

## Learning Racial Literacy While Navigating White Social Studies

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### ABSTRACT

How do children develop racial literacy? How do they make sense of and respond to the master narratives of race and racism? What role does elementary social studies education play in children's racial literacy development? I explored these questions as a parent–researcher, inquiring how my child, an Asian American elementary student, develops racial literacy as she learns U.S. history at school. In the following, I first situate my inquiry within the literature on social studies education from a critical race perspective. Next, I delineate my positionality as a critical race motherscholar and the rationale for studying my own child. Last, I present the findings from my inquiry and discuss its implications for elementary social studies education.

### KEYWORDS

Elementary social studies education; Asian Americans; racial literacy; critical race theory

### Danger of white social studies

From the extermination of Indigenous Peoples and the enslavement of African Africans to a multitude of present-day discriminations, including police violence against peoples of color and migrant children separation, the issues of race and racism are a permanent and integral part of the U.S. experience (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Against this backdrop, racial literacy, a “skill and practice in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race, probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotyping” (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015, p. 60), is vital for children to grow up as informed citizens of an antiracist society. Social studies, a curricular home of citizenship education, is then an important site for children to develop racial literacy (Ladson-Billings, 2003). It is an ideal place for students to explore the racial landscape in the past and the present moment and take action to dismantle racism.

The social studies field, however, has been unsuccessful in fulfilling its possibilities (King & Chandler, 2016). Instead, it continues the trends of what Chandler and Branscombe (2015) called “white social studies” (p. 63) such as employing

white common sense, presenting whiteness as the norm, and ignoring race/ism. Indeed, numerous studies have uncovered that white people dominate the history of the United States, whereas communities of color and their experiences are omitted or misrepresented in official social studies curriculum (Busey & Cruz, 2015; Shear, Knowles, Soden, & Castro, 2015). Studies also continue to find that race/ism is largely invisible or superficially treated in social studies textbooks and curriculum standards (Heilig, Brown, & Brown, 2012). In the classroom, such curricula are rarely interrupted. Many classroom studies have found that teachers tend to avoid teaching about race/racism or teach a colorblind perspective (Chandler & Branscombe, 2015).

The harmful effects of such curricular, pedagogical practices are well established. Epstein (2009), for example, found white youth saw social studies lessons at school resonated with their experiences outside school, keeping their colorblind ideology unchallenged. In contrast, African American youth in Epstein's study faced a discrepancy between home and school narratives, which led them to distrust textbooks and disengage from school learning. Mexican American youth in Almarza's (2001) study were also critical

of their social studies teachers and textbooks for being exclusive and irrelevant. As one student commented, “It seems that the Whites are the only ones who have history. [The teacher] doesn’t say that Mexicans were here [the United States] first” (p. 4). Navajo and Pueblo youth in Lee and Quijada Cerecer’s (2010) study were frustrated with the persistent white perspective and stereotyped representations of Indigenous people in school curricula.

### **A need for studying children’s race learning**

While the current scholarship informs us of the negative impact of white social studies on student learning, there is much more to learn. First of all, previous research has primarily focused on adolescents, and thus we are relatively unsure how children respond to white social studies. Given that children recognize race and internalize racism at ages as young as 3 years old (Ausdale & Feagin, 2001), more studies on elementary students are needed if we want to understand how racism is perpetuated or disrupted through social studies education.

Also lacking in previous research is inquiry into Asian American students’ racial perspectives. Often stereotyped as a model minority that does well in school or foreigners who do not count as Americans, Asian American students have too often been excluded from the discussion of racism, and thus their experiences are unfamiliar to many (An, 2009; Lee, 2005). Amplifying the voices of Asian American children would affirm their experiential knowledge and further provide important perspectives that need to be considered if we want social studies education to be antioppressive for all children.

### **Employing parent-as-researcher approach**

In studying how Asian American children make meaning of white social studies, I chose to study my own child. As a process of inquiry, parent research is not new (Kabuto, 2008). There is a long tradition of parent researchers who have written about their own children and contributed to our understanding of childhood (e.g., Gee, 2003; Miller, 2015; Piaget, 1971). The distinct

benefit of parent research is that unlike an outside researcher, parent-researchers can observe their children’s learning in natural, authentic, ongoing contexts (Adler & Adler, 1997). This allows more of a full picture of children’s everyday learning that an outside researcher would rarely gain access to.

Employing the parent-as-researcher approach, I inquired how my child makes sense of and responds to the white social studies she learns at school. My daughter, Sunny, is an Asian American girl born and raised in the United States. She was age 10 and 11 for the duration of the study, which included the 2 years of her formal study of U.S. history from fourth and fifth grade. During the study, I interacted with Sunny in ways that were consistent with the way my parental interactions would be if not conducting research. As a critical race motherscholar, I have engaged in everyday conversations with my child and tried to nurture her so that she could reject oppressive ideologies from school and society, such as whiteness as the norm, being nonwhite as inferior or undesirable, and being Asian as being foreign.

Indeed, over the 2 years of learning U.S. history at school, Sunny had moments of excitement, disappointment, frustration, and wondering. I captured these moments by writing field notes on informal conversations with Sunny about her day at school. I also gathered materials from school such as social studies notebooks, worksheets, study guides, unit tests, and textbooks. I analyzed the collected data through pattern analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the following section, I present notable themes that emerged from the analysis. These include: (a) seeking belonging in the story of the United States; (b) noticing and questioning Asian invisibility and hegemonic whiteness in school curriculum; and (c) disrupting, yet enacting, master narratives.

### **Sunny’s navigation of white social studies**

#### ***Seeking belonging***

One aspect of Sunny’s sensemaking of white social studies was seeking belonging in the story

of the United States. The vignette below is one representative example. The conversation occurred in early September when Sunny started fourth grade. After school, I was preparing dinner in the kitchen while Sunny was reading a book about an African American girl during the Revolutionary War.

Sunny: Mommy, would we be slaves if we were alive back then?

Me: Can you say a little more?

Sunny: I mean ... If we lived during the time of slavery, would we also be slaves and be treated badly?

Me: Ha! That's a great question. Why do you think so?

Sunny: Because ... we are not white. We are dark skinned like African Americans.

Me: Oh, I see. Well, although many Asians started to come to the United States after the Revolutionary War, there were Asians during the time of slavery. Do you remember the book about Chinese railroad workers you read?

Sunny: Oh, yeah, now I remember ...

This short conversation struck me hard. From kindergarten to the fourth grade, the official social studies curriculum at Sunny's school featured a long list of white men with few African Americans whereas there was not a single person or event about Asian American history. Thus, at home I tried to provide Sunny with the opportunity to learn about Asian American history through children's books. Doing so, I hoped Sunny would be able to resist the master narratives of whiteness as the U.S. national identity and Asian-ness as foreignness promoted in the school curriculum. However, my hope was unrealistic. As the vignette shows, Sunny was struggling to locate herself and other Asians in the story of the United States. In her eyes, the history of the United States seemed all about white people, and the peoples of color, especially Asian Americans, had little to no place in it.

### Noticing Asian invisibility

This early moment pushed me to be more diligent in critical race parenting at home. I sought to spend more time with Sunny in race

conversation as she read multicultural children's literature. I also helped Sunny find video clips and websites featuring counternarratives to what she was learning at school. This kind of home learning seemed to help Sunny critically read the school curriculum. For example, one afternoon in October, Sunny began to talk about her day:

Sunny: Mommy, today the fifth grade did Ellis Island simulation. We [the fourth-grade classes] got to visit the cafeteria to see.

Me: Good. How was it?

Sunny: It was fun! But there wasn't anything about Angel Island!

Me: Um ... Was the simulation only about European immigration?

Sunny: Yes! So, I asked Ms. Ray [her fourth-grade teacher] if they are going to do Angel Island later, but it seemed like she had never heard about Angel Island.

Me: Um ...

Sunny: So, I told her about it, and she said it's interesting, but that was it. I was a little disappointed, you know ... I don't know why we don't learn this at school!

Here, Sunny was clearly noticing and questioning the invisibility of Asian American history in the school curriculum. In fact, there were several other moments similar to this. For example, studying World War II in fifth grade, I heard Sunny comment, "We don't learn about what happened to Japanese Americans after the Pearl Harbor bombing." During the civil rights movement unit, Sunny questioned, "When are they [textbook writers] going to include stories about Asian Americans?" Indeed, the materials from school were closely aligned with the state standards (Georgia Department of Education, 2016), which listed names and events of the civil rights movement with an exclusive focus on white-Black racial relations. Missing in the unit were the civil rights struggles and activism of Asian Americans, along with many other groups.

### Questioning hegemonic whiteness

In addition to Asian invisibility, Sunny noticed the invisibility of other minorities in U.S. history

lessons at school. In these moments, Sunny was using counternarratives from children's books, video clips, or mother-child conversations at home to question the hegemonic whiteness in school curriculum. One example is captured in the vignette below. It was in November when her fourth-grade social studies class was learning about the American Revolution. Her teacher recommended watching *Liberty Kids* at home to help students learn about the event.

Me: Sunny, I heard you saying, "Freedom for whites! Not for the slaves!" Can you say more about it?

Sunny: Oh, yeah, I was watching the *Liberty Kids*; it was about the Revolutionary War, and people were celebrating like, "We are free! We are a free country!" But you know, it was freedom for whites but not for the slaves!

Me: Oh, I see. What do you think of that?

Sunny: Well, I think it's crazy! They only care about their freedom, but not others, like Black people! They were, like, asking for freedom when they had slaves and treated them badly!

Me: Brilliant! Did Ms. Ray talk about this at school?

Sunny: Not really! Well sort of ... I raised my hand and pointed it out, and she said it was a good point but that was it ... .

Me: You wanted to talk more about it?

Sunny: Of course ... but I guess she was busy ... or maybe she felt awkward ... .

Me: Awkward?

Sunny: Yeah, I mean, Ms. Ray is white, and many kids in my class are white, but we also have some African Americans ... so I guess she might have felt awkward ... .

Here, Sunny was critically reading the master narrative of the American Revolution that employs white common sense while silencing the experiential knowledge of communities of color. The question of the hypocrisy of the white colonists fighting for freedom while simultaneously supporting slavery seemed compelling to Sunny, and she wanted to learn more about it. Yet, her teacher avoided going deeper into the topic.

While disappointed, Sunny seemed to have already formed the idea that race talk would be uncomfortable for a white teacher. According to

Sunny, her teacher might have left race out of her instruction because she felt uncomfortable. Or, as previous research suggests, her teacher's reluctance could be attributed to other factors such as an official curriculum that is silent on race, the teacher's fear of controversy, the teacher's belief of children's inability to discuss racism, or the teacher's lack of racial knowledge (e.g., Brown, 2011; Buchanan, 2015a; Hess, 2002). Regardless of the reasons, teachers' continued avoidance of race talk can disappoint and further alienate students, including Sunny, who would want to learn more about issues of racism.

### Disrupting master narratives

In some occasions, Sunny went beyond critically reading white social studies. She took an action to disrupt the master narratives presented at school. For example, in late April, the fourth-grade social studies class covered the Civil War. One Friday afternoon, I was checking the weekly communication folder from Sunny's teacher. Inside, I saw Sunny's social studies test. Sunny did not answer one of the questions, which was, "Write 3 good reasons and 3 bad reasons for slavery." She listed several under the bad reasons but left blank the "good reasons" section.

Sunny: Mommy, did you see I didn't do well on the social studies test? I am sorry ...

Me: It's okay. I think I know why, but can you explain why you left one of the questions blank?

Sunny: Well ... I could've written the answer from the study guide, but honestly, I don't think there is anything good about slavery. Do you?

Me: Me neither. I am with you.

Sunny: Yeah, I didn't want to be rude to my teacher or get a bad grade, but I also didn't want to write things that I don't believe.

Me: I am proud of you! Maybe you can explain it to Ms. Ray? Maybe she then will not ask the question next time?

Sunny: That's better! I will!

Although proud of Sunny's desire to resist the master narrative of slavery, I was frustrated with the test itself. Indeed, Sunny is not alone. I have seen similar incidents happening across the

nation, where children are presented with a worksheet, a test, or a class activity in which they are asked to enact white knowledge. For example, an elementary school in Georgia had fifth-graders to dress up as characters from the Civil War. A white student, dressed as a plantation owner, said to a 10-year-old Black classmate, “You are my slave” (Martin, 2017). These curricular, pedagogical practices are far from trivial. Instead, they put students in a position to inflict pain on each other and experience real trauma. The practices also promote white knowledge as the norm, present nonwhites as inferior or subhuman, and perpetuate white supremacy.

### Enacting master narratives

While critically reading and disrupting master narratives promoted at school, there were also moments when Sunny conformed to and enacted master narratives. These include the discourses of whiteness as Americanness, racism as a thing of the past, and civic action as the task of exceptional heroes. Below is one of these moments.

- Sunny: Mommy, today at recess, we were talking about who’s going to which middle school, and guess what? Everyone is going to Peach middle school except me!
- Me: No way! There must be some!
- Sunny: Well, yes ... but they are not my close friends. Like, I know Matt is going to Apple middle school and some Americans too.
- Me: I see ... Wait, what do you mean American?
- Sunny: American? You know, the white kids!
- Me: Um ... you are American too! Mommy and daddy too.
- Sunny: Yes, but we are *Korean* American! They are like just American!
- Me: Um ...

This vignette shows Sunny retreat to the master narrative of white national identity. It was clear to me that I was not doing well in supporting Sunny to see how dangerous such racial ideology is. Sunny seemed unaware that the white national identity ideology has been at the heart of countless instances of racial violence against

various groups of color in the past and still today.

Related to this, Sunny also reproduced a dominant racial ideology that there is no racism today. For example, in a worksheet from school, Sunny wrote, “Dr. King Jr. ended segregation. Without him, our schools would be still segregated.” In other occasions, I heard Sunny say, “Things are better now!” or “Glad everyone is equal today!” In making sense of her words, I realized the majority of children’s books that Sunny read positioned racism as historical in nature with little attention to how race and racism operate presently. Also, Sunny was quite sheltered from the sheer reality of racism because her daily life was bounded by school and home in a middle-class neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Sunny enacted a master narrative that social change is made by a few, brave, exceptional individuals who are likely to face immense risk for their actions. For example, in February during her fifth-grade social studies class, Sunny was internet-searching for more information on Malcolm X.

- Sunny: It’s so scary ... Like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X was killed too! I don’t want to be like them.
- Me: Can you say a little more?
- Sunny: I mean, I do want to do something for my country, but I don’t want to get shot. I am not that brave.
- Me: I hear you. Speaking up against power is not easy. But not everyone gets killed for fighting for justice.
- Sunny: But ... all these people had to go through difficult lives ...
- Me: True. But ... many changes are made and start at a small scale, and that is also important.
- Sunny: Yeah but ...

Here, Sunny’s sensemaking about social change points to the adverse effect of the messianic master narratives. According to Alridge (2006), the messianic master narratives position an individual as the messiah or savior of an oppressed group. In this narrative, civil rights leaders are superhuman figures who likely face torture or

death to advance justice. According to Woodson (2016), this narrative can be more disempowering than empowering because it sends a message to children that only perfect and exceptional individuals can bring change, and even when they do so, they would sacrifice their lives.

Hearing Sunny enacting such a message and distancing herself from civic agency, I felt defeated. How can I better support Sunny to reject the master narrative? Alridge (2006) suggested presenting civil rights leaders within the context of their full humanity so that children can see ordinary citizens can bring about social change. Woodson (2016) recommended rewriting the narratives of civil rights leadership in a way that allows children to see diverse forms of leadership. Unfortunately, this was missing for Sunny's learning at home, as well as at school.

### **Lessons learned from sunny's learning journey**

#### ***Discrepancies between home and school messages***

As I engaged in mother-child conversations with Sunny over the two years, I found the clear discrepancies between the messages from school and home. The messages from school were largely based on white social studies (Chandler & Branscombe, 2015). As in the immigration lesson that exclusively focused on European immigration, Sunny's school sent a message to children that the United States is a country of white people, and the peoples of color have little to no place in it. In fact, in most social studies lessons at school, nonwhites and their experiences were largely invisible. White knowledge and perspectives were further advanced through assessments such as the social studies test asking children to "write 3 good reasons and 3 bad reasons for slavery." Meanwhile, teachers' general avoidance of race talk sent a message that racism is not a significant concern in our society.

In contrast, messages from home largely drew upon counterstories of marginalized groups. As a critical race motherscholar, I was aware of the hegemonic whiteness in official school curriculum and tried to provide Sunny with the opportunity to learn about Asian American history and other marginalized groups at home. Through

multicultural children's books, video clips, and mother-child conversations, I sought to nurture Sunny so that she can reject master narratives from school, such as whiteness as the norm and being nonwhite as insignificant, inferior, or undesirable.

#### ***Racial literacy learning as a dynamic process***

Encountering the conflicting messages from school and home, Sunny was constantly making and remaking her own sense of race, racism, and U.S. history. In numerous moments, Sunny built on home messages to critically read and challenge the master narratives promoted at school. For example, Sunny noticed the hegemonic whiteness in U.S. history taught at school and questioned, "Why don't we learn about Asian Americans at school?" Sunny criticized white common sense when she saw white colonists fighting for freedom while simultaneously supporting slavery. She stated, "They only care about their freedom but not others." In some occasions, Sunny resisted master narratives as in the case of rejecting the school's test question regarding slavery.

In other moments, however, Sunny enacted master narratives—such as whiteness as Americanness, racism as a thing of the past, and social change by a few extraordinary persons. For example, Sunny struggled with locating herself in the white dominant history, wondering, "Would we be slaves if we were alive back then?" Sunny stepped into a dominant racial discourse and stated, "Dr. King, Jr., ended racism." She also reproduced white supremacy with a belief: "American? You know, the white kids!" She further enacted the messianic master narrative, distancing herself from civic agency. She shared, "I don't want to die. I am not that brave!"

Likewise, Sunny's sensemaking of white social studies was filled with hybrid discourses in which some master narratives were disrupted, whereas others were reproduced in the working with counter-narratives. Racial literacy learning for Sunny was indeed a dynamic, ongoing process, not a one-off activity.

#### ***A call for race teaching in elementary schools***

An implication from Sunny's learning journey is a critical need for race teaching in elementary

schools. Children are not colorblind, and they are at an important point where ideas about racism and white supremacy can be solidified or challenged (Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Children are also ready and capable to talk about racism. As with other children in previous studies (e.g., Bolgatz, 2005; Epstein, 2009; Kersten, 2006), Sunny did and could talk about race and white supremacy, and she wished her teachers did not avoid but rather engaged her in a deeper study of racism. Teachers' continued avoidance of race talk can disappoint and alienate students who want to learn about issues of racism. It can also send a message that racism is not a significant concern in our society, thereby denying the lived experiences of children whose daily lives are shaped by racism. It also can lead children to accept and suffer from harmful racial messages that they may hear from the media or in school.

Despite the possible harm, many elementary teachers stray away from race teaching because of various reasons, such as their fear of controversy, their belief of children's inability to discuss racism, or their lack of racial knowledge (e.g., Brown, 2011; Buchanan, 2015a; Hess, 2002). Although not the majority, however, there are elementary teachers who are "teaching against the racial grain" (Martell & Stevens, 2017, p. 4). As curricular gatekeepers (Thornton, 1991), these teachers transform the official curriculum into a more inclusive one. They bring in counterstories, encourage children to share their experiential knowledge, and move the issues of racism to the center of their instruction (Bolgatz, 2005; Kersten, 2006).

To do such work, elementary teachers need to be prepared with critical race knowledge and pedagogy. It is inspiring that many social studies teacher educators already are threading race into their courses and empowering elementary teachers through innovative pedagogies. For example, Drake and Rodríguez (2019) use *The Hate U Give*, a young adult novel on contemporary issues of racial violence, as a way to support elementary preservice teachers in the development of racial literacy. Hawkman (2018) employs critical whiteness pedagogy to raise elementary preservice teachers' racial pedagogical content knowledge and expose them to real-world examples of anti-

racist teaching. Buchanan (2015b) shows the great possibility of documentary film as a tool to support elementary preservice teachers to examine their personal biases and explore ways to teach race. I hope other social studies teacher educators join such transformative works so that more elementary teachers engage in critical race teaching in their own classrooms.

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