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The Extent to Which Antiracist English Teachers Still Conveyed Racism

Spurred by the murder of George Floyd and the rise of Black Lives Matter protests, we have witnessed the awakening of White America in the past year. Many White people have become acutely aware of the systemic injustices of racism and the necessity for antiracist action. In his book *How To Be An Antiracist*, Kendi creates a binary, asserting that people's ideas, practices and policies can be either racist or antiracist. Therefore, working toward an antiracist identity is an active, ongoing process during which people may slip back into racist tendencies. Teachers are no exception. Although schools are often understood as "antidotes to inequality," teachers' levels of racial bias mimic the general population (Starck et al. 9). Therefore, there is an urgent need for antiracist education to empower students of color.

Despite White teachers' best intentions and efforts to practice antiracist teaching, studies have shown that challenges often arise (Hyland 430; Sleeter 568; Puzio et al. 223). The tension between White teachers' antiracist intentions and potentially racist impact is especially prevalent in English classrooms, as texts often evoke the topics of race and racism (Borsheim-Black 426). Therefore, Josie and Dan wanted to investigate the extent to which White teachers still conveyed racist ideas even while intending to practice antiracist teaching. Put simply, to what extent did White antiracist English teachers still convey racist ideas? We interviewed White high school English teachers about specific instructional moments when they tried to teach an antiracist

lesson, but the lesson was misinterpreted, resulted in tension, or failed in some way to shed light on the challenges of antiracist teaching.

To describe our positionalities, Josie identifies with a mixed racial background as a Filipino-American, and she recently completed her one-year undergraduate student teaching experience as an English teacher in an urban school with a majority of students of color. Dan identifies as White and taught high school English for seven years in urban Catholic high schools and has been a researcher and English teacher educator for eight years. As English teachers striving to be antiracist, our motivation is not to shame well-intentioned English teachers as racist individuals but rather to support them and the ELA teaching community in the continual process of practicing antiracist education, which involves identifying and naming racist ideas, practices, and policies. By sharing the narratives of teachers who chose to be bravely vulnerable, we hope to encourage all teachers to be responsible for their own racist behavior, open to correction from people of color, and prepared to learn from their mistakes so that we can continue the antiracist work that is so needed in our schools.

Antiracist Framework

Kendi asserts that there is only racist or antiracist behavior: “There is no inbetween safe space of ‘not racist.’ The claim of ‘not racist’ neutrality is a mark for racism. This may seem harsh, but it’s important at the outset that we apply one of the core principles of antiracism, which is to return the word ‘racist’ itself back to its proper usage” (9). Aligning with Kendi’s principles, we used these definitions when interviewing the teachers to encourage them to name their ideas, practices, and policies as “racist” — not to make the teachers feel ashamed but to challenge them to engage in honest reflection.

Being racist or antiracist is not an identity but a description of a moment in time. Kendi explains, “The good news is that racist and antiracist are not fixed identities. We can be a racist one minute and an antiracist the next” (10). By framing “racist” and “antiracist” as descriptive terms, we hope to encourage White teachers to be more comfortable naming their ideas, practices, and policies as racist without feeling like their character is on the line. Due to the constant state of tension between racism and antiracism, Kendi’s philosophy centers on reflection. By asking teachers to reflect on moments when they tried to teach an antiracist lesson but failed, our goal is to spur the “persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination” needed to do antiracist work (23).

Antiracist English Teaching

Borsheim-Black defines antiracist pedagogy “as an approach that works proactively to interrupt racism,” which can look like examining power and oppression, investigating racism as systemic, and acknowledging White privilege (409). Since most of the teachers’ stories dealt with literature instruction, we will discuss multicultural literature and critical literacy — two approaches integral to antiracist English education. Antiracist English teaching should extend beyond canonical works to present literature that reflects students’ lived experiences. Bishop emphasizes bringing literature into school curriculum that mirrors the experiences of historically underrepresented groups while also offering windows into other people’s experiences (1).

According to Tschida et al., antiracist English teachers will also move away from the single-story narrative, which can reduce the complexity of people’s identity to one perspective. Additionally, critical literacy involves reading against texts to develop students’ critical consciousness (Borsheim-Black et al. 123). Teachers who employ critical literacy must guide their students in

analyzing and critiquing oppressive ideologies within texts, specifically from the canon, to examine the dynamics of power and privilege (Storm and Rainey 96).

Challenges of Antiracist English Teaching

Much research has been done about well-intentioned White teachers who still manage to perpetuate racism (Sleeter 568; Hyland 430). After interviewing 200 teachers, Sleeter discovered teachers' tendencies to oversimplify, essentialize, and trivialize culturally responsive pedagogy (CRT). For example, many educators perceived CRT as "cultural celebration," which conveys attitudes of tolerance (568). Other teachers essentialized students' cultures by creating fixed, narrow ideas of an ethnic or racial group, assuming that all students who belong to said group identify with the teachers' generalized conceptions (570). Additionally, teachers trivialized CRT by conceptualizing it as mundane steps of a process rather than a disposition for teaching (Sleeter 569). Many teachers simply "check the box" for CRT if they incorporate specific instructional methods or texts by authors of color when CRT should be integral to their teaching philosophies and their relationships with students (Ladson-Billings 162-163).

Despite the relevance of race and racism in English classes, fewer studies have specifically explored teachers' common mistakes in antiracist English teaching (Borsheim-Black 426). Challenges with antiracist instruction often arise when teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* (TKAM) (Borsheim-Black 418). For example, Borsheim-Black analyzed the instruction of Ms. Allen, a second-year English teacher. Highlighting the complex nature of antiracist English teaching, Borsheim-Black concluded that Ms. Allen "both reinforced and interrupted Whiteness" (418). While Ms. Allen engaged in critical literacy by encouraging her students to read against TKAM, she also fell victim to the racist ideologies within the book. For example, in analyzing the symbol of the defenseless mockingbird, she guided her students to the conclusion that Tom

Robinson alone was a symbol for the “Black race,” essentializing complex racial and cultural identities and reinforcing White saviorism (419). Macaluso also describes his own experience of safe self-reflection while teaching TKAM: “The novel allowed me, a White male, to discreetly deflect uncomfortable and complex discussions of race and racism by focusing on the characterization of its White protagonists: Scout and Jem’s coming-of-age and Atticus’ moral fiber” (280-81). Macaluso and his White students identified with the White characters’ heroic sides rather than interrogating their roles in perpetuating racism.

Teacher discourse can also undermine antiracist intentions. Macaluso explains this reality through the concept of pedagogy-as-text, meaning that like canonical literature, a teacher’s classroom discourse can also reinforce oppressive ideologies. For example, when preservice teachers analyzed transcripts of their own teaching, they found “mismatches between their lesson intentions and the actual classroom dialogue” (Macaluso 16). Additionally, Croom analyzed an interaction involving a White teacher and Black student. While reading an informational text, the teacher implied that many people of color do not play hockey because of the cost, revealing a deficit mindset that associates people of color with uniform poverty (284). Croom discussed the teacher’s lack of preparation in approaching the topic of race: “I observed a good teacher, using a good, mass-produced text, to offer good instruction, and yet she lacked the racial literacies to critically attend to both the race practice in the text she selected and the race practice in her own thinking and talk” (289). Many teachers we interviewed, though well-intentioned, also lacked these “racial literacies,” which often led to racist ideas and practices.

Interviewing White English Teachers of Black Students

For this study, Josie interviewed 12 White high school English teachers who taught in schools with large populations of students of color; however, we specifically wanted to explore

the experience of Black students. These teachers were from a variety of schools (six public schools, two Catholic schools, one charter school). Six of the schools had a majority of Black students (over 70%) and the other three schools had a majority of students of color (over 50%). Teachers' experience ranged from 3-27 years. To select the candidates, Josie interviewed them about their antiracist English teaching philosophy and practices. Following Borsheim-Black's study, we looked for teachers "who described antiracist goals for literature study, demonstrated awareness of [their] own whiteness, and expressed an eagerness to participate in this study as an opportunity to improve [their] practice" (412). These interviews lasted 30-60 minutes and took place over Zoom. We asked the following questions:

1. Can you tell me about your teaching philosophy?
2. How do you try to support Black students in the context of teaching English?
3. How/to what extent do you address issues of race/racism in your class?
4. How would you describe antiracism?
5. How do you incorporate antiracism into teaching English?
6. What is your motivation for joining this study?

Then, during the second interview, Josie asked teachers to share specific examples when they tried to teach an antiracist lesson, but the lesson was misinterpreted, resulted in tension, or failed in some way in addition to general examples of failed antiracist practices in their classrooms. Then, Josie asked the teachers to reflect on how they knew they were being racist and what they learned from this situation. After discussing multiple teaching experiences, Josie and the teacher agreed on one to three narratives that were suitable for the aims of the study.

Following Puzio et al., we used a method of narrative inquiry and asked each participant to describe these chosen experiences in writing during their own time; these became our field

texts. Seven teachers participated in the second interview, which yielded 11 field texts. Josie and Dan then analyzed the stories of these teachers by reading them multiple times and looking for patterns and themes, specifically focusing on trends about how and why teachers fell short of being boldly antiracist in the classroom (Puzio et al. 225).

The method of narrative inquiry is based on the idea that our lives are a series of “lived stories,” meaning that stories are a natural way for people to reflect on and understand their lives (Clandinin 4). Furthermore, these stories are complex; there are times when teachers may be both racist and antiracist within one lesson. By using narrative inquiry, we highlight “imperfect, messy, and real learning spaces. . . . These creative failures are important because missteps and errors are an important tool for learning” (Puzio et. al 225). Ultimately, sharing these narratives can support White teachers in developing the critical consciousness necessary to enact antiracist teaching and encourage them to intentionally confront discomfort and tensions.

Analysis of Narratives

While there were many significant patterns about antiracist English teaching in these narratives, we noticed three main themes. First, many teachers oversimplified their students’ identity. Second, even these veteran teachers were generally unprepared for conversations about race and racism. Lastly, these narratives illustrate that even teachers who identify as antiracist teachers lacked explicit antiracist vision.

Theme 1: Oversimplification of Student Identity

White teachers failed to acknowledge their students’ racial and cultural complexity. For example, teachers perpetuated racist ideas by relying heavily on stereotypes or tokenism. They also used single-story narratives, which led to essentialization or reducing a race or culture to one

experience (Sleeter 570). White teachers also attempted to explain Blackness to their Black students, resulting in racist assumptions. This theme appeared in seven of the eleven stories.

Theme 1 was evident in a story we called “Swahili vs. Spanish.” With an intention to be antiracist, an English teacher tried to have a discussion that made his students think critically about their education. However, this led him to making a racist comment: “Should there be such a thing as African American History Month? Why or why not? ... [Then], I pressed them about the requirement we had for them to take Spanish. Why, I wondered, did we not have a language more suitable to their culture, like Swahili? ... I’m not sure where that example came from.” The teacher reduced “their” culture to Swahili, which he later found out that almost none of them spoke. He did not know about his students’ racial and cultural background but relied on racist assumptions to carry out his antiracist intentions.

A story that we called “Whitesplaining Racism” also illustrates how a teacher oversimplified her students’ identities. During a unit about the American Dream, the teacher asked if the American Dream was achievable, and all her students said it was with hard work and determination. Wanting to discuss the barriers of systemic racism, she explained: “I basically asked them if it was as achievable *for them* as others [my emphasis]. When I said this, I was greeted with looks of confusion. I believe a student asked why it wouldn’t be as achievable for them. I don’t know for certain, but it seemed like they thought I meant they were less capable or less hardworking.” This teacher had the antiracist intention to discuss how systemic racism might limit the achievability of the American Dream. However, in doing so, the teacher oversimplified the students’ identities by explaining their reality to them. Using an us/them mentality, the teacher made a blanket statement, neglecting to understand that her students’ experiences may differ from what she perceived as the “Black experience.”

Additionally, the story called “Tired of Talking About Race” also demonstrated how teachers can oversimplify student identity. In one year, this teacher taught three out of eight books that were explicitly about race and two that explored it tangentially. The teacher describes his students’ experience with one of these books, Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give*: “The students loved the book; they just got tired of talking about race. Actively and persistently tired. I tried to move back and forth between the text and the issues it raised.” After noticing that his students were “actively and persistently tired” of talking about race, the teacher attempted to empower them by discussing other aspects of the book, such as the main character’s joy and strength. However, in trying to “move back and forth between the text and the issues it raised,” the teacher oversimplified race, implying that students can simply set it aside while exploring other parts of the text; this perspective comes from a place of privilege, as Black students cannot simply set aside an integral part of their identity. There is no discussion about *The Hate U Give* without talking about race and racism. Instead, the teacher could have framed the lesson so that conversations about race and racism could happen alongside joy and strength, for example.

Theme 2: Lack of Teacher Preparation

Many of these White teachers rushed into having unplanned conversations about race and racism. They may have failed to contextualize the discussion or ground it with a text, resulting in superficial understandings of race and racism. Additionally, these teachers expressed a lack of antiracist training in teacher preparation programs and school-wide initiatives. This theme was evident in nine of the eleven stories.

Returning to “Swahili vs. Spanish,” the teacher’s lack of preparation was the primary reason for his racist comment. He struggled to facilitate the class discussion and scaffold the students. The teacher began this conversation with the question, “Should there be such a thing as

African-American History Month? Why or why not?” However, when the students did not think critically about the question, he changed directions and used an example about the difference between “house slaves” and “field slaves”: “The idea is that the house slave was satisfied because their lot was better than those in the field. I compared this thinking to the argument that having a Black History Month was better than nothing.” Though the teacher tried to make a meaningful historical comparison, his lack of preparation resulted in a racist comment that conveyed a superficial understanding of slavery. When his students did not make the connection, the teacher continued to fumble: “From there, I am guessing I tried to bring it closer to home. Should African-American History be a separate class or part of the standard American History class?” Finally, he concluded with the comment we analyzed for Theme 1. The teacher had antiracist intentions to guide his students through critical reflection about how society attempts to honor Black history and culture. However, due to his lack of preparation and “racial literacies,” he stumbled through examples and made racist remarks (Croom 289). He even struggled to follow his own questions, as illustrated by the phrases “I am guessing” and “Somehow.” This story shows the danger of having unplanned conversations about race and racism.

Revisiting “Whitesplaining Racism,” this story similarly illustrates how a lack of teacher preparation led to the oversimplification of student identity. Prompting her students with a general question about the achievability of the American dream, the teacher expected her students to discuss systemic racism, which is a big jump; her students needed more scaffolding to have this conversation. When the students did not make this connection, the teacher quickly tried to relate to them, making the racist comment we analyzed for Theme 1. After reflection, the teacher became aware of her lack of preparation and recognized that she has no authority to explain racism to her Black students. Now, she uses poetry to ground the lesson and allows the

students to discuss their experiences. She reflected on this new approach: “I have found this works much better and takes away the stress and problems with me telling THEM what the barriers are as a White teacher in a classroom filled predominately with students of color.”

Lastly, Theme 2 was prevalent in a story we called “Surface Level Literacy in TKAM.” This teacher tried to be antiracist by teaching *To Kill A Mockingbird*, which she supplemented with resources from Facing History, a social justice-oriented website. The teacher wrote in her narrative, “Because a lot of my resource materials came from that organization, I assumed that I was ‘covered’ and did not have to think any deeper about the racism and structural inequity that the text refers to nor interrogate why we barely hear the voice of Calpurnia, the Black housekeeper.” This teacher was not prepared to unpack TKAM, which can perpetuate racism if not taught with a critical approach (Macaluso 280). She also did not adequately use the Facing History materials to interrogate the text. Rather, the teacher trivialized antiracist teaching by relying on a novel with Black characters and social justice-oriented resources without critically examining the text or encouraging her students to do so (Sleeter 569).

Theme 3: Lack of Explicit Antiracist Vision

Teachers often did antiracist work without framing it as such. Teachers also did not share their antiracist aims with students or parents, often leading to misunderstandings. Interestingly, many teachers did not explicitly use the words “race,” “racism,” or “antiracism” in their stories even though they were explicitly prompted to write narratives about antiracist lessons that failed in some way. This finding shows that teachers were hesitant to face this issue and name their behavior and practices as racist or antiracist, which is crucial to antiracist work (Kendi 9). This theme was evident in nine of the eleven stories.

In a story called “Why Don’t My Kids Like Shakespeare?” an English teacher shared his experience teaching Shakespeare in schools with predominantly Black students. At the start of this teacher’s career, he believed Shakespeare was objectively valuable and grew frustrated when his students did not see that: “A failure to appreciate said value lay primarily with the reluctant audience. That is, Shakespeare had objective value, ergo, an inability to react to this value could not lay with Shakespeare and therefore must be in the audience.” This teacher conveyed racism by having a deficit mindset toward students who did not appreciate Shakespeare. After years of his students not sharing his perspective on Shakespeare, this teacher reevaluated his assumptions, leading to a “paradigm shift”: “Previously, my opinion was that Shakespeare was valuable and it was the duty, in a sense, of the student to recognize and interact with that value. Now my opinion is that students are valuable, and Shakespeare is only valuable insofar as he can benefit those students.” By shifting his focus from the text to the students, the teacher recognized his biased perspective of expecting his students to automatically appreciate Shakespeare and believing something was wrong with them if they did not; now, the teacher uses a more antiracist approach by spending weeks preparing to read Shakespeare, instead of trudging through an entire play, to make the text more accessible and culturally relevant. This teacher undoubtedly experienced moments of critical consciousness, as evidenced by his “paradigm shift.” While he shows growth, he never takes the next step to describe his previous philosophy and practices toward Shakespeare as racist or his new understanding as antiracist. This teacher’s narrative was distant and vague, suggesting a lack of an explicit antiracist vision.

Additionally, the narrative called “Standing in Solidarity” illustrates how teachers are hesitant to frame their teaching as antiracist. To motivate students to submit their quarterly essays and improve the passing rate of the class, this teacher created a “DIY accountability”

system called “Standing in Solidarity” (SIS). According to SIS, if the teacher did not receive a quarterly essay from everyone, he took away the students’ desks for one day, so they had to stand for that class period. While the pass rate improved by 20%, students turned against each other, and one parent was especially unhappy that his son was being punished for other people’s actions. Due to this backlash, the teacher ended SIS and reflected on this decision:

It was a White dad with a White son who ruined my effort (crazy though it was) to help my struggling students — a majority of which are non-white. This parent had no racist agenda — he cared only about his son. But I can’t help but see how his actions have a racist effect. While I will never know for sure which of my students passed English because of SIS, I feel confident saying that a number of my non-White students did.

Not until the end of the story does the teacher reveal his antiracist intentions behind this accountability system. The teacher also did not provide the much-needed antiracist context of SIS to the students and parents who expressed disapproval; rather, when faced with conflict, the teacher ended SIS. This teacher lacked transparency about his antiracist intentions, which led to the misinterpretation and ultimate failure of a system that likely benefited students of color.

Lastly, a story called “A Glossy Lesson” exemplifies a lack of explicit antiracist vision. To be antiracist, an English teacher taught a lesson about the differences between stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, but she used glossy examples to define these terms rather than discussing the reality of racism (i.e., She explained “stereotype” with the following example: “People with pink hair are mean”). Therefore, when she asked her students to find images that represented these terms, she received clip art that only scratched the surface of this heavy topic. The teacher describes how her lesson “missed the mark”:

I had set us up for a genuine and real discussion about the ways that Black people are discriminated against in our country both as a result of stereotypes and prejudice, but also as a result of laws and policies. However, I chose not to take that next step; partly out of fear, partly out of ignorance, and partly out of the excuse that there is always so much content to cover.

This teacher tried to be antiracist but acknowledged that she did not take that important next step to be boldly antiracist. Also, this teacher did not share her intentions with her students. If the students knew the purpose of the lesson, they could likely have had a more fruitful discussion.

Conclusion: Still So Far to Go

After completing this research, our main takeaway is that we, as educators, still have a long way to go. Even English teachers who actively try to be antiracist can slip into racist ideas and practices; for example, both Josie and Dan have been racist teachers of Black students. Therefore, we want to thank all the teachers who courageously shared their stories with the English teacher community, which is how we will continue to learn. We encourage all teachers to engage in regular self-reflection to assess how words and actions can undermine antiracist intentions: reflect on your teaching individually through writing, analyze transcripts and videos of your own teaching, or have a principal or colleague observe your class. Additionally, we call for explicit antiracist teacher education and professional development with an ELA pedagogy-as-text approach. We must move beyond school wide professional development about antiracism that does not investigate how racism and antiracism manifests in specific subject areas. Through these efforts, we hope to continue working toward English classrooms that are actively antiracist in word and deed.

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