

Building a critical teacher-researcher partnership: Anti-racism pedagogies and practices in a first-grade classroom in the Midwest United States

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Abstract: This study investigates our ongoing, multi-year partnership as a university professor and classroom teacher/administrator enacting anti-racist practices and pedagogies in a first-grade classroom in the Midwest area of the United States. Grounded in Critical Race Theory and a critical counterstorytelling methodology, we investigated what our counternarratives could illustrate about how we sustained our anti-racist work with young children. Through our analysis, two insights emerged as important: the importance of engaging with slowness in developing a critical race partnership and developing critical race criteria for selecting children's books about race and racism. We describe these insights and discuss the implications of this work, while providing suggestions for others interested in developing critical race partnerships.

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Introduction

As early childhood education professionals who have strong commitments to justice, we have been interested and engaged in supporting children's capabilities for learning and naming their experiences about (in)justice in their worlds. Our interests and engagement have been guided by tenets of anti-racism in early childhood (Escayg, 2019, 2020; Husband, 2010; Husband & Escayg, 2022) which Escayg (2020) described as:

a praxis of liberation, grounded in epistemologies of racialized groups, including Indigenous worldviews, that reveals, challenges, and critiques dominant ideologies of race through centering not only counter narratives and experiences of racialized bodies, but also alternate perspectives of children, childhood, education, parenting, and society. (p. 6)

To become an anti-racist educator, it takes a deliberate and intentional focus as well as a commitment to learning and understanding how racism operates. As Kendi (2019) described, it takes more than just declaring you are 'not racist,' instead it is an active stance which requires deliberate effort, time, and dedication to disrupt and challenge norms and practices which keep racism in place. In early childhood, teaching about racism is a new area of study, as young children have often been positioned by early educators as too young, innocent, and therefore 'colorblind' (Farago et al., 2019; Hagerman, 2019). We know these dominant discourses are myths and untrue - not only because of our own experiences with young children but also based upon research. Children as young as two years old begin to notice and name race, using race language to categorize and classify (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Mac Naughton & Davis, 2009). If we minimize, or ignore children's abilities to notice, name, and classify by racial markers, we miss opportunities to support children with developing healthy, holistic ways to talk about race, rather than ways that are based in superiority (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006). Anti-racism in early childhood, then, must address and challenge harmful racist stereotypes, assumptions, and Eurocentric norms that discount the important contributions of BIPOC people.

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We take this anti-racist directive seriously within our collaborative partnership through our professional roles as university professor and classroom teacher/school administrator. To build our anti-racist commitments, we developed our knowledge, practices, and pedagogies of anti-racism over time through our multi-year partnership in a first-grade classroom setting. We found that it was and is important to document our anti-racist work together to help illustrate for others who are interested in doing this work, the thoughtful, intentional journey of our partnership. We recognize that navigating the socio-political and professional minefields of doing anti-racism work in education can be difficult and so we share our experiences and lessons learned to support others who share our commitments.

We deliberately bring readers into our anti-racist collaboration by weaving in what we name “reflections” throughout this article. These *reflections* are excerpts from our research memos, notes to each other, and transcripts of recorded conversations that we bring to the surface of this manuscript. We do so with the intention of bringing readers into the journey of our collaboration – including the struggles we encountered, our decision making, and insights gained. We do this for multiple reasons – first to embody the process-oriented method we took in our research and collaboration, second as an approach which follows our critical counterstorytelling methodology which we describe later, and last to share the complexity of ethical decisions we made while enacting anti-racist pedagogies. Our reflections are usually written in first person while other parts of the article are usually written in second or third person. Throughout the article these reflections are included from each of us in italics to highlight the importance of collaboration and support that we believe is needed to sustain anti-racist work in education.

The Journey of our Collaboration

As early childhood educators who were (and are) committed to social justice, we first met at a “Making Black Lives Matter in the Classroom” event. While we have different experiences, roles, and identities, what we found that connected us was a commitment to social and racial justice. When we first met, we were both residing within the geographic context of a politically conservative region of the Midwest United States. As a result, engaging in explicit and radical forms of anti-racism was not an easy path and we found that we needed to be intentional and strategic with how we shared our work and with whom, ultimately recognizing that the support and partnership we built through our collaboration was vital. Oona is a former early childhood classroom teacher and now a university professor, teaching courses in early childhood practices, pedagogies, and research. Cynthia is a former elementary classroom teacher and now an elementary school assistant principal.

Oona’s Critical Reflection about Collaboration

The partnership that Cynthia and I have built and sustained over 8 years has been so important in my work for racial justice in early childhood. We began from a place where both of us were learning, exploring, and questioning. I really believe that this leveled any kind of expert status, and we could both be experts as well as learners. Therefore navigating the challenging terrain of being in in the midwest U.S. while working for anti-racism felt like less of an impossible hill to climb, because we were doing it together, and could rely on each other. If one of us encountered a difficult conversation or situation we did not know quite how to handle, we had the other to bounce ideas off of, vent to, and strategize with. Working with Cynthia has also taught me about the importance of relationships in research - that matters so much if we are truly committed to justice.

Cynthia’s Critical Reflection about Collaboration

The partnership that Oona and I have is a cornerstone of my work in advancing racial justice in my teaching practice. From the beginning, we approached our collaboration with openness, curiosity, and a shared willingness to learn, not only about the work, but from each other. We were transparent in our conversations, even when things were uncomfortable, which helped us build trust. Our commitment to learning from our different experiences and perspectives leveled any sense of hierarchy; we could both be learners and both bring our own expertise. This approach made the work of engaging in anti-racism in a complex place in the U.S. like Missouri feel less overwhelming because we weren’t doing it alone. We had each other to lean on, to talk through hard conversations, to vent with, and to strategize alongside.

Identity and Positionality: Recognizing Differences and Sameness

Oona and Cynthia possess different racial identities. Oona is a white woman, who has a desire to teach and research with the goals of social and racial justice. Oona has over fifteen years of working in various early childhood classroom settings as a teacher and curriculum coordinator and was also working on her doctoral degree (which she has since completed) when we first met. Cynthia is African American woman whose journey to teaching was different from many of her colleagues (as she changed careers later in life), and whose passion for teaching and research grew as she advanced her educational journey, taking note of the many areas of racial inequality that needed addressing in early education. Cynthia felt that her commitment to advancing social and racial justice was further ignited when she met and worked with Oona. Cynthia began her career in elementary education over ten years ago and during the beginnings of our partnership, was working on a Doctorate in Educational Leadership (which she now completed).

In our work together, while we discovered that there were similar goals and even approaches to our work, the external racial identities we both inhabit led us to different experiences in how we were seen by others. In conversations and reflections, Cynthia often described feeling like an “outcast,” who was “different” due to her racialization in her school building. At the beginning of our partnership, Cynthia was the only Black teacher at her school. Cynthia spoke about how important she knows it is to be a Black teacher in her school, however, due to her racial positioning she felt different from many of the other educators in her school campus. Yet, this difference encouraged her to create a classroom where critical questions of race and identity could be asked and explored. Oona did not feel like an outcast in the school building. Oona’s white body and whiteness within the building was not seen as different, and Oona and Cynthia would notice that Oona often seem to be more seen as belonging in Cynthia’s school/workplace, even though, ironically, Cynthia was the one who worked there and Oona was just a guest researcher.

While by racial categorization alone we were marked as different, there were also many ways in which we experienced connection and similarity. We found that in educational spaces we asked questions, made observations, and shared ideas which challenged the status quo of pedagogy and practice and were frequently dismissed as unwelcome. We also connected about aspirations of working on a doctoral degree and our commitments to taking a critical stance in our coursework and research. We regularly and openly discussed our differences and similarities with each other as part of our partnership and to help level the power differences that might occur when university professors and classroom teachers work together.

Cynthia’s Critical Reflection about Racial Identity

It’s annoying... It always feels like I am the outcast. I feel like I am stared at and I feel like they [white educator colleagues and families] don’t understand how what they say can be offensive. Like what they say about certain kids or how I’m always told “you look the part” because my hair is a certain way and because of the way I may talk. But when I walk down the hall I feel like they question if I am the teacher. It always feels like I am the outcast. As a Black woman in the politically conservative midwest, no one had to tell me I was the outcast-it’s a feeling that comes with my race, whether others realize it or not. Sometimes it’s intentional, other times unconscious, but the impact is always there. It is frustrating that when I speak directly, I’m often labeled as aggressive or unacceptable-yet when a white person does the same, it’s seen as passionate. The stereotypes I carry walk in before I do, entering every building, room, meeting, hallway, classroom-every space, including educational ones. I constantly have to monitor my tone to avoid being labeled ‘the angry Black woman,’ a burden that others don’t have to bear.

Oona’s Critical Reflection about Racial Identity

While I knew intellectually about my white privilege and had read, written, and even presented about concepts of racial privilege, our collaboration provided a new journey into understanding whiteness and white privilege in ways I had not yet experienced. As our relationship grew, I witnessed many of the ways that Cynthia’s ideas, contributions, and critiques were othered, sidelined, and disregarded due to her racialization. It gave me new insights and motivation in what it means to walk the journey as an ally and co-conspirator (Love, 2019). It cannot be enough just to sympathize, empathize, and listen - we also must intentionally act (Fontanella-Nothom et al., 2025).

Anti-Racism in Early Childhood

Our collaborative work towards anti-racism in early childhood recognizes that in the U.S. context, racism is a normalized part of policy and practice and unless we work individually and collectively to actively interrupt and dismantle racism, it will continue to grow and thrive. As early childhood education professionals, we are inspired by scholars working to name, advocate, and practice anti-racism in early childhood contexts (e.g., Escayg, 2019, 2020; Husband, 2010, 2012).

Escayg (2020) described three principles of anti-racism in early childhood. The first challenges epistemologies which guide how early childhood professionals approach their work with young children while recognizing many of these perspectives have come from a white, male, middle class, and Eurocentric frame. Second is cultivating strengths-based approaches for recognizing the contributions and assets of families and children, while deliberately uplifting the knowledge and insights from Black families and children. Last is deliberate focus on unmasking the white racial frame within ourselves and also with our students to dismantle racial biases in early childhood. To engage this last principle, Escayg asks early childhood educators “to cultivate pedagogical approaches that can subvert oppressive practices derived from racist ideologies, especially in the forms of discipline, teacher–student interactions, and teachers’ expectations of students” (p. 10). These three principles guided the way we approached anti-racism in our work in early childhood, as well as how we thought about the goals or outcomes of our work, to challenge racist practices in early education.

Tiffany Jewell, an early childhood Montessori educator describes in her text, *This Book is Anti-Racist* (2020), the importance of exploring and understanding one’s own identities as intersectional in becoming and sustaining anti-racist practices. Jewell hypothesizes that once one can clearly recognize and name the complex ways that racism operates, taking action becomes the next logical step. This deep understanding in the path to becoming an anti-racist educator supports us in building a strong commitment to transforming education through anti-racist practices.

While we value anti-racist practices in education as important work, researchers have recognized that early educators may hesitate to engage or resist these practices for a number of reasons. Boutte et al. (2011) recounted the self-described discomfort of many early childhood educators in doing what they name “anti-racism work.” As an antidote, Boutte and colleagues emphasized the importance of teachers engaging in anti-racist teaching on a regular basis. They describe that by seeing anti-racist teaching as ongoing, it becomes the norm rather than exception and in doing so these educators will grasp “that the process becomes easier with practice [and] will hopefully encourage and inspire educators to inch out of their comfort zones on behalf of the children whose care is entrusted to them” (p. 335).

Husband and Escayg (2022) detail that many early years educators still operate from a color-blind or selective seeing paradigm. This race-evasive position claims to not see color and/or race, therefore dismissing the need for an active anti-racist stance. To move educators from this view, it is important to provide opportunities for educators to engage in professional development learning opportunities specifically focused on topics of race and racism to support how race does in fact matter. Ignoring racial realities limits our world views and invalidates the experiences and identities of students and families. Committing to anti-racism means that you acknowledge these realities and commit to ending racial injustice.

This commitment is connected to Boutte et al. 's (2011) imperative for teachers to engage with young children regarding race and racism as an ethical and moral issue, as part of a teacher’s sworn duty to do no harm. The researchers advise that when teachers do not create time in their classroom curriculum for conversations about race and racism it “threatens the full humanity of all” (p. 341). There is harm involved in not allowing young students a place to discuss race and racism and the distress that it causes. Boutte et al. (2011) argued that “silence in early childhood classrooms on issues of racism prevents preparation for active and informed participation in our democratic society which includes multiple (even dissenting) perspectives” (p. 339). Avoiding issues of race and racism in early childhood classrooms is akin to instructing students that ignoring racism is a goal to which they should aspire. Falkner (2019) described

the need for additional research on anti-racism in early childhood, to explore and explain effective practices and provide models of what this work looks like with young children. We aim that our work together can add to the growing body of knowledge of what it looks like to build and sustain anti-racist partnerships in early childhood settings.

Method

Critical Race Theory: Our Theoretical Framework

One of the theories that guided our work together is Critical Race Theory (CRT). We intentionally centered an approach that took a critical approach to race and racism and could support us in working towards anti-racist informed pedagogical practices. Scholars who enact CRT in educational contexts intentionally center and explore the impacts of race and racism in their work (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Solorzano, 1997). CRT draws on multiple disciplines to challenge dominant ideologies such as meritocracy and color evasiveness, opposing the idea that education is neutral, and operates in the same ways for all. CRT underscores the necessity of experiential knowledge and storytelling from Communities of Color as an integral part of understanding and analyzing racial inequality. One of the fundamental principles of CRT is that racism in our society is indeed the norm and thus is rooted in the configuration of our nation and maintained through policies, institutions, and other structures. CRT assists scholars, educators, and other activists in understanding that racism exists within a complex interaction with other social and cultural factors.

According to Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), CRT in education has five main tenets specific to education. Those five themes are: (1) The centrality of race and racism and intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (2) The challenge to dominant ideology, (3) The commitment to social justice, (4) The centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) The interdisciplinary perspective. These five principles assist researchers, educators, and activists in having a specific framework to analyze and approach the experiences of all people. These themes specific to CRT in education assist educators in bringing out and naming racial inequities that have plagued society for generations. At an early age children form strong ideas about people based on race and ethnicity (Aboud & Amato, 2001; Johnson, 2023; Mac Naughton & Davis, 2009), and by not including topics of race and racism in our early childhood classrooms we send hidden messages to children about the importance of preserving structures that sustain institutionalized racism. Therefore, we found CRT to be a theoretical and pedagogical framework which guided us in recognizing the importance of teaching with a race conscious lens.

It is also important for us to recognize and call out recent and ongoing ideological, legislative, and educational maneuvers to ban, erase, and/or prohibit CRT in the United States, where we both work and reside. As Templeton and Harvey (2022) argued, these bans attempt to support the idea that children are naturally race evasive, and as such, educators who take a critical stance on race and racism are being intentionally divisive in bringing racial injustice into the forefront. Like, Templeton and Harvey, we recognize children's abilities to notice and name racial injustice in their worlds and want to use our roles as educators to work towards curating spaces where children can ask critical questions about race and racism, build relationships that are not based on racial hierarchies, and engage in thoughtful solutions. We are confident that this can be done, but only by allowing and encouraging children to explore their observations and ensuing questions about race, racism, and racial inequality. Building our research from a CRT frame allows us to centralize race and racism in our work together as well as in our teaching with children, while understanding that racial injustice does indeed impact children's lives. Therefore, committing to anti-racism practices and pedagogies through CRT highlights the importance of supporting children in resisting racial biases rippling through society.

Critical Counterstorytelling: Our Research Methodology

One of the central tenets of CRT is counterstorytelling, centering and uplifting experiential forms of knowledge that can challenge and disrupt the pervasive and normative presence of racism. Counterstorytelling challenges majoritarian narratives, interrupting dominant narratives of seemingly

race-neutral perspectives, to unveil and expose the deep imprint that race and racism have upon our work in education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) characterized counternarratives as “naming one’s own reality” or voice through “parables, chronicles, stories, counterstories, poetry, fiction and revisionist histories to illustrate the false necessity and irony of much of current civil rights doctrine” (p. 56). Delgado (1995), well known critical race legal scholar, described that counternarratives provide a form of self-preservation, as one constructs the story of their lived reality. Counternarratives also enrich our reality by complexifying our knowledge and experience of living with racism and working to resist what it does to us and our communities.

In this research, we are guided by a critical counternarrative methodology (Miller et al., 2020). Miller and colleagues explained that critical counternarratives can serve as a tool and resource to work for educational equity, and can guide approaches to inquiry, pedagogy and practice, as well as research and corresponding methodological approaches. Miller et al. (2020) described how there is variability in how researchers use counterstorytelling and counternarratives in educational research and we find this variability allows for narratives to be relevant to the context being studied. However, generally a critical counternarrative methodology is framed by three components: (1) CRT serves as a model for the approach to inquiry, (2) critical reflection is valued as an ideal approach to praxis that can be used in research and teaching, and (3) transformative action that leads to educational equity is the goal (Miller et al., 2020).

Counternarratives have several traits: they expose, analyze, and critique our current racial reality (Delgado, 1995); they interrogate assumptions about the impact of race in our lives (Ravitch, 2014); they expose racism and offer solutions to mitigate the harms (Blaisdell, 2023); and they critique inequitable practices while offering transformative possibilities (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Our work in this paper is guided by these three components, as we kept them in the forefront of our partnership. The counternarratives that we include in this paper are titled “reflections” which we generated throughout our research partnership, which come from memos, transcripts of critical conversations with each other and with students in Cynthia’s classroom, and creative/artistic renderings based upon our critical reflections of our work with Cynthia’s first-grade students.

Cynthia’s Critical Reflection about Counterstorytelling

Counterstorytelling is more than a methodology—it’s a form of resistance, a reclaiming of voice in spaces where dominant narratives often erase or distort the lived experiences of marginalized communities. As a Black woman, counterstorytelling is not just something I engage in; it’s something I live. Mainstream narratives often paint a picture of objectivity and neutrality, but they are shaped by systems that were never built for people like me. Centering my counterstories disrupts those so-called objective narratives. They center voices like mine that are usually pushed to the margins, allowing me to unveil truths that challenge the status quo. They reveal the gaps where our previously unheard histories, struggles, and triumphs should be. When I share my story—about being labeled aggressive for my directness, about walking into rooms where stereotypes precede me, about constantly navigating how I am perceived—it is a counterstory. It pushes back against the single story often told about who belongs, who leads, and who is heard in educational and professional spaces. Counterstorytelling gives language to the injustices we experience and allows us to reframe them on our terms. It helps build solidarity and opens space for others to see the world through my lens—not for pity, but for understanding, for truth, and for change. In telling my story, I feel that I create space for envisioning what equity and justice in early childhood teaching can look like.

Oona’s Critical Reflection about Counterstorytelling

You know, it is interesting for me to think about my work as counterstorytelling. In so much of the research and literature in CRT, counternarratives and counterstorytelling is focused on people and communities of Color sharing their experiential knowledge and challenging dominant Eurocentric perspectives. Alone, I cannot do that. By those standards, I am the majority. However, working with Cynthia and her perspectives and experiences as an African American woman shifted that. A lot of our early work together was about me listening to Cynthia - what were her experiences, frustrations, and subsequent goals? How did these align and in what ways could I be an ally, co-conspirator, and provide support and validation? Cynthia feeling frustration at being positioned as “the outcast” and “the angry Black woman” reminded me that contributing counterstories that challenged those harmful narratives was

important work to do.

Research and Teaching Context

Our research partnership began several years ago when we met at the local university where Cynthia was part of a panel of educators at a “Making Black Lives Matter in the Classroom” event. After the panel we began a conversation about our shared interest in social justice, early childhood teaching, and anti-racism pedagogies and practices. Our collaborative research-teacher inquiry began formally, then, as we have been co-studying teaching and learning through the lens of the students in her first-grade classroom since 2017.

In this article, the classroom data we draw from in this article is from the school year 2018-2019, when Cynthia had 21 students in her first-grade classroom, whose families identified them as Black, white, and several who identified as biracial or multiracial. IRB approval was secured from Oona’s institution as well as Cynthia’s workplace/school district’s research approval committee. Consent from families was obtained when the Cynthia met with them and shared the intention and process of our research. Additionally, Cynthia’s students were also asked to positively assent prior to each time we made recordings, took photos, or otherwise documented classroom learning. Other data we draw from is from field notes, reflections, and transcripts of our conversations from collaborative meetings and informal conversations from the same year. Lastly, we also draw on our reflective memories of these experiences working together as important data that traces our partnership.

Cynthia’s school was in a midsized Midwest university town in the United States. As we worked together to build and implement anti-racism in our teaching, we noticed that we encountered particular challenges based upon our location. These challenges arose due to the political-geographic context. The socio-political climate in the region created a sense of risk around addressing systemic racism directly in the curriculum. Educators in the town described feeling tension between the ethical imperative to foster equity and the fear of community backlash from conservative talking points in local and state government to “take our education back.” This environment made critical, open dialogue about racism harder to achieve and forced us to navigate carefully between advocacy and caution. We sometimes experienced pushback from other educators, families, and educational administrators when initiating difficult conversations about race. We faced uncertainty around how students might interpret or communicate these discussions with their families, but ultimately, did not scale back our research due to these external pressures as we stayed consistent in our work.

Results and Discussion

In our analysis of our multi-year partnership working towards anti-racism pedagogies through a counterstorytelling methodology, we located and described two central insights/findings that we discovered sustained and supported our anti-racist pedagogies and practices. We recognize that many other educators teaching and learning with children who have commitments to social justice and anti-racism are facing challenging contexts for doing anti-racist work. To work in solidarity with other educators, we provide our two insights along with providing strategies, lessons learned, and seeds of hope for engaging in anti-racism work in early childhood in challenging contexts.

Our first insight is the importance of building and leveraging critical race partnerships. In this insight we describe how our partnership, built over time, supported us in engaging anti-racist practices and pedagogies. We describe how proceeding with slow intentionality enabled us to feel supported and validated in doing anti-racist work. In our second insight, we describe how children’s books were an important teaching tool and resource for us in our work with Cynthia’s first-grade students. In this insight we describe how we created a set of critical race selection criteria to guide our process in selecting and sharing books. These criteria were intentionally designed to challenge dominant narratives, support critical conversations around race, identity, and equity, and create meaningful opportunities for students to engage with diverse perspectives. Our goal was to ensure that the literature we shared not only reflected a wide range of experiences but also encouraged thoughtful dialogue, reflection, and a deeper understanding

of social justice issues. Through our partnership, we developed a set of critical questions which supported us in selecting books which provided opportunities to name and resist racial biases, support critical conversations around race, and learn to value racial diversity with children.

Slowness: An Important Trait in Building Critical Race Partnerships

As we described earlier, our partnership was built from our common interest in exploring race and racism with children from a critical lens, guided by a commitment to social justice. We first met in 2017, nearly ten years ago. While conversations about systemic racism and the importance of involving kids has become more mainstream over the past few years, when we began working together, it was still viewed as controversial and divisive in many spaces. Because of this, we were slow to begin our partnership and build the trust (we now have) with each other. After our first meeting, we met for lunch at a nearby restaurant to discuss interests and to get to know each other.

After that meal, Cynthia invited Oona to visit her classroom for the 2017-2018 school year. Oona started by visiting once a week for an hour or two, taking direction from Cynthia in what would support her classroom and goals as an educator. For example, Cynthia might support a small group who was working on a math or literacy activity, or share a read-aloud while Oona worked with a small group, or get supplies that Cynthia needed. We continued with this kind of relationship for several months, while at the same time discussing our interests in anti-racism and reading and discussing texts and resources together. During this time, we got to know each other better and developed our relationship as colleagues, educators, and eventually friends. We asked each other questions, brainstormed curricular and pedagogical thoughts and plans. In reflecting on this initial timeline of the beginnings of our partnership, we noticed how much time we took to build this working relationship. As we reviewed our notes and timeline together, we felt surprised at how *slow* it seemed to happen.

During early 2018, we discussed more formally researching together - working to obtain institutional and school district research panel approval and recording our teaching and research together. We once again took time to consider this. We sat, discussed, and strategized. We wondered: how will others perceive our work? We considered administrators in Cynthia's school building, would they be open to formally approving a teacher-researcher collaboration that was grounded in a critical approach to race and racism? Soon after, Cynthia experienced resistance and backlash as she describes below,

During a faculty meeting, the topic of how to approach the teaching of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy arose. I shared an experience from my own classroom: During a read aloud, a student had asked me how Dr. King died. I told them that I responded honestly—Dr. King was murdered. My white colleagues in the meeting all seemed to gasp and be taken aback by the way I had responded. I then posed a question to my colleagues: "Is saying 'he was murdered' too direct for first graders, or is it a necessary truth we owe them?" One teacher responded by asking, "Do you feel that's appropriate with them being in first grade?" While I acknowledged the gravity of the question I answered, "Well, it is part of history. It is unfortunate, but it is the truth." Another colleague responded by sharing her discomfort with my pedagogical decision, stating she didn't feel comfortable telling her class the full truth about Dr. King's death. She worried it would make her students uneasy, that parents might object, and that she did not want to face pushback from families.

Over the years, I've developed a reputation for being straightforward and honest with students. Prior to this school year, a parent requested their child be transferred out of my classroom because they felt like their child shouldn't hear these honest truths about racial injustice. When the administration brought the request to my attention, they were transparent about the parent's concerns but left the decision open. I expressed my disagreement, asking whether granting such a request would set a precedent that undermines support for teachers. Ultimately, the administration decided the student would remain in my class. However, in a separate instance, a student was removed from my classroom following sustained pressure from parents. The administration justified their decision by stating that keeping the student in my class might make my job more difficult due to ongoing parental resistance. Out of concern, I asked whether this had happened before—whether any other student had ever been moved to another classroom under similar circumstances. The answer was no, that this was the first time. Throughout our work to engage anti-racist pedagogies, the resistance I encountered came not from children/students, but from adults—staff and parents—who often struggled with the discomfort of truth telling about impacts of race and racism.

This resistance faced by Cynthia reflects a larger tension many educators face when teaching young children about race, racial injustice, and historical violence. While some worry that naming these realities

explicitly may cause harm to children, others argue that shielding them can perpetuate sanitized and incomplete understandings of the past (Dutro, 2019; Fontanella-Nothom, 2021; King & Swartz, 2014). As we discussed and strategized about these challenges together through a critical race theoretical lens, we once again recognized the importance of *slowness*. Our commitments to building respectful yet truthful pedagogies with children could not be rushed – they needed time to develop and mature. It was also important for Cynthia to be able to discuss these concerns with Oona, to slowly analyze and digest what these choices meant and how we could work together, providing the support and reinforcement that Cynthia needed to continue her anti-racist work.

We noticed, in reviewing and analyzing our field notes and conversations from this time in our growing partnership, is that the word *fear* and similar words were often present. In Figure, we have included a found poem, rooted in our critical counterstorytelling methodology, drawn from our field notes and critical conversations of our process of working through our fear(s). This poem embodies some of the challenges we went through, but also how we came together to work through them, emphasizing the importance of our slow work together.

Found Poem of our Field Notes and Critical Reflections

Worry.

Were they watching us?

I'm fearful.

We have to find ways to justify.

Did you hear what he said?

I was surprised.

Deep breaths.

Take time.

I'm still worried but feeling less scared.

When you are here, I feel like it's okay, we can back each other up.

No rush.

Solidarity!

That was SO GOOD today.

Can we have more days like that?

Days like this should stretch on forever.

Feeling my confidence build today. These kids are so ready.

I think I'm the teacher? They are teaching me/us.

Learning takes time. Learning needs time.

We still need to be careful.

Worry is still there.

Yeah, I feel fear. Still. Afraid.

Waiting for approval that will never be provided.

We are already doing it - lives are too precious.

Our slowness is our strength.

Rather than pushing concerns to the side, we centered them in our conversations with each other, providing validation and affirmation. Because we were both working on doctoral degrees at the time, we recognized that not all research, teaching, and collaboration experiences considered the importance of slow time the same way we were. We shared frustrations – being rushed to make decisions, researchers making quick or rushed decisions to pursue knowledge over relationships, sensitivity, and human connection were

often the case. As we slowly continued our partnership, this slowness continued to show up in a variety of ways that supported us in recognizing its importance and value.

Cynthia's Critical Reflection About our Partnership

As we reviewed and analyzed our field notes and reflections from this period of our developing partnership, one word surfaced repeatedly: fear. Variations of this word appeared throughout, signaling our shared uncertainty about how our work would be received. While skepticism and fear were present, we never wavered in our beliefs. In fact, our unspoken connection grew stronger and remained committed to the work. What helped sustain our determination was the trust and curiosity we built between us. Though we came from different racial backgrounds, I often found myself asking Oona how she seemed so comfortable speaking truths that many others hesitated to say especially regarding Critical Race Theory or CRT and so called "hard topics" that many people I work with assume children are too young to discuss. This gradual, intentional process allowed us to observe and learn from one another, finding ways to speak truths in a predominately white school setting. Together, we created opportunities for students to question, wonder, and engage in student led conversations about race, conversations they seemed to never have been invited into before. Little did I know, this was the beginning of my journey toward speaking more comfortably about these topics and creating space for students to voice their own opinions, independent from the harsh judgements and stereotypes they may encounter both inside and outside of the classroom.

Selecting Anti-Racist Children's Literature with a Critical Race Lens

The second insight we gained from our work to engage anti-racist pedagogies and practices is the importance of being supported by meaningful children's books to guide our teaching and research about race and racism with children. We discovered books to be an important tool to guide our conversations with children, spark new questions and ideas, and to support critical dialogue. Additionally, we found that by researching, discovering, and exploring new books we also expanded our own knowledge base and perspectives about race and racism.

As important as these texts were, we also discovered that some books were problematic. While our initial search and locating of books which focused on race and racism yielded a lot of results, sometimes those books were not what we were originally looking for. For example, some books that we found did not take a critical view, provided incomplete and/or inaccurate histories, and were too focused on savior narratives. We would often locate books, only to be disappointed that it did not meet our expectations grounded in our anti-racist stance that we discussed earlier. Additionally, we found that some books which focused on topics of racism would place this social problem as occurring in the past, making racism a historical problem. The characters in these stories would often be upholding ideals of racial progress, when we both recognized that was not our current reality. By starting our partnership from a CRT and anti-racist stance, it demanded that we remain critical of these narratives presented in books, and be thoughtful about which books we shared with Cynthia's students. We shared similar beliefs about children - listening, trusting, and respecting their ideas, questions, and contributions. As a result, we deliberately created a classroom space where critical questions could be asked and mediated upon (often with no answers), creating a student-teacher co-created learning environment. Cynthia's students regularly engaged in critical dialogue about the narratives, experiences, and history we were sharing through books. We share an example from Cynthia's classroom which was a critical moment for us in our journey as anti-racist educators. In this excerpt of a critical conversation, we were reading *Separate is Never Equal* by Duncan Tonatiuh (2014) which centers upon school desegregation in the United States. The class was discussing the racist signs illustrated in the book and the racist chants being shouted at Sylvia Mendez within the story.

Student 1: He said "go back, you don't belong here. You go to the Mexican school." And because she is not the same color as their skin. They are white and she's Black.

Other overlapping student voices: No, look, she's Brown!

Student 1: (While looking at the other students and nodding) Yeah, she's Brown. And she's upset because he said that. She doesn't need to go to that school if she doesn't want to.

Student 2: You know, they are not even really white. It is just their skin is a little lighter and more like tan. It is just a

lighter color of Brown.

There is silence in the classroom for about 30 seconds.

Student 3: You know, if I was a principal, and the Brown people wanted to come here I would just say yes. Everyone should have a school, you know, that they should want to go to.

Oona: I agree. I think everyone should have a school they want to go to and treats them well.

Student 3: What about our school? Does our school do that?

Student 4: Yeah, do people still say that stuff?

We spent time discussing moments like this one and how we could make sure to select children’s books to share in Cynthia’s classroom that demonstrated critical yet accurate portrayals of topics of race and racism. We also wanted to make sure the students in Cynthia’s classroom had opportunities to draw connections to their own lives from books. We wanted to make sure that the books we shared did not simply place racism in the past as something that happened long ago but instead provided opportunities to draw present day connections and enable critical conversations like this one.

What we discovered is that there was no exact or precise way to determine if a book was *right*, but instead we needed to do the same thing we are working on with Cynthia’s students - engage in critical questioning about the texts we were curating and if they provided the critical race lens we were looking for. What this meant for us is that we needed to align the theory that was guiding our work together (CRT) with how we analyzed the messages presented within these texts and how we were able to present them. We did this by creating a set of critical questions (we asked as we encountered each new book) which aligned with the five tenets of CRT we discussed earlier. We share those questions in Table 1.

Table 1

Our co-created critical book criteria questions

CRT Tenet	Our Critical Questions and Book Criteria
Centering race and racism with other forms of subordination	Who are the central characters in this book and what are their racial identities? How does the book offer opportunities to learn about intersectionality?
Challenging dominant ideologies	Which majoritarian stories does the book identify and challenge? Does the book offer new perspectives that uplift marginalized voices in respectful ways?
A commitment to social justice	Where, specifically, does this book advocate for social change and transformation?
The centrality of experiential knowledge	What are the authors and illustrators’ racial identities and how does that contribute to the knowledge presented in the book? What types of research have the author/illustrator pursued to provide authentic portrayals?
Bridging interdisciplinary perspectives	Does the book offer authentic opportunities to learn about different topics, subjects, and disciplines?

These questions became for us touchstones in keeping us grounded to our anti-racist stance. These questions supported us in making sure that we both aligned our book selection to our theoretical frame of CRT and kept our anti-racist stance active, engaged, dynamic as we questioned what books made possible, or conversely provided limitations. We were unable to simply select a book that seemed to be about race and racism topics and share it, without first, for example, examining who it was written by, if the illustrations created a respectful portrayal, and if the story/narrative challenged Eurocentric narratives/histories. In our book selection we were inspired by Hintz and Tribunella (2019) who instruct that:

[Children’s] literature does not just represent the world, but also constructs the world; it depicts the world not only as it is, but also as it might be. Literature, as a form of art, can help readers see the world differently or anew and thus help them envision alternatives to current or dominant beliefs and ways of living. (p. 37)

Oona’s Critical Reflection about Our Book Selection Process

Through this process of coming up with critical race book selection, I learned just how difficult creating criteria

can be! As we explored the context surrounding children's literature, we learned more about the many misrepresentations within children's picturebooks (e.g., Thomas et al., 2016). While it was difficult, it also was important in Cynthia and I, naming and solidifying our critical race and anti-racist stances. It forced us to take a stand in not just what we were against, but also what we were for. By clearly claiming what was important in selecting books about race and racism also supported us in being clear about our research and teaching goals. What kinds of histories were we aiming to teach? Whose narratives and/or perspectives did we want to center? What were elements of books that would support us in doing that work?

Cynthia's Critical Reflection about Our Book Selection Process

What strikes me the most about the texts we selected and read with our first graders is how deeply they engaged with the material—not only forming their own opinions but also challenging events from the past. They were able to articulate how disheartening certain historical practices were, and many expressed disagreements with injustices, such as discrimination based on race or gender. Some students openly discussed how they felt that families with same-gender parents were not always fairly included, offering thoughtful and accepting perspectives that challenged dominant societal assumptions. I'll never forget a moment during a read-aloud when a student asked what it meant to "hang someone." Oona looked at me, and with a simple nod, we gave each other the unspoken permission to explore and explain. It was a powerful, sobering moment that reflected not only the seriousness of the content but also the trust we had in each other and in the students' capacity to understand hard truths.

Throughout our work, Cynthia's students consistently discussed and explained their questions, feelings, and curiosities - we made sure to build in time for extended critical dialogue whenever we were centering critical race topics so Cynthia's students felt heard. We were intentional in how we scaffolded both our instruction and our responses. Over time, we learned that while selecting meaningful and diverse books is critical, it is also important to know the context of those books and feel prepared to respond truthfully and thoughtfully, especially when unexpected vocabulary or difficult questions arise. These moments reminded us that young students are not only capable of engaging with complex topics, but that they deserve the opportunity to do so in a supportive and honest learning environment.

Conclusion

When we consider the insights we shared about our collaboration to create and sustain critical dialogues about race, racism, and anti-racism with young children, three words come to mind: intentional, deliberate, and relational. Our slowness in developing our critical race partnership was an intentional choice to build collaboration that did not hurry our knowledge and practice of anti-racism. To create criteria to select children's books, we learned that we also had to be intentional. We were deliberate in carefully reading, analyzing, and selecting books without rushing through any concerns or doubts we had. Last, as we demonstrated through our critical reflections presented, our relationship and the way we nurtured our relationality (such as seeing how our racial identities were different and how we could support each other) was so important in working as anti-racism practitioners. We find anti-racism a practice that is difficult if not impossible to do on your own and our intentionally slow way of working together nurtured how we related to and supported each other. We hope readers consider the intentional, deliberate, and relational possibilities they will select in their anti-racist pedagogies and practices. How will you be intentional in the choices you make? What do deliberate choices to select, share, and create anti-racist materials look like?

As we write this, from the United States, social justice work is under direct assault. Each day we witness diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and programs under attack, active efforts to defund and dismantle public education, and educators who are committed to anti-racism feeling fearful of losing positions and being censured. These are real fears, grounded in accounts of the withdrawing of funding, disappearing of students and activists from streets, and demands to eliminate education programs which address race and racism. We are discouraged and frustrated with the onslaught of attacks, but it is also a reminder that anti-racism pedagogies and practices cannot wait for the 'right' time or conditions. Rather, we all, as early childhood professionals, must seize the moment to embark upon being an intentional, deliberate, and relational educator who works for social justice. We believe that although curriculum

mandates can be made and funding structures may be changed, divisive so-called leaders cannot control who and how you are with your students and colleagues.

Anti-racism, for us, has become an intentional, deliberate, and relational practice woven into our core beliefs and a deep part of who we are. While mandates may cause worry, fear, and loss of resources they cannot reach into our relationships and our capabilities for transformative education and community building with each other, our students, and colleagues. Our anti-racist practice that we continue to slowly build together has uncovered the importance of relational partnerships and intentional critical practice as essential elements to sustaining anti-racism pedagogies in the early years.

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