

## “We Gotta Change First”: Racial Literacy in a High School English Classroom

Vetter, Amy, [amvetter@uncg.edu](mailto:amvetter@uncg.edu)

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

Hungerford-Kressor, Holly, [hkresser@uta.edu](mailto:hkresser@uta.edu)

The University of Texas at Arlington, Texas, USA

### Abstract

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Students need more opportunities to learn how to respond to and counter forms of everyday racism. This qualitative study addresses that need by investigating how one peer-led group engaged in dialogue about issues of race in regards to an eleventh-grade Language Arts assignment. A racial literacy perspective framed our analysis of three small group conversations. Findings suggest that dialogue in the small group fostered opportunities for students to engage in the following elements of racial literacy: a) hear and appreciate diverse and unfamiliar experiences; b) facilitate problem-solving with the community; and c) create opportunities to talk about race.

**Key words:** racial literacy, discourse analysis, social justice

Please cite this article as:

Vetter, A., & Hungerford-Kressor, H. (2014). “We gotta change first”: Racial literacy in a high school English classroom. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 10(1), 82-99. Retrieved from <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu>.

Social justice education is a process and goal (Bell, 1997) for “interrupting current practices that reproduce social, cultural, moral, economic, gendered, intellectual, and physical injustices” (NCTE, 2010). To interrupt such practices and prepare children to participate in U.S. democracy and a global society, literacy educators must address race, racism, and antiracism in an educative manner (Greene and Abt-Perkins 2003; Guinier, 2009; Skerrett, 2011). Although many teachers integrate multicultural education and/or elements of culturally relevant pedagogy, they are hesitant to engage students in discussions about issues of race and racism (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Nieto, 2003). These hesitations are understandable because conversations about racism are personal, vulnerable, and have the potential to disrupt an already delicate classroom community.

Talk about these issues, however, is imperative to fostering racial literacy, transforming social positions, and developing the foundations of a community that leverages the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of all students (Bolgatz, 2005; Mosley & Rogers, 2011). In other words, racial literacy is *engages students* in social justice. Developing racial literacy helps students think about the social, cultural, and political aspects of their experiences, with a focus on race. To solidify that point, we use Keisha’s (all names are pseudonyms) words for the article’s title to illustrate how these discussions opened opportunities for her and her high school peers to consider dilemmas related to issues of race, such as how social and cultural transformation occurs.

In particular, lack of dialogue about race is a form of action that leaves assumptions unexamined. With that said, research has shown that teachers must facilitate talk about race carefully because some discussions can be harmful if a group is stereotyped (Bolgatz, 2005). Teachers, who have been successful in promoting such dialogue, consistently set up a class tone and structure that builds trust, normalizes conversations about race, and challenges assumptions about race and racism. Specifically, some teachers use questions, notice and respond to racial issues, and encourage reflectiveness and curiosity. Such conversations require consistent and continuous practice, specifically when it comes to fostering dialogue at a deeper level (Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Dutro, Kazemi, Balf, & Lin, 2008; Sutherland, 2005). Teachers who have engaged in racial literacy practices in professional development are typically more confident in facilitating such conversations in their own classrooms because they are familiar with characterizations of race and racism, such as essentializing race, colorblindness, and the myth of individualism (Glazier, 2003; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Skerrett, 2011).

To increase the facilitation of such conversations, we, the authors, believe that educators would benefit from more research that examines how students and teachers navigate discussions about race in everyday classrooms, particularly in small-group conversations. Specifically, we argue that examining peer group conversations could provide insight into how high school students engage in racial literacy practices independent from adult supervision. This examination is especially pertinent to high school teachers who are preparing students to engage in social justice practices independently in higher education, in future careers, and as active citizens in their communities. To fill that need, this article investigates how three high school students engaged in racial literacy practices through small-group conversations about issues of race and segregation in regards to an eleventh-grade English/Language Arts assignment.

### **Theoretical Framework: Racial Literacy**

We use a racial literacy framework to highlight the importance of recognizing, responding to, and countering forms of everyday racism, especially in classrooms. We conceptualize race as a social

and historical concept that is formed and reformed throughout society by individuals and groups of people (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Omi & Winant, 2006). As a socially constructed concept, race is relational and establishes levels of privilege and power for people in particular settings. Everyday practices, such as talk or dress, maintain and establish race. For minority students in U.S. schools, race is often a prevailing narrative in their lives that inevitably shapes their school experiences (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Historically in the U.S., equitable literacy education has included the social justice movement (DuBois, 1999; Willis, 2002) that, unfortunately, has yet to come to fruition. Currently, schools and programs (e.g., advanced placement) remain segregated, thus fostering the ideology that literacy education is merely a privilege for students of color (Greene, 2008; Prendergast, 2003). Specifically, some schools utilize a deficit ideology for culturally and linguistically diverse students that restrict access to equitable literacy education (Lipman, 2008).

In an attempt to “overcome the structured dissention race has cemented in our popular consciousness,” Guinier (2004) argued for people becoming more literate about how racism permeates our social, cultural, and political worlds. The goal of racial literacy is to develop a set of social proficiencies that attempt to make sense of the discursive and performative systems of race. Specifically, racial literacy develops an understanding of how race shapes the “social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups” (Skerrett, 2011, p. 314). While race is the central focus of racial literacy, this concept examines the dynamic and fluid relationship among race, class, gender, sexuality, and other markers of difference. A person practices racial literacy by communicating with others in ways that challenge undemocratic practices (Bolgatz, 2005).

In addition, the practice of racial literacy means to hear and appreciate diverse and unfamiliar experiences, recognize how to ask questions, view racial issues through a critical lens that recognizes current and institutional aspects of racism, and engage in talk even when it is difficult or awkward. Thus, a racially literate person addresses race in ways that recognize race as a structural rather than individual problem, views debates with a democratic context, understands that racial identities are learned, and facilitates problem-solving within the community (Guinier, 2004; Twine 2004). Consistently engaging in racial literacy requires practice and the concept deserves more investigation, especially in relation to the content and structure of racial literacy dialogue in classrooms.

More research, then, is needed to examine how teachers and students share knowledge in ways that foster racial literacy. Thus, we draw from sociocultural theorists who argue that in whole-group contexts, teachers can guide “the construction of knowledge” through classroom interactions (Mercer, 1995, p. 1). When in small groups, students might struggle with figuring out how to work together, especially in regards to social and cultural issues. Because of those struggles, students need more opportunities to practice autonomous dialogue and collaborative problem solving (Maloch, 2002). Mercer (2000) found that students typically engaged in three types of talk when attempting to solve a problem. Sometimes students engaged in disputational talk in which students disagreed, made individual decisions, and fostered a competitive rather than cooperative space. Other times, students engaged in cumulative talk in which everyone accepted and agreed with one another, resulting in an uncritical dialogue that did not promote problem-solving. Finally, students sometimes engaged in exploratory talk in which they listened actively, treated opinions with respect, shared a sense of purpose, and critically sought agreement for joint decisions. Mercer found that students who engaged in exploratory talk were more successful at solving problems in ways that fostered collaborative learning. Because students in this study were in a small group focused on solving a

problem, we drew from these sociocultural theories to examine how students used talk in ways that fostered racial literacy practices.

### **Method**

This research drew from a larger research study focused on the identity work of readers and writers in Gina, the teacher's, high school English classroom. After several observations, Amy, the first author, noticed how students' race and ethnicity shaped how they engaged in literacy practices, including in-class discussions and writing assignments. To explore that broader finding and its implications for teaching practices, this research used a micro-ethnographic approach (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005) to explore the following questions: How do students engage in dialogue about issues of race and segregation in regards to an eleventh-grade English/Language Arts assignment? In what ways did these conversations foster racial literacy in the students over time? We used discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) to interpret classroom interactions, specifically how people act and react to each other within literacy events. Such a lens provided insight into how students did or did not engage in racial literacy practices through collaborative writing group conversations.

### **Context**

To provide context for the reader, we describe the school, researchers, participants, and classroom project. Next, we provide a description of the data collection and analysis methods of this qualitative study.

**School.** Rushmore High School (RHS) is a 9-12 grade school located on the Eastside of a southwestern city in the United States. A culturally and linguistically diverse working-class neighborhood surrounds this school. The school's population reflected the diversity of the neighborhood with a majority of Latino/as (67%) and African American (30%) students, and 31% speaking English as a second language. Until the late 1990s, RHS was a predominately African American school, but population shifts quickly made it a predominately Latino school by the time of our study in the 2007 academic year. While a teacher at RHS, Holly, second author, often noted the distance between the two populations, peer groups, clubs, and sports teams were typically racially segregated.

At the time of the study, 81% of students qualified for free-and-reduced lunch. Based on state assessment results on math, science, social studies and language arts, and school completion rates for grades 9 through 12 since 2005, the school was rated academically unacceptable, a categorization made by the state education system based on low standardized test scores and graduation rates.

**Researchers.** During a National Project Teacher Research Group in 2006, Gina and Amy, first author, met for the first time. It was during this meeting that we discovered similar interests in literacy education for students. Gina invited Amy into her classroom, where she stayed as an observational researcher for five months. She recommended that Amy observe her sixth and seventh period classes to document both an honors-level and on-level eleventh-grade classroom.

Holly, second author, knew Gina as a former colleague. They spent three years teaching in the same department at RHS, and Holly was Gina's department chair for one of those years. Holly was also a doctoral student after leaving RHS, and regularly supervised student teachers in Gina's classroom.

For this paper, we focused on sixth period (honors-level), because they engaged in the “proposal for change” assignment. In the findings, we provide context for the study by providing Gina’s teaching philosophy and practices..

**Classroom and participants.** We conducted this study in Gina’s fifty-minute honors-level eleventh-grade course that consisted of 28 students (15 female and 13 male). Students represented a range of ethnic backgrounds (18 African American and 10 Latino/as) and linguistic backgrounds (six students spoke English as a second language). The majority (23) of the students intended to attend higher education in the future, and several (19) of them would be first-generation college students. This article focuses on three students (Keisha, Hope, and Terrell), not only because of their willingness to be in the study but also because of their rich peer-group discussions related to their project. These students were not explicitly educated about how to engage in racial literacy in small groups; however, throughout the school year, they consistently and continuously engaged in racial literacy practices through whole group conversations facilitated by the teacher.

To learn more about how these three students engaged in racial literacy within small group work, we closely examined their conversations over the semester. Keisha is an African American female who self-identified as a lesbian. She was outspoken and was typically the first person to volunteer to read her writing aloud to the class (i.e., essays, poetry). She had a dynamic personality and regularly engaged students in lengthy discussions about their school and the world around them. Hope is a Puerto Rican and African American female who identified most with her African American family and friends. Although quieter than Keisha, she was more likely to talk with Keisha because they were best friends. She also tended to share her writing and opinions during whole-class discussions and readings. Terrell, an African American male, did not speak up as much in whole-group conversations. When he did share his thoughts, however, they tended to be insightful. He appreciated humor and attempted to foster a light-hearted tone in the classroom through jokes and movement.

## **The Project**

Gina’s class had the unique opportunity to be part of the Students Partnering for Undergraduate Rhetoric Success (SPURS), a pilot program in 2006 that brought students from high schools with low college attendance rates into university writing classes. The goal for the program is to develop more equitable opportunities for first-generation college students. Students receive feedback from college students and a university professor on a project typical for a second-year rhetoric class--the proposal argument. Specifically, they learn to define a problem and propose a solution. RHS students visited the university campus twice during one semester for peer revision focused on addressing questions about the targeted audience, the thesis, the clarity of objectives, and the effectiveness of the argument.

## **Data Collection**

For data collection, Amy used ethnographic methods to explore how students constructed and enacted reader/writer identities through small group interactions. The data provided insight into how students’ race and ethnicity shaped their literacy identities, especially as they related to racial literacy. Over five months, Amy participated in prolonged, extensive participant-observations. Data sources included expanded field notes from observations, videotapes and audiotapes of classroom interactions, interviews with the teacher and students, and artifacts of student work. She observed the class three to five times weekly (approximately a total of 68) for one 50-minute period class. At the

end of each week, Amy created detailed analytic memos to ensure ongoing analysis. In early February, Amy began recording (audio then video) large and small group interactions to familiarize participants with the taping process. At the end of data collection (late May), she audio-taped 67 interactions and video recorded 54 interactions. When students formed their writing groups, Amy placed audio recorders on tables to hear student interactions (with student and parent permissions). After students settled on topics, Amy focused on one group because of their discussions about race and racism in their school. As a result, she transcribed those seven conversations.

Because we were interested in understanding how students engaged in dialogue about race, Amy focused field notes on moments when this particular group did or did not engage in such practices. For example, notes focused on episodes when students potentially essentialized race by portraying race as a predetermined aspect of personality (Bolgatz, 2005). Notes also concentrated on the structure of talk, including interruptions, types of questions, and tone.

**Table 1**

*Characteristics of Conversations about Race*

<b>Characteristics of Racism</b>	<b>Characteristics of Racial Literacy</b>
Essentialize race: portray race as a predetermined and deterministic aspect of personality or life.	Challenge undemocratic practices
Colorblindness: Dismisses the significance and relevance of race	Hear and appreciate diverse and unfamiliar experiences
Racism as a thing of the past	Recognize how to ask questions related to race
Racism as extreme action or words: Only see blatant aspects of racism.	Understands that racial identities are learned
Racism as personal: Used as a way to downplay racism	Engage in talk even when difficult or awkward
Racism within the myth of individualism: Anyone can overcome obstacles	Recognize race as a structural rather than individual problem
	Facilitate problem-solving within the community

Amy also informally interviewed students at several points during the semester. All of the interviews were audiotaped (eight informal interviews with the three group members). In addition, she formally interviewed (all audiotaped) Gina three times (beginning, middle, and end) throughout the five months. In all interviews, Amy asked Gina about pedagogical strategies and theories, students' participation and engagement, and interpretations of the data collected so far, specifically in regards to the small group conversations related to race. In particular, Gina provided insight into students' backgrounds that informed interpretations. She also expressed dilemmas that she encountered as a teacher, such as negotiating when to step in on a conversation or sit back and let students' process concepts on their own terms.

## Data Analysis

Holly (author two)'s involvement in the project began during analysis, and both authors worked together during this stage. Data analysis occurred in two phases. Phase I began with generating common patterns and themes across student and teacher interactions (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). To do this analysis, both authors reviewed all audio and videotapes and field notes that included information about how the focus group engaged in dialogue related to race and racism. Specifically, we noted moments when students engaged or resisted ideologies related to the following: essentializing race, colorblindness, racism as outdated, racism as extreme actions or words, racism as personal, and racism within the myth of individualism (Bolgatz, 2005). We also noted moments when students engaged in the following characteristics of racial literacy: challenging undemocratic practices, hearing and appreciating diverse or unfamiliar experiences, recognizing how to ask questions related to race, understanding that racial identities are learned, engaging in difficult and awkward talk, recognizing race as a structural rather than individual problem, and facilitating problem solving within the community. Table 1 indicates these themes.

During phase II, we drew from Gee's (2005) discourse analysis methods (i.e., situated meaning, social languages, Discourse models, and situated identities) to better understand how students did or did not engage in racial literacies (Table 2). Gee explains that the meaning of words vary across contexts, which he calls situated meanings (p.53). To better understand the variations of words used by students, we examined the meaning of key words and phrases within the specific time and place.

We recognize that while a micro analytic approach provides significant insights to classroom interactions, there are limitations to this kind of analysis. These findings are reflective of one teacher's classroom within a localized context and cannot be generalized. With each level of discourse analysis, there is increasing possibility for oversights and misrepresentations that are associated with representing participants marginalized groups, especially as White researchers. Because of these obstacles, careful attention was used to prevent such misrepresentations. For example, we shared our analysis with several colleagues who were outsiders to the study. They offered multiple interpretations of the data, including counter arguments to how students engaged in racial literacies. Despite these limitations, however, the thick description of the classroom interactions has much to offer current educational dialogue about racial literacies in secondary classrooms. To verify and confirm interpretations of the data from multiple sources (i.e., teacher and various students), we triangulated transcripts from classroom discussions. We also member-checked interpretations with participants during frequent informal and formal interviews. Frequently both teacher and students added a new perspective to the data that we integrated into our analysis (e.g., Terrell's silence). Because Amy was a consistent presence in the classroom, students became more comfortable talking with her about school experiences and after a few weeks, they no longer acknowledged that the camera or audiotape was on. After years teaching at RHS, Holly knew the campus, teachers, and students intimately. Thus, her additional perspective offered depth and insight into the student interactions.

**Table 2**  
*Tools for Discourse Analysis*

<b>Situated Meaning</b>	<b>Social Language</b>	<b>Discourse Models</b>	<b>Situated Identities</b>
What are keywords or phrases in the text?	What is the grammar and function of the language?	What are the speaker's underlying assumptions and beliefs?	Who is the speaker trying to be, and what is she or he trying to do?
What do these words mean in this time and place?	What type of person speaks like this?	What are the simplified story lines that one must assume for this to make sense?	What Discourses are being produced here?
What do words mean in this context?	Is the grammar appropriate for the setting?	What Discourse models does the speaker believe in?	

### Findings

Findings suggest that dialogue in the small group fostered opportunities for students to engage in racial literacy over time. To begin this section, we first describe Gina's classroom to provide context for the reader. Second, we describe how the students in the small group practiced the following elements of racial literacy: a) hear and appreciate diverse and unfamiliar experiences; b) facilitate problem solving with the community; and c) create opportunities to talk about race. Although students were not fluent (i.e., comfortable and aware of this type of dialogue) in racial literacy, their practice with it emerged over time. Within each of the sections, we discuss both the content and structure of the talk, including moments when students did *not* practice racial literacy. Such information can be useful for teachers interested in fostering racial literacy in high school English classrooms, specifically through student-led assignments.

### The Classroom

Gina is an alternatively certified teacher who was in her third year of teaching at the time of the study. During interviews with her throughout the semester, she expressed her dedication to engaging students in dialogue about social justice issues. For example, students read and engaged in a whole-class conversation about an excerpt from *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks (1994). Students discussed the importance of dialogue about significant community issues, specifically in relation to RHS's beginning phases of a redesign based on their prior academic performance.

At the same time, Gina encountered obstacles to her goal of fostering student dialogue. As a young White, female teacher to African American and Latino/a students, she was aware that her race, class, and gender shaped her instruction and how students learned in the classroom. To practice awareness about these issues, she attempted to build relationships with students by sharing her background of being born in Colombia and living in Laredo. At the same time, Gina realized that she could connect with students in many ways, but that she would never fully understand their experiences. Gina said that talking about sociocultural issues, however, was not easy for her and she struggled to figure out



how to do it well. She stated, “At first, I was afraid that others would get seriously offended. I hated conflict. But then I realized they were comfortable interacting that way... it was part of a longer process of dialogue.” Thus, fostering dialogue about sociocultural issues was not always comfortable for Gina. She worried about the opinions they would share or the conflict those statements might stir up. Over time, however, she realized that dialogue was an integral part of the change process that she believed to be so important at RHS. In addition, as a graduate student at the local university, she engaged in cross-racial dialogue about social and cultural issues. During interviews, she stated that these conversations both motivated and guided her through the dialogue she initiated with her high school students.

The SPURS Program was another attempt for Gina to foster agentic opportunities with her students. As stated in the Methods section, the goal of the program was to provide college experiences to potential first-generation college students. Because the program required that students write a proposal argument, Gina attempted to make the assignment relevant and meaningful to students’ lives and communities. Before explaining the assignment, Gina asked students what they wanted to change about their school and/or community. From past conversations in the class, students expressed their frustration with negative media coverage about their school. For example, an article in the local newspaper described RHS as “a school known more for violence and low academic performance than rigor and ambition.” After brainstorming topics that ranged from healthy lunches to segregation, Gina asked students to write their topics on large scraps of butcher paper. They hung these scraps outside her room in the hallway with pens hanging from strings. Their goal was to engage the entire school in a written conversation about these important community issues. RHS students took them up on the challenge and wrote mostly constructive feedback that helped students view multiple perspectives on the issue.

After creating a draft of their proposal arguments, students went on their first visit to the university to engage in peer revision. In an article from the local newspaper, May (2006) described students in baggy t-shirts and hoodies piling off a bus into a college classroom to discuss selections from Harper’s Magazine with college students. Before the students left the bus, Gina said, “Y’all represented last time. You have your intelligence, so show it in your conversation. I think you can blow some of the [university] kids out of the water.” Later, in an interview, she stated she was surprised at how critical her students were with the university students. “They felt like experts. They were professional.” Our data begins after this visit.

### **Hear and Appreciate Diverse and Unfamiliar Experiences**

After writing draft one of the proposal, Keisha, Terrell, and Hope met in class at RHS to discuss feedback from a university professor and university students about their proposal. They sat and stood at the four desks arranged in a square near the whiteboard. After reading the feedback, they agreed that their proposal “wasn’t all that good.” In reference to a section in the paper about their group being comprised of all African American students, they reflected on the importance of hearing and appreciating diverse and unfamiliar experiences:

Keisha: She had a point though. All of us are black and we need to get someone of another race.

Hope: Why wouldn’t all black people work together? I mean our project is aimed towards black people. Why do we need to get another race? I mean it was good to survey them, but... then when we talk to them, they say, what do you want to talk to us for? Not all of them, but

some. You go talk to one of the Mexicans, they going look at you like your crazy. Like, why are they talking to me?

Keisha: Because they probably felt like the way that same person felt that wrote that quote.

Hope: Something about blacks thinking they run everything? To me, it's not like that. We just stick together. Just like they stick together. Because everybody got their own reasons for not liking somebody

Keisha: And our parents have something to do with it.

Hope: The way we were raised.

Keisha: It's not our fault.

Hope: And there's not really anything that could be done.

Keisha referred to a comment written on butcher paper that the students hung on the walls of the hallway. The butcher paper listed concerns that Gina's class had about RHS and one of them was segregation. They left their paper up for a few weeks for all students to write on. On the paper, a student wrote that they felt like the African American students "think they run the school," which is one reason for division between the two group (Latino/as and African Americans).

At the beginning of the conversation, Keisha attempted to recognize the need for her group to hear and appreciate diverse and unfamiliar experiences in order for them to understand the reasons behind segregation in their school. She used the key phrase "we need" to express her opinion that the group should document multiple perspectives. Her use of "us" indicates her realization that she is part of an exclusive group. Keisha's suggestion to "get someone of another race" illustrates her belief that in order for their proposal about segregation to be valid, they will need to gather opinions from people who are not black. At this point in the conversation, Keisha appears to take on elements of racial literacy by stating the importance of multiple perspectives.

Before the group further explored this recognition, Hope questioned Keisha's belief that they needed multiple perspectives. She also attempted to justify surveying only African American students for their study about segregation, because the project is "aimed towards black people." Through this questioning, she revealed her belief that there is no need to collect multiple perspectives because their audience is only African American students. Her repetitive use of key words, such as "them" in reference to Latino/a students, illustrated her assumption that the two races were divided and she questioned their ability to talk to one another, especially about issues of race.

In particular, Hope essentialized Latino/as by assuming that most of them would resist talking to a group of African American students. She did this by voicing what they might say if asked questions by a group of African Americans. Bolgatz (2005) explained that essentializing race means to view race as predetermined or having a concrete underlying reality or "true nature." For example, someone might use the phrase *acting White* or make judgments, such as "skin too dark." Realizing that she essentialized Latino/as in this statement, she attempted to correct it by saying "some, not all." In the next sentence, she essentializes Latino/as again, by saying ("They gonna look at you like you're crazy."). Understanding multiple perspectives might be difficult for Hope because of her own cultural background. Hope is African American and Latino/a, however she identifies with African Americans. In an interview, she described the pressure she received from members to talk like an African American, not "a Mexican."

Next, Keisha said, "...they probably felt like the way that same person felt that wrote that quote." By using the pronoun "they" with the verb "felt" Keisha indicated her attempt to understand the feelings

of the Latino/a students who wrote the comment on the butcher paper. In doing this, she shifts the conversation perspective towards evidence from a past event related to their project. Thus, Keisha attempted to take a racially literate stance. She reasoned that the divide between the students might be because Latino/a students do not feel comfortable talking with African American students because they act like “they run the school.” In other words, Keisha recognized that some African American students have intimidated other groups of students. Keisha’s response is important to the group dynamic because she is challenging her group’s desire to be insular and only reach out to African Americans, again indicating an emergence of racial literacy. She is not afraid to disagree with her classmates, and it appears she is internalizing the feedback from people at the university when she says, “She had a point though,” indicating an important shift in her thinking about the scope of their project. Thus, Keisha situated herself as a listener who hears and understands Hope’s perspective and the perspective of the university students. In fact, her ability to listen to various perspectives ignited this strand of conversation. We recognize that being part of a small group might be at a disadvantage at this point. Perhaps a teacher could have extended these threads if included in the conversation.

In response to Keisha’s statement, Hope asked a clarifying question to indicate that she remembered what students wrote on the butcher paper. This procedure ensured that Keisha and Hope did not have a miscommunication. Following that exchange, Hope switched the conversation focus back to her belief that multiple perspectives are not necessary. She justified the “sticking together behavior” as something that we all do, so it must be okay. Throughout her talk, she used divisive pronouns. Her use of the word “everybody” illustrates her belief that if everyone does it, it must be okay. At this point, Hope defends their original argument by situating herself as a “normal” person with “normal” behavior patterns.

Keisha used the word “and” to expand Hope’s commentary about everyone being exclusive by recognizing that these ideologies are passed down through generations. Rather than pushing back against Hope’s resistance to multiple perspectives, Keisha appeared to agree with Hope. Hope then agreed and validated Keisha’s point by rewording and adding to what she said. The phrase “we were raised” acknowledged that racism and racial identities are learned. At the same time, she appeared to use this belief as an excuse to not acknowledge other perspectives. To follow, Keisha used the pronoun “our” to say that the racist ideologies they have are not their fault but the fault of their parents. As a result, she indicated no need to take ownership for their resistance to talking to Latino/a students. Hope validated this belief by using fatalistic language to illustrate her belief that there is not much “you” (people in general) can do to fix it. Although Terrell was not a vocal participant in this excerpt, he engaged as a listener who considered the issues brought up in these conversations during discussions at a later date. We are unsure as to why Terrell did not speak up, but we can verify that this behavior was typical; he tended to listen while Keisha and Hope dominated the conversation.

Throughout the conversation, Hope and Keisha did not explicitly talk about racism, nor did they indicate awareness about characteristics of racial literacy that challenged these undemocratic practices. Specifically, Keisha and Hope argued that racial identities, in general, are learned, but they stop there. They did not recognize, however, that *their* racial identities are learned too, along with their apparent discomfort. They appeared to be on the verge of viewing racism as an institutional and societal issue, but they did not take responsibility for it. Perhaps with some facilitation from a teacher, the students might be pushed to talk about the consequences of excusing racism based on

parental rearing. The professor and university students' comments did challenge the group to critically examine tensions within their proposal. For this group, however, practicing racial literacy was an emerging process that occurred over time and on their terms as we see in their next conversation.

### **Facilitate Problem-Solving with the Community**

A few weeks later, the group sat and stood at the same table attempting to revise their proposal, which was due back to the university class in a few weeks. They were at a standstill trying to figure out how to develop a plan of action that would bring segregated students together in dialogue about issues of race. They threw out several ideas, including asking people, "Are you racist?" with tape recorder in hand. After deciding that approach was too confrontational, Keisha alluded to the conversation discussed earlier that ended with the thought that there was not much they could do.

Keisha: Probably about us doing this paper, it would make us change. Because, we, we, I know we segregated but we trying to write a paper on it, but I think it would make us change. And that would be good because we would have to set an example for them to make them change.

Terrell: Why are looking at me?

Keisha: Because that's what you said before. I be listening to him. I be listening to all of them. We gotta change first before we expect everybody else to change.

In the beginning of this transcript, Keisha used the pronoun "us" and the verb "change" to illustrate the need for their group to change their behavior so that their actions matched their words. With this powerful statement, Keisha pushed back against the past conversation that excused them for their behavior ("that's how we were raised"). She hedged ("we, we, I"), indicating that although she wanted to speak for her group she realized that she might be the only one who believed this to be true. Next, she explicated the dilemma by stating despite the fact that they were writing a paper about how to change segregation, they must first change their behavior. Not only did this indicate her ideological belief that despite their upbringing, they still have agency to behave in ways that match the behavior they were proposing, it also showed how Keisha took on the identity of a leader and model for change by facilitating problem-solving within their school community and challenging the group to change their behavior.

After Keisha's comments, both females looked to Terrell for a response. By asking why they were looking at him, he revealed his hesitation to get involved in this conversation. Perhaps Keisha and Hope looked to Terrell because they disagreed with each other and wanted another opinion. Most likely, Terrell hesitated to "take sides" about a heated topic that could possibly divide their group.

In an attempt to gain an ally, Keisha attempted to engage him by referencing something he said in a past conversation related to being the change they wanted to see. She used the verb "listen" to illustrate her belief in the importance of hearing other perspectives and then taking action based on those words. Again, she stated her belief that they have to change before they can ask others to change and she alluded to her desire to figure out how to do that. By saying, "I be listening to him. I be listening to all of them," Keisha positioned herself again as a listener who heard and worked with commentary from all parties (Hope, Terrell, and university group). This positioning is an important practice of racial literacy, because Keisha both hears and considers various perspectives when developing ideas about how to solve the problem of segregation in their school.

After this exchange, the group distracted themselves by talking with other students and walking across the room. After a reminder from Gina that the proposal was due soon, the group came back together to figure out their plan of action. They stated that although they were not able to gather more surveys and interviews at this point, they had to think of some ways to improve segregation in their school. In a brainstorming session, they thought about having a day dedicated to celebrating the diversity in their school. Hope suggested it be called diversity day.

Terrell: I don't like that name. That's too plain. We need something...

Keisha: First of all, we going to role play. She's going to be white, he's going to be Hispanic and I'm going to be black. We going to mix everyone up with a different race. We going to have two different parties.

Terrell: We have to have one party. Because if we have two then one race goes to one and another to the other.

Keisha: No, we going to pair them up.

Terrell expressed his opinion about the name of the event: diversity day. He expounded on why by using the adjective "plain" to describe his opinion. He switched pronouns from "I" to "We" to infer that they needed to come up with something else. Terrell could not think of the word to describe what they needed so Keisha jumped in. She used various pronouns ("She", "He", and "I") to describe how each of the group members would role-play different races/ethnicities at two parties. She used the verb "mix" to point out that everyone would be with someone from a different background. Based on past conversations, Keisha expressed her ideological belief that students should spend the day with someone they do not normally spend it with to understand the perspective of the other. Again, Terrell expressed his opinion that they must have one party or else students will divide themselves. Keisha continued to brainstorm her idea that students would be paired up with someone. At this point, Keisha and Terrell appeared to recognize race as a structural problem. They realized that if racial identities were learned, then it makes sense to usurp that habit of mind by creating situations for people to question what they learned.

Overall, this conversation illustrates the group's attempt to facilitate problem-solving strategies within the community, an example of racial literacy. The excerpt also illustrates the difficulty they have in figuring out how to provide opportunities for integration at a segregated school. So far, Keisha realized that the group might need to change their behavior and Terrell stressed the need for an event that could bring everyone together. Hope remained quiet in these conversations, but her nonverbal behavior (nods, eye contact) indicated her engagement and agreement in the content of the dialogue. Thus, all of the members appeared to be promoting an event that engages students in dialogue about multiple perspectives (i.e., diversity day).

### **Dialogue: Create Opportunities to Talk About Race**

In the following week, they traveled to the college campus for their second visit and engaged in peer revision. They received feedback related to grammatical changes and comments that questioned whether highlighting these students' differences might reinforce the stereotypes their proposal aimed to address. Back in Gina's classroom, the group attempted to clarify these comments. After explaining that they were going to organize "a cultural pride and understanding day," where black students would be paired with Latino/a students for a day to learn about each other's music and food, Keisha said, "The major part of this event will be lunch. We plan to have enchiladas, chicken tacos,

and more.” Terrell, however, seemed to have a shift in thinking about the event. He said, “Nothing’s going to come out of it. After diversity day, everything will just go back to normal.” From those comments, Terrell revealed his belief that a one-day celebration was not enough to solve this societal issue. Keisha noticed his frustration and said, “Martin Luther King fought his whole life to stop it. The problem is still here.” At this point, Keisha used academic language to refer to MLK, a historical figure, who fought for racial equity during his entire life. By stating, “The problem is still here”, she recognized current and institutional aspects of racism still exist. In this conversation, Keisha and Terrell imply that something more has to be done. Figuring that out is the hard part. It is through Keisha and Terrell’s collaborative exchange that allows them to build on one another’s ideas to facilitate problem solving and value multiple perspectives.

Later, after Gina came around to their group to check in, she asked them about their proposed solution. Terrell attempted to answer.

Terrell: Our solution is... Our solution, everybody kind of shoots down but they don’t see the vision that we have. Our vision is to somehow get, somehow get the student body to sit down and talk about what makes them feel uncomfortable.

Keisha: I think that’s a good idea.

Terrell: You see there’s no really like program that can really solve the problem because you know a kid can come to program and you know what is he really going to get out of it? He can get out of it, just come for the snacks, you know, like me. I used to go to after-school programs just to get my snacks. And then, you know, they might not really get the whole meaning. They like just be there and leave and think, just thinking man I wasted my time here. Yadayadyada, never gonna have nothing to do with me. You know some kids just have their minds set. And we just want to sit them, sit their people down and know what makes feel them uncomfortable. Why they are, why two sides of the school won’t communicate.

Hope: How are we gonna do that?

Terrell: The how is the hard part. That’s the part we haven’t figured out yet.

At first Terrell hedged when explaining the group’s idea (“Our solution is... our solution”) to indicate his belief that people do not view dialogue as valuable. He explicitly stated that their goal is to bring students together to talk about what is uncomfortable. This statement revealed the group’s ideological belief (“our vision”) that dialogue about race is important even if it is awkward and difficult. It is through these various conversations over time that they come to this ideological belief. After examining the trajectory of their conversations, we see how those ideological beliefs changed over time (blaming parents to valuing dialogue across all races). Keisha affirmed Terrell’s idea by agreeing. Terrell elaborated with a personal narrative about his experience with after-school groups. He used the phrase “solve the problem” to hint at the fact that no program can “solve” the issue of segregation at their school. He raised the point that students can attend programs, but only be there for the snacks. With the phrase “minds set,” he recognized that their idea needed to get people talking about their experiences (“what makes them uncomfortable”) so that participants would take ownership. Hope asked how they could start those conversations and Terrell stated that the “how” was the hard part that they still need to figure out. Although Terrell still used “us” and “them” language, his goal was to merge the barrier rather than blame others and develop a solution rather than believe it to be irreparable. They might not have the logistics down, but they expressed their ideological belief that students need to practice racial literacy. One way to do that is to open spaces

in which students talk about the awkward and difficult things that are going on within their community.

At this point, Gina intervened and helped the group form a plan that would work. This conversation carried over into the next few days, during which Amy, the first author, was not present. From interviews and informal conversations with students and teacher, however, they explained that their final decision was based on the idea of a continuous, silent dialogue. Every student at RHS was to be given a composition notebook in which they were to write about their thoughts in relation to segregation at their school during homeroom (facilitated by teachers). The notebooks would be anonymous, but trackable by number. After writing in their first book, the

teacher would collect them, trade them with another teacher, and pass them out to the students the next week. This process would occur over one semester. Thus, students would engage in an ongoing written and anonymous discussion about issues of race and segregation with various students across campus. Teachers would return their original notebooks to them at the end of the semester and students could read the thread of conversation and discuss it with their homeroom group. Intervention from the teacher at this point in process was particularly helpful because it helped to broaden possibilities for how students could engage classmates in conversations about race and segregation across campus. To propose this solution, the group wrote the following in their final proposal that they gave to the principal: *Racial mistrust is a problem that can't be 'solved' by an event or a program: The best thing to do is provide opportunities for students to continually talk about it.* Thus, the group exhibited elements of racial literacy by engaging the entire school in dialogue about race that attempted to create a safe space for this kind of talk. As a result of their hard work, the administration and faculty at RHS implemented this idea the following semester at RHS. Because the implementation occurred after Amy's data collection period and involved the entire school, she was not able to receive permission to view these notebooks. From her visits to the school, Holly, the second author, observed that the notebooks opened up dialogue about race in ways that did not normally exist.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Mercer (2000) argues that if we can change the quality of talk in a classroom, we can improve the quality of education. To extend that argument, we suggest that more opportunities for dialogue about issues of race, and about *how* to talk about issues of race, would help teachers and students engage in racial literacy, disrupt hierarchies of power and privilege, and prepare children to participate in U.S. democracy and a global society—all goals of a social justice curriculum, and all important for our students. Data from this study illustrated how a small group of students engaged in conversation about solving problems of segregation in their school. Specifically, racial literacy constructed around social praxis, challenged students to not only share personal experiences related to racism and segregation, but also to engage in action that attempted to dismantle oppressive structures in their school (i.e., the school dialogue) (Freire & Macedo, 1995).

In particular, the findings examine how these student-led conversations fostered (or did not foster) racial literacy over time. Our findings suggest that the practice of racial literacy is an interactive process that can be co-constructed in student-centered groups. In particular, the small-group participants supported one another in practicing racial literacy by hearing and appreciating diverse and unfamiliar experiences; facilitating problem solving with the community; and creating opportunities to talk about race. They also exhibited how racial literacy includes challenging each

other's ideas, especially when a group member essentializes race. Thus, this study contributes to a much-needed discussion regarding how student-centered dialogue about race and segregation works in small groups in a classroom. In addition, this research opens questions about not only the content of conversations that attempt to make sense of segregation and racism (Skerrett, 2011), but also the structure of dialogue that fosters this kind of thinking. Such information can be useful to teachers interested in fostering racial literacy, specifically in student-led projects. To further explore that structure, we discuss the following elements of dialogue practiced in the small group: (a) tentative ideas were treated with respect; (b) ideas were challenged; and (c) agreement was sought through the discussion of alternative ideas.

Students engaged in elements of exploratory talk (Mercer, 2000) to foster racial literacy over time. First, tentative ideas were treated with respect by listening and making connections. For example, in the first excerpt, Keisha and Hope discuss reasons why they should only interview African American students for their project on racism and segregation at their school. As stated, Hope essentialized Latino/as by assuming that most of them would resist talking to a group of African American students. Throughout this conversation, Keisha both agreed with and challenged Hope's opinion, illustrating her attempt to validate Hope's opinion and experiences while also considering new perspectives. This move potentially prevented the alienation of Hope from the group and provided more opportunities for the three of them to engage in this conversation.

Second, in each excerpt they challenged each other's ideas with respect. For example, Keisha challenged Hope's opinion about talking only to African American students and Terrell challenged Keisha's idea of a diversity day. By questioning each other's ideas and offering up new solutions, both Keisha and Terrell transformed their ideas of what it meant to change issues of segregation at their school. Third, the group sought agreement by discussing alternative ideas and solutions. We saw this interaction in Keisha and Hope's discussion about the interviews and Terrell and Keisha's discussion about diversity day. Because the assignment expected they come up with a doable solution, the group worked together to construct a solution. Thus, the structure of peer-led dialogue matters, especially as it relates to racial literacy practices. Using elements of exploratory talk can help participants' appropriate successful problem-solving strategies, jointly construct new, robust, generalizable explanations, and participate in internal dialogue that could foster racial literacy practices (Bolgatz, 2005; Mercer, 2000). The development of these practices in whole-group discussions facilitated by Gina certainly influenced how the group engaged in these small group conversations.

Although this small group illustrated how they took on elements of racial literacy over time, students also essentialized Latino/as by making assumptions about their reactions. At first, teachers may want to avoid conversations that open opportunities for students to make biased comments. However, without these opportunities, students do not have the chance to hear other perspectives (Bolgatz, 2005). As seen, it is important to provide space for students to work through issues on their own without teacher facilitation. At the same time, a teacher's guidance can be valuable (e.g., Gina's proposal to do a silent dialogue) and teachers must know when to step in and when to stay out. Thus, racial literacy is not something students can reach as an ultimate goal. Instead, it is something that students must practice through constant conversation. With new perspectives and experiences, these conversations are likely to shift over time and can be used as a powerful tool for building the capacity for social justice in our schools.



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