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An Autoethnography on Teaching Antiracism in the Current Sociopolitical Environment

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**AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON TEACHING ANTIRACISM IN THE CURRENT
SOCIOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

by

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B.S. May 2019, Longwood University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON TEACHING ANTIRACISM IN THE CURRENT SOCIOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

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In the course of American history, students from historically marginalized and underrepresented communities have been left out of the educational conversation. This has created an era of undereducated citizens who have historically used privilege to oppress students from these communities. Teachers must use their privilege to teach antiracist education that specifically encourages students to stand up for the justice needed to make a better world. Although this education is important, politicians, parents, and school board administrators are consistently putting teachers in an awkward position when they work towards implementing antiracist education by enacting policies that force them to stop or threatening termination for speaking on divisive concepts. Through this autoethnography, I have analyzed my own practices and reflected on my teaching through autobiographies, journal entries, and book studies so that readers understand the struggles of a teacher who cares about, and implements, antiracist education in the current politically charged social environment.

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This thesis is dedicated to the students who will receive a better education because of this paper and the teachers who have the gall to teach what they know is right.

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, centuries of inequities came to a head when George Floyd was murdered on the streets of Minneapolis after being accused of using a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill at a neighborhood store. More than ever, society looked at the attack as a flagrant disrespect for black lives and many educators decided to educate themselves as much as they could to ensure that they were doing what they could to change these decades of mistreatment. To do this properly, teachers must have the courage to investigate what makes them the people they are and what biases they have that may impact the way they treat their students (Will, 2020).

Unfair stereotypes of students from underrepresented groups negatively impact their lives beyond the time spent in a teacher's classroom, sometimes leading students to fall into stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is a psychological phenomenon where individuals feel at risk of confirming negative stereotypes, which can negatively impact their performance and behavior in that situation (Steele & Aronson, 1995). To help combat these stereotypes from impacting students, schools turn towards professional development to support teachers in unlearning those biases. In some cases, diversity training is unsuccessful as it focuses on short-term vocabulary knowledge rather than long-term changes (Sparks, 2020). Studies have shown that members of privileged communities (white women making up the biggest demographic group of teachers) can feel threatened by pro-diversity messages and training (Dover et al., 2016). Although diversity training can help teachers be more aware of what they're doing and saying, it is not the only thing schools can do to become more culturally sensitive and should be part

of a greater plan (Sparks, 2020). Beyond that, diversity training cannot be the only thing that schools do to call themselves culturally aware and antiracist.

Because school districts tend not to have social justice issues as standards or objectives, it becomes the teacher's responsibility to learn and understand their biases and learn how to ignore and resist those inherent biases. It is also important that teachers themselves work to be comfortable with their own identities so that they can allow students to explore and understand their identities and find it in themselves to be fighters for justice (Han et al., 2010). Although this may be easy for a teacher who cares deeply about antiracist and social justice education, it can be extremely hard for teachers who have a lack of experience and information about the actual implementation of these curriculums. It is also hard for teachers who don't see the value in antiracist education because they may not agree with its foundations of privilege, for example.

Diversity training, equity clauses, and instruction that teaches students "it's okay to be different" (Diaz, 2022, para. 4) are being targeted by policymakers, school boards, and parents searching for a way to shut down learning they deem to be controversial history, which tends to be history that paints them as the enemy. Even if teachers are sure they need to confront these biases in the classroom, they are faced with barriers such as governor hotlines (as is the case in Virginia, c. f., Wong et al., 2022), banned books, and verbal attacks from parents. The political environment we are living in right now is incredibly polarized and can, at times, pit teachers against parents and school boards who want to save face. So teachers are forced to decide whether they want to deal with vitriol from parents, face possible termination, be threatened with legal action, et cetera, or just shut up, teach the state standards, and try to keep their heads above water.

In one Virginia school division, school leaders had to revisit an equity resolution passed in early 2020 that covered race and discrimination as a way to embrace diversity and inclusion. A school board member voiced her opposition to the resolution on a conservative news show, *Patriotically Right*, saying that the policy uses race to divide students (Arevalo, 2021). Dozens of parents, teachers, and even students attended to show their support for the school board member's comments or to show support for the policy itself. Teachers were put in an uncomfortable position as they saw their peers, students' parents, and community members spew vitriol against what they were worried was "Critical Race Theory" (CRT). In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis signed the Parental Rights in Education Act, or the "Don't Say Gay" bill as its opposers have dubbed it. This act says that no instruction can be provided to students on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through grade three and all instruction must be "age-appropriate" (Diaz, 2022, para. 2). After the governor signed the bill into law, teachers from that state who may be non-gender conforming or identify as LGBTQ+ may fear retaliation or termination if they talk about their identities and home lives, which are critical parts of creating a classroom community.

After spending three years in public education and prioritizing social justice education, it was overwhelming for me to try to decide whether I would focus on antiracist teaching or I would try to keep my job. I remember in the early weeks of the first year I taught, I received a notification from my principal outlining how we should be cognizant of avoiding "sensitive topics." I have repeatedly gone back and forth between my strongest beliefs and my anxieties over losing the job I have always wanted to have. As a white woman, I don't have to worry about these repercussions in the same way as

my coworkers who are people of color. Unfortunately, teachers work hard every day to be the best teachers they can be, while also keeping their guard up in terms of their careers and the looming possibility of termination if they cross an invisible line. There is a lack of research from the teacher's perspective that allows people to see the toll of teaching antiracist education to students in areas where people are vehemently against those ideals being taught.

In this thesis, I will summarize and convey the daily struggles I have faced in my first years as a white classroom teacher, and how I have wanted to incorporate antiracist teaching methods while facing the backlash of politicians, school boards, and parents. The following reflection methods align with those of a typical autoethnography: autobiographies, journals, reflection pieces, and responses to policies and news articles from around the country. I will be examining these experiences by answering the following question: *How can a teacher who is committed to teaching antiracist practices and social justice-based education continue to do so in the current polarizing sociopolitical environment?*

In the next chapter, I will be exploring the published literature that relates to my study including the rise of antiracist practices, the political environment, and the frequent anti-teacher rhetoric, the repercussions teachers who have taught controversial issues have faced, as well as clearly describing the feelings experienced by some teachers who are enacting antiracist practices in their classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter includes literature on antiracist education, political pushback, and anti-teacher rhetoric, teachers who have taught controversial issues, self-studies by teachers exploring their identities and their impact on teaching, and the emotional toll of teaching to discuss the research already present in these areas but also to present the context of the current sociopolitical environment.

Antiracist Education

The idea of antiracist education and diversity training has been scrutinized by many for decades. Many feel that teaching social justice should stay out of schools completely, calling it “brainwashing” (Bialystok, 2014, p. 413), while others believe that teaching social justice to students will allow for a more understanding and forgiving world for children to grow up in, as well as a place to “unwind biases by introducing the normalcy of other cultures” (Jacobson, 2018, p. 37). But the benefits of social justice education, things like a feeling of acceptance, an understanding of injustices, and preventing the spread of intolerance, are imperative skills for students who are joining an increasingly diverse world.

The core goals of antiracist and social justice education were extensively studied by Derman-Sparks (2001, 2004, 2011, 2019) and, in working with Olsen-Edwards, she provided research that acted as a foundation that is used by Learning for Justice as their “Social Justice Standards” (Learning for Justice, 2018). These standards outline four specific goals and adapt them into “standards” that teachers can follow to ensure antiracist education in their classrooms. These goals are presented as domains, including

identity, diversity, justice, and action. These standards present a basis for students to learn how to be effective citizens in our diverse world.

Social justice, antiracist, antibias, multicultural, and culturally responsive are often used as synonyms for the same idea. They are interpreted as a point of view, or a way of seeing the world and a way of categorizing education to better the experiences of all those in the world by cutting through and allowing the curriculum to be representative of those who have been continually left out of the lessons (Au, 2009).

Generally, teaching for social justice and using antiracist practices incorporates curriculum, pedagogy, and social action (Dover, 2013) whereas multicultural and culturally responsive education often only teaches the presence of diversity in the world. The difference between antiracist practices and social justice education, as used in this thesis, is that antiracist practices are methods to help students learn to be antiracist, and social justice education involves the teaching of justice, the inequities in our world, and what they can do about those injustices. Although they are different ideas, I tend to use them synonymously because it is important that they are taught together. At this point in our society, we have moved past the need to only teach multiculturalism and be culturally responsive and only “accept” others for their differences, there is now a need to be antiracist and actively work together towards justice. Some would say that this need is far overdue.

Antiracist and social justice education take an extra step toward not only including histories of underrepresented communities, but explicitly teaching students to speak out against racist ideals and institutions. Boston University’s Community Service Center (2022) defines antiracism as “the practice of actively identifying and opposing racism

with the goal of antiracism being changing policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions” (para. 7). Antiracist practices take multicultural education to another level by asking teachers to teach history in a way that specifically allows students to discover the racist histories that have plagued the society we live in, while also attacking and analyzing modern-day examples of racism.

Some of the ways teachers enact social justice and antiracism in their classrooms are by including representative texts in their lessons, having students write letters or participate in service learning projects, or explicitly teaching identity and Learning for Justice’s Social Justice Standards (Jacobson, 2018). Teachers work to explicitly include education that is focused on social justice and inclusion, but not all stakeholders agree that this needs to be taught in classrooms.

The importance of antiracist education is not in need of argument, but that doesn’t keep politicians and other stakeholders from painting teachers in an unfair light. In the next section, I provide information about how the current political environment is feeding into anti-teacher rhetoric.

Political Pushback And Anti-Teacher Rhetoric

In the current political world, many buzzwords fly around to generate a rise out of teachers, parents, and community members. CRT, white privilege, Black Lives Matter – these are all phrases that cause people to get angry. Rarely do these words or phrases get properly defined, leaving teachers to be in the middle of the misunderstandings that arise from them. Most recently, conservatives voiced concern over the presence of CRT in schools. CRT is the idea that racism is ingrained in the history of the United States of America and was “founded on the theft of land and labor and that federal law has

preserved the unequal treatment of people on the basis of race” (Anderson, 2021, para. 1) Conservative media has pushed the idea that this is being taught to elementary schoolers in a way that paints white students as bad people and perpetrators of racism in today’s society.

This reaction to the alleged teaching of CRT is one of the issues pushing teachers out of schools. There is no evidence that teachers are explicitly teaching CRT (Anderson, 2021), but for teachers who have continued to teach antiracism, diversity, and inclusion this can feel like policymakers are singling them out. One school counselor quit after North Carolina passed a ban on CRT and the 1619 Project (Dixon, 2021). This school counselor prioritized antiracism and respect of identity yet assumed she would be spending more time working to please administration and dodge parents than actually teaching the things that students need to be good, accepting people.

Teachers who prioritize teaching antiracist and social justice education are often involved in politics because of their commitment to being culturally sensitive. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) noted that “Culturally relevant teachers feel personally, and not simply professionally, invested in educating children of color” (p. 703). These teachers prioritize this kind of education because they care about it. Beauboeuf-Lafontant called for further analysis and autobiographical study from teachers from various backgrounds who prioritize antiracist education to further the discussion.

The pressure created by these political moves impacts teachers who want to teach antiracism and diversity because they are aware of its importance in society. For teachers who teach various controversial issues, this pushback is not new to them. In the next

section, I share some instances where teachers faced criticism for their discussions on controversial issues.

Controversial Issues

Five of the most powerful teacher groups, the National Council for the Social Studies, the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Science Teaching Association, and the National Coalition Against Censorship, came together to share: “In their zeal, activists of the current culture wars, unfortunately, treat teachers as if they are enemies” (Will, 2022, p. 1). Teachers are painted as villains for teaching topics like evolution, climate change, racism, sexism, or gender expression and these teacher groups are worried about the possible limitations these restrictions can cause for teachers (Will, 2022). Teachers and other education professionals have constantly faced conservative critiques because of their personal beliefs (Gross & Simmons, 2006). These researchers found that a significant minority of people (most identify as elderly, undereducated, and/or conservative) believe that colleges are a haven for democrats who impress liberal beliefs onto students. Since all teachers are college graduates, this may impact how these people believe teachers vote or identify politically.

In 2006, a Pennsylvania school board was taken to court due to the debate over Creationism. Eventually, the court sided with the school board and scientists took this as a win for evolution (Berkman & Plutzer, 2011). These researchers concluded that, in this debate, there were three types of teachers: those who agreed strongly with evolution, those who were religiously convicted to believe in creationism, and the majority of teachers not feeling particularly strongly about each way, referred to as the “cautious

60%” (p. 404). Yet, most teachers teach evolution because it is a requirement for state objectives (Berkman & Plutzer, 2011). However, researchers have concluded that a biology teacher’s personal feelings affect their willingness to teach evolution (Long, 2012). Although no research directly correlates this in the context of antiracist teaching, it would not be far-reaching to assume that research would show that teachers who have strong biases and racist beliefs would also struggle with teaching antiracist and representative curriculums.

Another example of teachers acting to dismantle biased curriculum comes out of South Africa after Apartheid. The Apartheid curriculum was focused on white men who were in power. After the end of Apartheid in South Africa in the 1990s, teachers played an important role in the country's transition to a democratic society. They worked to address the disparities in education that had been perpetuated by the Apartheid system and to provide quality education to all students, regardless of their race. This involved developing new curricula and teaching materials, training teachers in new pedagogical approaches, and building a new generation of leaders who would be able to shape the country's future (Chisholm, 1999). Teachers also helped to promote national unity and reconciliation, using their classrooms as spaces for dialogue and building understanding between different communities. Teachers in South Africa were given the opportunity here to focus on creating an antiracist curriculum that dismantled the previous regrets of Apartheid. It begs the question: what if American teachers were given the same chance?

In the next section, I explore the importance of interrogating identity for teachers as it can help them be more aware and intentional teachers of antiracism. Many of these teachers looked into their own identities culturally, and some linked it to how it impacts

their teaching style. This identity research provides a base for the autoethnography I completed in this paper.

Self-Studies Exploring Identity

There is much research already about how teachers can use self-study to explore their *teaching* identities, but very little on how they can use it to understand and explore their cultural identities and the implications for student identities that may arise from that exploration. These next self-studies are examples of teachers working to expose their identities and cultural differences.

When using self-study to understand their cultural differences and how they affected their teaching, Hu and Smith (2011) were able to work together to learn about what they did in their classrooms that worked and what things didn't work for their students. They began to discover that a lot of the work they did in their classroom was based on things they did because of their cultural identities. Based on this study, teachers can learn from each other and benefit from observing and talking about the experiences they have. Their identities provided an important starting point for the authors to study and analyze.

Similar to the study by Hu and Smith, Ajayi (2011) studied different English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and how their identities affected the way they taught their students. Though she reported that a minority of the teachers believed that their practices are based on their identities, she found that many teachers from marginalized communities (Hispanic, Latinx, and African American teachers) themselves were more able to empathize with the students and were able to find ways to teach these students in ways that moved beyond the curriculum. In contrast, white teachers did not identify

themselves racially, therefore ignoring the privileges that come with racial identity.

Ajayi's research shows that an understanding of racial identity is necessary to ensure that students are receiving equitable education from teachers from all backgrounds and identities, as the students of the Latinx and African American teachers were more able to empathize and understand the difficulties of ESL students.

In Chang and colleagues' (2016) collaborative self-study of their work in a teacher preparation program, they discussed that talking about their identities and their critiques was "exhilarating" and "left them feeling empowered" (p. 164). They consistently reminded the reader that although they all came to this self-study with different ideas of adequacy as teachers, being together and working through the study helped each of them establish a sense that they were and had been doing the right thing for their students all along.

In Mason's (2016) exploration of racial identity with three of her preservice teachers, she realized that although all three of these students had gone through her Foundations of Multicultural Education class, not all of them could be considered not racist and completely antiracist. Mason discusses that racism is extremely misunderstood and complex, which helps us understand why no one leaves a class completely rid of something that's been ingrained in them since they were born as they grew up in a society that fosters racism. Importantly, Mason discusses that "each aspect of [her] identity [is] more complex than it may appear at the surface" (p. 10). This allows the reader to infer a sense of the importance of studying identity beyond what is presented at the surface when first exploring what the implications of one's identity may be.

The studies reviewed here show how important it is for teachers to explore their own identities and how those identities make them the teachers they are. My study supported me in understanding my own identity and how that affects my success in teaching antiracism. Many teachers are sensitive, which contributes to what makes them great with kids, but that sensitivity can lead to burnout, which I discuss in the next section.

Emotional Toll Of Teaching

As if teaching antiracism in the current environment wasn't hard enough, it is necessary that we talk about the emotional toll of teaching that teachers are already facing in the world, without the effect of outside comments or the pressure of teaching antiracist practices.

The impact of how people view teachers can truly affect a teacher's emotional well-being. Hargreaves (1998) noted that "Teachers are expected to be kind and considerate, yet demanding and stern" (p. 318). These expectations placed on teachers can be overwhelming already as it is a work of emotional labor. As Hargreaves pointed out, oftentimes teaching is a labor of love as teachers love and care about what they do, but sometimes the labor can cause guilt and burnout for them. For teachers who care so much about something like antiracism, the constant beratement from parents and policymakers can just add to the burnout they may already be facing. This study supported me in examining how my emotions affect me as a teacher, especially when I am working towards integrating antiracist and culturally relevant education into the daily classroom routine.

Janzen and Phelan (2015) described how teaching often comes with a moral obligation and responsibility to be perfect; teachers find themselves in positions where they are concerned about responding inappropriately or about what their administration may think about their choice. Ball (2014) shared, “Teachers are concerned that what they do will not be captured by or valued within the metrics of accountability and, on the other hand, that these metrics will distort their practice” (p. 223). Teachers are constantly worried about the way parents, administration, and community members may think about them, and that stress can be monumental.

Beyond the normal toll of teaching, there’s also a distinct emotional toll that comes along with teaching antiracism. One professor explained the overwhelming stress of relying on students to write his evaluations when he shared about racism and principles aligned with racism. Graves (2017) wrote, “The emotional and physical toll of teaching about racism was likely [causing him] physical and emotional [harm]” (p. 63). Feeling drained physically and emotionally by the intense toll that comes along with the job is not a foreign concept to teachers. For teachers of color specifically, this toll is exacerbated.

As teachers entered the 2022 school year, they were bombarded with headlines outlining the extreme teacher shortage in the world. Because of external pressures, teachers are more stressed and burnt out than ever, and among the reasons teachers have admitted to leaving, many teachers were said to have left because of the portrayal of teachers in the media (Heffernan et al., 2022). Teachers feel attacked by politicians and parents who have been a part of laws passed restricting teachers’ abilities to talk about U.S. History, race, and LGBTQ+ histories (Natanson, 2022).

In this section, I discussed the extreme toll that comes with teaching and the way that teaching antiracism may amplify these anxieties. For teachers who are diving into the profession, and teachers who have been teaching for years, there is a lot of worry about parents and administration because no one wants to cross a line. For teachers who prioritize antiracist education, it can be even harder to ensure that they are doing what's right without being forced to walk on eggshells during each lesson.

The purpose of the following autoethnography was to help other teachers learn how to balance teaching antiracism and social justice during the ever-changing sociopolitical environment that our country is currently facing. In the next section, I will explain how the methods I chose met that purpose.

METHODS

In this thesis, I used autoethnography as my primary research method because it allowed me to critically analyze my teaching while specifically looking through the lens of social justice and balancing teaching with current issues in our world. In the next sections, I explain what autoethnography is and why it was the best choice for this study.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of research that allows researchers to write about and analyze their own life stories and treats research as a socially-just process and product (Ellis et al., 2011). This is different from experimental forms of research with a testable question answered with experiments and quantitative data. Instead, autoethnography relies on qualitative data. Autoethnography also allows the researcher to show that their personal experiences influence the findings and results. Ellis and colleagues explained that the word *autoethnography* combines the autobiography that allows the researcher to look at previous experiences and histories (the “auto” part of autoethnography), then the data and the specific research lens the researcher is using will help amplify those experiences (the “ethno” part of autoethnography).

Autoethnography allows researchers to focus on themselves and self-reflection while looking at the limits of life and biases that are found within the individual (Hamilton et al., 2008). While autobiography is from the heart and interpretive, autoethnography forces the researcher to analyze and interrogate the cultural perspective of the autobiographical content (Coia & Taylor, 2010). The researcher uses their own experiences as a case to explore cultural themes, identities, and lived experiences. The

goal of this approach is to gain deeper insights into the researcher's cultural background, as well as to generate new knowledge about the culture and society more broadly.

Context

I am a white, cisgender, female teacher and I conducted this autoethnography during my fourth year teaching at an elementary school in Virginia. This study lasted through early Spring 2023. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump presidency, and years of police brutality, the current political environment is extremely toxic. People are divided in a way that seems overwhelming and any profession is thrown off by the influence of politics, but not in the way teaching is. Because schools are government-funded and public, many people have opinions on what is right or wrong in a school. More than ever, teachers are forced to be the face of education and are often assaulted by the vitriol in news stories or public school board meetings because of this politically-charged environment. That environment is precisely the reason for this thesis and is extremely important to the context of the research.

Data Collection

In this autoethnography, I collected data through various means. These means included an autobiography, a book study, and reflections made on various articles related to the topic of the study. In the following sections, I explain why I chose the methods and how I specifically used them to collect data for my study.

Autobiography

The purpose of using an autobiography in this autoethnography was to help me understand my identity as a teacher. This autobiography focused on my teaching and the road to my teaching experience, but also the things that I found stand out as part of my

personal story. As Coia and Taylor (2010) described, teaching is an act that requires a multitude of choices and, by writing an autobiography, researchers can describe how the past affects the present. This autobiography helped me discover what parts of my upbringing and story have made me into the teacher I am today. It also helped me understand how that led me to my passion for social justice and antiracist education.

Book Study

One of the methods used to observe culture is analyzing books (Ellis et al., 2011). Because of this, I used the book *Start Here, Start Now: A Guide to Antibias and Antiracist Work in Your School Community* by Kleinrock (2021) to learn more about antiracist education and how to implement this in the classroom. After each chapter, I wrote a journal entry that allowed me to reflect on how I could use this in my classroom and how possible that is while keeping in mind the denial of racism from the public.

Response and Reflection

I responded and reflected on a few articles and policy pieces that directly correlate with the current sociopolitical environment and its impact on education. This will provide validity as it shows how the current environment looks for teachers and those in the education field during the time period of the study. It also allowed me to further show the difficulties of teaching in today's context by allowing a deeper understanding of the environment teachers are forced into each day.

Data Analysis Procedures

Throughout all the various data collection procedures, I primarily used a priori coding with the ideas from Gorski and Swalwell's (2015) Equity Literacy framework. The coding scheme I used was made up of these six categories: recognizing different

forms of oppression, understanding and naming privilege, responding to and interrupting inequity, redressing systemic inequity, developing a critical consciousness about inequity, and taking responsibility for creating equity. After breaking down the information and coding that way, I analyzed the information through process coding. This focuses on the process of identifying “-ing” words to understand the patterns of the information collected from the autobiography, book study, and reflection journals. These action words helped me to identify trends and themes in the various data sources. Rather than trying to use various coding methods, using process coding (Saldaña, 2013) for each data source helped me focus on properly analyzing the data as a whole, rather than looking at each data collection tool as a separate piece of data.

Trustworthiness And Validation

Trustworthiness and validity are two crucial aspects in evaluating the quality of research. Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which the findings of a study can be considered credible, dependable, and worthy of belief. In other words, it assesses the confidence one can have in the results of a study. There are several methods to ensure the trustworthiness of research, but using reliable resources from the modern era and using a rigorous data analysis technique were primarily the methods used for this study. Validity refers to the degree to which a study measures what it is supposed to measure. By focusing on a clear research question (stated above) and using those data analysis procedures, I have ensured the validity of the study.

In the following chapter, I will dive into the findings and conclusions I’ve made from my research methods and discuss what I learned about myself through these explorations and how they have impacted how I approach antiracism in my classroom.

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I go through each of the three research methods that I used and summarize the important findings I found throughout the research. In the first section, I discuss my autobiography and what I knew about my identity. I also discuss how it impacts how I feel about and teach social justice and use antiracist practices in my classroom each day. In the second section, I discuss the book study and how that helped me understand practical applications of antiracist practices and the feelings I had about the ones Kleinrock (2021) presented in her book. In the third and final section, I discuss the articles and policies I read and how those policies impact teachers and students in and out of schools each day.

What I Already Knew About Antiracist Teaching And Social Justice Education

In this section, I discuss what I knew about antiracism before conducting this research, and how conducting this research has changed my views and attitudes toward antiracist education. I also discuss how my identity molded me into the teacher I am today.

Growing up as a cisgender white woman in Virginia Beach, Virginia afforded me a good amount of privilege. When I was growing up, my parents struggled to make ends meet and I didn't have much, but I was happy enough and didn't feel the struggle at the time. My parents did everything they could to keep me happy, fed, and safe. I went to a JumpStart program for preschool and then into a school in a poor area for kindergarten and first grade, but my mom worked hard to get me to Virginia Beach Public Schools because she said they were better. At the time, I didn't think much of it, but as a teacher in the same area, I know that a lot more money goes into Virginia Beach Public Schools

and my mom wanted us to live in a city that prioritized education. When I started school in Virginia Beach, I was quickly identified as Gifted and Talented and, after that, school itself became pretty easy. Teachers always seemed to like me and I never really got in trouble. I didn't struggle in school and I worked hard without having to work very hard. Growing up, I don't remember experiencing a lot of racism around me. I went to an elementary school where it was generally racially diverse and I was friends with people from all races. As I started to dive into middle school, I saw more racism and inequity around me. Middle schoolers would make fun of someone for anything, but race and ethnicity were easy targets. Although I witnessed it, I never directly intervened. I just assumed it was the way things were, and I was dealing with being bullied for my weight and I was more worried about myself.

When I got to high school, I attended the Global Studies and World Languages Academy at Tallwood High School. This experience led me to begin to see the world beyond Virginia, and beyond the United States, and put into perspective the privileges I had throughout my upbringing. Although women in America still see a lot of oppression, it is nothing in comparison to the oppression women experienced in other countries. It also is nothing compared to the oppression many other people face around the world for race, religion, and ethnicity. This is when I started to become aware of the inequities in the world and the inequities right here in my backyard.

Because of how much this academy focused on and studied the world and its systems, my classmates and I became pretty involved in politics. In class, we often discussed current events and I began to understand politics and their real impact on the treatment of people. I had listened to and watched the news before, but I never was in a

room with other educated people whom I could debate and try to prove wrong. I worked hard in clubs to help the community I lived in. This is where my passion for social justice began to take shape and when I started working more specifically toward my college degree, that passion solidified.

When I started my college experience at Longwood University, I experienced a lot of culture shock. I went from a very diverse school environment to a primarily white institution. I began to see a lot of injustices exposed around me and overt racism from people I was going to school with. Also, at the beginning of my time in college, Barack Obama was nearing the end of his presidency, and the discussions of who would run as the Democratic and Republican nominees for the presidency were flying around campus, specifically in my government classes. I specifically remember the boy who sat two seats down from me in my comparative government class continually having conversations about how equal rights should not be a priority. One day, we were discussing the rights of transgender people and he said that we “should not continue to bend to the needs of the minority” and I remember throwing my head down onto the table. It was that day when I remember saying that I have to make it a priority to use my privilege to reject inequities for the people who are less able to or in a position where they have less power or privilege to do so. When I got into my junior year, I had a professor ask me to complete a research project with him. We discussed ideas and quickly settled on the idea of social justice in education. This was when I got to discover my passion for inclusive education through an antiracist curriculum and representative literature and learn more about the ways people can make a change and be conscious of the inequities around them.

When I started teaching, I soon learned that I could use books to teach students about the diversity around them to help them feel supported and loved, but also aware and curious of the world around them and its inequities. I also fell in love with teaching history because I could expose students to things that should make them upset. I believe that students need to know what is going on in the world now because it has direct connections to history. I think it's important that students aren't sheltered from information that could make them uncomfortable, because history *is* uncomfortable. Students must have the information before they are sent off to make their own opinions. I quickly found that one of the biggest responsibilities I have as a teacher is to interrupt inequity and work to create equality.

What I Learned About Antiracist Teaching From *Start Here, Start Now: A Guide To Antibias And Antiracist Work In Your School Community*

In this section, I discuss my book study of Kleinrock's (2021) *Start Here, Start Now: A Guide to Antibias and Antiracist Work in Your School Community*. This book made me explore how I could be a better and more intentional teacher in terms of antiracism. After completing my autobiography, it was really interesting to read this book as it provided a lot of good solutions and resources for teachers who take the responsibility of interrupting inequities seriously.

Kleinrock (2021) introduced her book with a study on identity and it was quite interesting to me because it was hard to find parts of my identity that I found important. As a white woman, I don't necessarily see my race, gender identity, or religion as important because they are validated by the world and I was never forced to constantly be aware of them. But I have to work to remember that having that privilege of not being

forced into an awareness of my race is a part of the reason I have been able to achieve what I have today.

Kleinrock (2021) made it a focus in her book to discuss how important it is to prioritize relationships. These relationships are what allow teachers to have conversations that prioritize growth and interrupt inequality. One of the hardest things I face as a teacher is controlling my reaction when a student makes a comment that is racist or unkind.

Kleinrock cautions teachers to be aware of their reactions and boundaries. I often see conversations that include microaggressions in my classes. These tend to be subtle and something I think that are not worth calling my students out on, but microaggressions add up and eventually those students turn into students who are willing to cross lines without hesitation. Microaggressions also add up for the students experiencing them, possibly leading to retaliation. As a teacher from a privileged background, I struggle with calling these students out because I don't want to cause a bigger fight and I do not want to cross lines with parents. If it were not for those worries, I'd make a bigger effort to call out the microaggressions I witness in my class.

Caregivers are one of the hardest parts of teaching. Never knowing what the parents will consider "too far" or never knowing how far they'll push an issue is terrifying. It seems as if our jobs as teachers are constantly on the line. Kleinrock (2021) used antiracist work as an opportunity to engage caregivers in the classroom. She also takes their concerns seriously and tries to help them adequately describe their concerns so that she knows how to address them. Liz explains that concerns about these difficult conversations don't stop at parents who experience privilege due to their identities, some parents who come from underrepresented communities are concerned as well. Simply

because I think that teaching social justice should be intersectional doesn't mean that parents agree. Teachers must make parents a part of their classroom because if teachers try to hide things from the parents, that's when mistrust begins to form.

As I researched for this thesis, the importance of community in schools continued to come up (Carothers, 2019; Fu et al., 2022; National Education Policy Center, 2017) No matter where I researched, it all came back to the importance of stakeholders linking together to support this move towards antibias and social justice education. Although I know this is super important, I get very stressed about an increased parent presence in schools. I haven't had a lot of issues with parents, but that doesn't mean I haven't seen them. One of my coworkers was being recorded by a student last year because her mom wanted to know what was going on in her classroom every day. Another one of my coworkers received emails and messages each day from a parent who was watching her instruction during COVID-19 virtual learning and criticizing everything she did. One of my coworkers is constantly worried that a student's parent is going to come to the school and confront her, unsure of the violence that he may bring. Unfortunately, when I think about my job, parents are the hardest part of it. Without the support of parents, though, no teacher will ever be successful. We will not be able to create equality on our own, we must do it with the support of all the people who have their hands in the pot of education and all people in our community as a whole. One of the things that I work extremely hard on is creating a strong classroom culture, but I could make more of an effort to work on our community.

As I discussed in the last paragraph, research has shown that community involvement is a critical factor in supporting student success (Carothers, 2019; Fu et al.,

2022; National Education Policy Center, 2017). When families are engaged and supportive of their children's learning, students are more likely to succeed academically and socially. By partnering with families to promote antiracist and antibias work, educators can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that benefits all students. I think it is very important that teachers prioritize family involvement. If family involvement is a priority, then a lot of parents won't have an issue with the teacher because they will be more likely to trust the teacher. Parents who feel like their student's teacher likes them and their child are more likely to listen to and value what the teacher is bringing to the table. By working with parents and maintaining transparency, if something does come up, that teacher is more likely to be able to get through the discussion civilly, rather than fighting or disagreeing.

Towards the end of the book, Kleinrock (2021) wrote about how to make antiracist teaching work in all grade levels in a developmentally appropriate manner. Scaffolding antiracist work for elementary students can create a safe and supportive learning environment that celebrates diversity, models inclusive behavior, encourages critical thinking, and challenges stereotypes and biases. If teachers are intentional about the work that they are doing and the importance of that work, then they are more likely to be successful in continuing to teach antiracist work. A lot of times, I will say things that I don't realize are antiracist because it is second nature to me, but I'll stop and find a different way to approach it. This happens a lot in social studies. I teach American History from 1775-2023. This is a hefty period of injustice and we talk about a lot of it. We talk about the founding fathers (who owned enslaved people) and the heroism of Harriet Tubman (who was forced to go back to the South over and over again to free her

family and other enslaved people) and the Jim Crow laws that kept people of color down. Although the curriculum has continued to add more inclusive standards, it is still hard to teach fifth graders about the impact that these injustices have today. But fifth graders are old enough and able to analyze primary sources and decode the injustices that they are presented with, so they should be pushed to work more on those skills so that they can refine them throughout their middle and high school experiences. To interrupt inequities, we have to allow students to learn the skills to critically analyze the world around them.

What I Learned About My Teaching Through Reflection And Journaling

In this section, I discuss the articles and policies I read and the journals I wrote about them. By reading articles and reflecting on how they made me feel, I saw a lot of the struggles that I am facing in my classroom and school flowing through the minds of teachers around America. I continued to hit the same conclusion: the stakeholders in education (politicians, administrators, teachers, parents, community members, etc.) all have a lot of opinions about how education should be run, and it seems like none of them are willing to compromise and work together.

While I was reading through these articles, I was consistently making connections with issues my coworkers and I were having in school. Politics can be a divisive issue, and the division can sometimes extend to relationships between teachers and parents. When political views diverge, it can lead to misunderstandings and conflict. This political polarization can lead to a lack of trust in public institutions, including schools, which can impact the relationship between teachers and parents. This lack of trust can make it more difficult for teachers to do their job effectively and can create a challenging environment for students and families. I see this distrust between parents and teachers in my school

and with my coworkers. Just recently, I witnessed a fellow teacher start to yell back at a parent who was screaming at her through the phone. This interaction was baffling, I saw someone I respect reach a point where she could no longer hold back the emotion and was forced into a situation where she was unable to control herself. But it did not really shock me. Of course, many parents are angry right now, everything seems to be imploding around them. And, of course, many teachers are upset that they are being treated unfairly by adults and students around them.

Another article I read discussed that some politicians have proposed legislation or policies that they refer to as a "Parent's Bill of Rights" that generally aim to give parents more control and choice over their children's education. For example, some proposals include provisions for school choice, review of curriculum/instructional materials, student privacy, and parental involvement. As someone who is in the classroom each day, it surprises me to see how much parents see themselves as *not* a part of the conversation. Specifically, a point is made that parents will have the right to meet with teachers twice a year. I've never worked in a school that didn't force teachers to meet every request by the parent. Never once have I been allowed to not take a request by a parent to meet or send a lesson if I was asked. In the schools I have worked in, parents' needs have been put above any teacher's or student's request. What parents say, goes. It is common for schools to prioritize open communication and collaboration with parents to ensure the best possible education for their students. Some parents may be more demanding or assertive in their interactions with schools, which can be intimidating for educators who are responsible for complying with various regulations and policies.

One of the policies I reviewed was the first executive order put forth by Governor Glenn Youngkin when he took office in 2021. The order bans the teaching of CRT and related concepts in Virginia public schools and state agencies. The executive order directs the Virginia Department of Education to develop new standards of learning for K-12 schools that focus on academic excellence, critical thinking, and civic education while avoiding divisive concepts that could be harmful to students. When I first heard that this was published, I remember the anger that oozed out of my skin.

This past month, I was teaching about Read Across America Day. I do not teach Dr. Seuss because Dr. Seuss was blatantly prejudiced and included many of these racist themes in his children's books. So I was sharing about how the National Education Association (NEA) sees Read Across America Day and its mission. The mission of the NEA Read Across America Day is to let kids find a love of reading through books they can see themselves in, as well as appreciate the diversity that can be found in books about people other than themselves. I was teaching this and halfway through I stopped and thought, is this a divisive concept? Then I went on to read *The Proudest Blue* by Ibtihaj Muhammad (2019). This book is written from the perspective of a young student whose sister just started wearing her hijab to school. She recounts the bullying she sees her sister facing and we had conversations about why the kids were making comments like that, and we had a lot of conversations about what hijab is and how it is a part of the Muslim religion. These were all very thoughtful conversations, but I thought over and over, will I get in trouble for talking about this?

Educators often feel responsible for creating a safe and inclusive learning environment that recognizes and celebrates diversity. This includes teaching students

about different cultures, histories, and perspectives, as well as addressing issues of bias, prejudice, and discrimination. But this executive order goes against all of this - so many teachers are simply afraid because they don't know what they can say or can't say. I feel very pressured to avoid discussing controversial topics altogether for fear of facing repercussions.

After reflecting on each piece of research and looking to see how it falls into the codes, I was able to come to some conclusions about teaching antiracism and how to do it in a way that may help teachers be more successful. Through my experiences in life, the ways that Kleinrock (2021) breaks down how to make antiracist work approachable, and the articles and policies I read through, three themes arose throughout each piece: the importance of community, critical thinking skills, and confidence. In the next chapter, I explain how teachers could make antiracism work in their classrooms.

DISCUSSION

To say I have all the answers would be a complete lie. Unfortunately, no one is ever going to have a one-size-fits-all solution to antiracist work. Antiracist work is a responsibility as teachers because of our unique presence in the world as mentors to students from multiple different backgrounds. With this increasingly polarized political environment that our country has fallen into, teachers are even more scared of the impacts and repercussions of teaching social justice curriculums and antiracist practices. From my research, I believe that the best ways to be successful in teaching antiracism in schools are to build and maintain strong relationships with all stakeholders in the school, to teach and model respect and critical thinking skills, and to stay confident in the teaching of antiracist work.

The most common theme that came out of my research was the importance of community. Especially in public schools, so many people have a hand in what students carry to school. Parents are just as important to schooling as teachers, administrators, or other students. Politicians and school board members will find their way into schools, even if it is not by directly stepping foot into the classrooms. Teachers must have strong relationships with all of those stakeholders. Teachers need to be sure to go the extra mile to maintain communication with parents and they have to give them transparency when talking about antiracist topics. I don't think it's necessary to ask for permission, but I do think it's important to give parents the information they need to correctly reflect on the lesson, rather than having to make assumptions about it based on whatever their students go home and share. It's also important for teachers to have a good relationship with the administrators at their school so that teachers can use antiracist practices in their

classroom without feeling like their principal is going to come down and yell at them or pull them into their office after school. Having a good relationship with those administrators is sometimes easier said than done, but teachers should embrace professional development that would make them more educated on antiracist work. That may help convince the administrator to trust in the teacher more and thus allow them to continue using antiracist practices. If parents and administrators are on the teacher's side, then they can truly show the value of the antiracist work that they are doing and use that to support if they were ever caught in the crosshairs of politicians.

Another important thing teachers can do for students is foster critical thinking skills. Students are in a world where information comes very easily to them, whether that's through social media or simply having access to so much information at their fingertips through search engines and artificial intelligence. Students must learn how to dissect that information and all information that they are coming into contact with and learn how to ensure that they are forming opinions based on evidence and facts, rather than something they just saw on the internet or was said to them at school. Teachers can foster these skills by modeling them for students in think-alouds. They can also do it by exposing students to inequities when they see them and allowing them to practice finding evidence or using primary sources to fully understand the concept. These critical thinking skills will go beyond antiracist work, but students must be confident in those skills so that they can use them in an antiracist classroom, but also when they are in classrooms that may not be as centered around antiracist work. We have to ensure that we are enabling these students to confront inequities in their lives, forever, no matter where they are facing them.

Lastly, the most important thing to remember is to remain confident. Antiracist work is important and a great way to combat the racism and bigotry we see in our world today. Without clear instruction on how to be antiracist, we are enabling students to fall into the same path that the generations before us have walked down. Teachers cannot allow themselves to give up on teaching antiracist work because it's hard; they must ensure that they are doing everything in their power to prove that it is important and necessary in today's political environment. Being a teacher is a unique job where we are allowed the opportunity to change the world each and every day by teaching students to be better humans. We cannot allow the hardships of this work to stop us from doing what we know is best for them.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I dove deeply into the question: *How can a teacher who is committed to teaching antiracist practices and social justice-based education continue to do so in the current polarizing sociopolitical environment?* This question will never be answered perfectly, but through the research completed in this thesis, there are a few distinct ways in which teachers can be successful in pushing through these hard times and being successful teachers committed to antiracist work. By ensuring that teachers have developed a strong relationship with the people who have a stake in their classroom and maintained transparency with those people, working hard to model and foster critical thinking skills with their students, and persisting through the hardships of teaching through an antiracist lens, then any teacher will be successful in this fight.

Further research on this topic would benefit from a collaborative self-study with a group of teachers who are actively working to incorporate antiracist work into their

classrooms. This would show even more evidence to confirm the claims I make in this thesis. It would also help diversify the experience of the researcher. It would also be very interesting to research the impact of strong family involvement versus weak family involvement and the comfort of teachers teaching antiracism. This would help prove whether or not family involvement helps teachers feel more comfortable teaching antiracist pedagogy in their classrooms.

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Mandela, 2003). This is one of the most prominent and powerful quotes that I have seen throughout my teaching career and one I use to sign my emails. Education changes the world, and with good education, the world can truly be a better place. Antiracist practices are one of the most powerful ways a teacher can ensure that they are helping students be the change in the world. This study has shown that we have a lot of work to do, but it’s not impossible to be better; it just takes work.

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VITA

Spring 2023

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EDUCATION

Master of Education, Elementary Education, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Va.
 Professional specialization: Antiracist Education. Due to graduate May 2023.

Bachelor of Science, Elementary Education, Longwood University, Farmville, Va. May 2019.

PUBLICATIONS

Jacobson, T. M., & Ruday, S. (2021). *Looking into oneself: Exploring representative texts and their impact on understanding identity*. Reading in Virginia, XLIII, 23–31.

Ruday, S., & Jacobson, T. M. (2021). *Remote teaching and learning in the elementary ELA classroom*. Routledge.

Jacobson, T. M. (2018) *Making a difference: What research has to say about social justice in the classroom*. Virginia English Journal, 68(1), 35-46.

PRESENTATIONS

Jacobson, T. M. (2022). *Exploring Representative Texts for Social Justice Education*.

Conference presentation at the 2022 JLI Virtual Conference on Equity in Literacy Instruction.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**Service**

Reviewer for Journal of Literacy Innovation, 2020-now

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

2019-Present

Glenwood Elementary School: Grade 3 & 5 Teacher: Served as the Yearbook Chair. Served as teacher liaison to literacy leaders in the building. Acted as cooperating teacher for multiple high school teaching interns.