

# Developing Racial Literacy

## USING READERS' THEATER IN TEACHER EDUCATION TO CRITICALLY ADDRESS RACE & RACISM

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University of Wisconsin  
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### PROJECT OVERVIEW

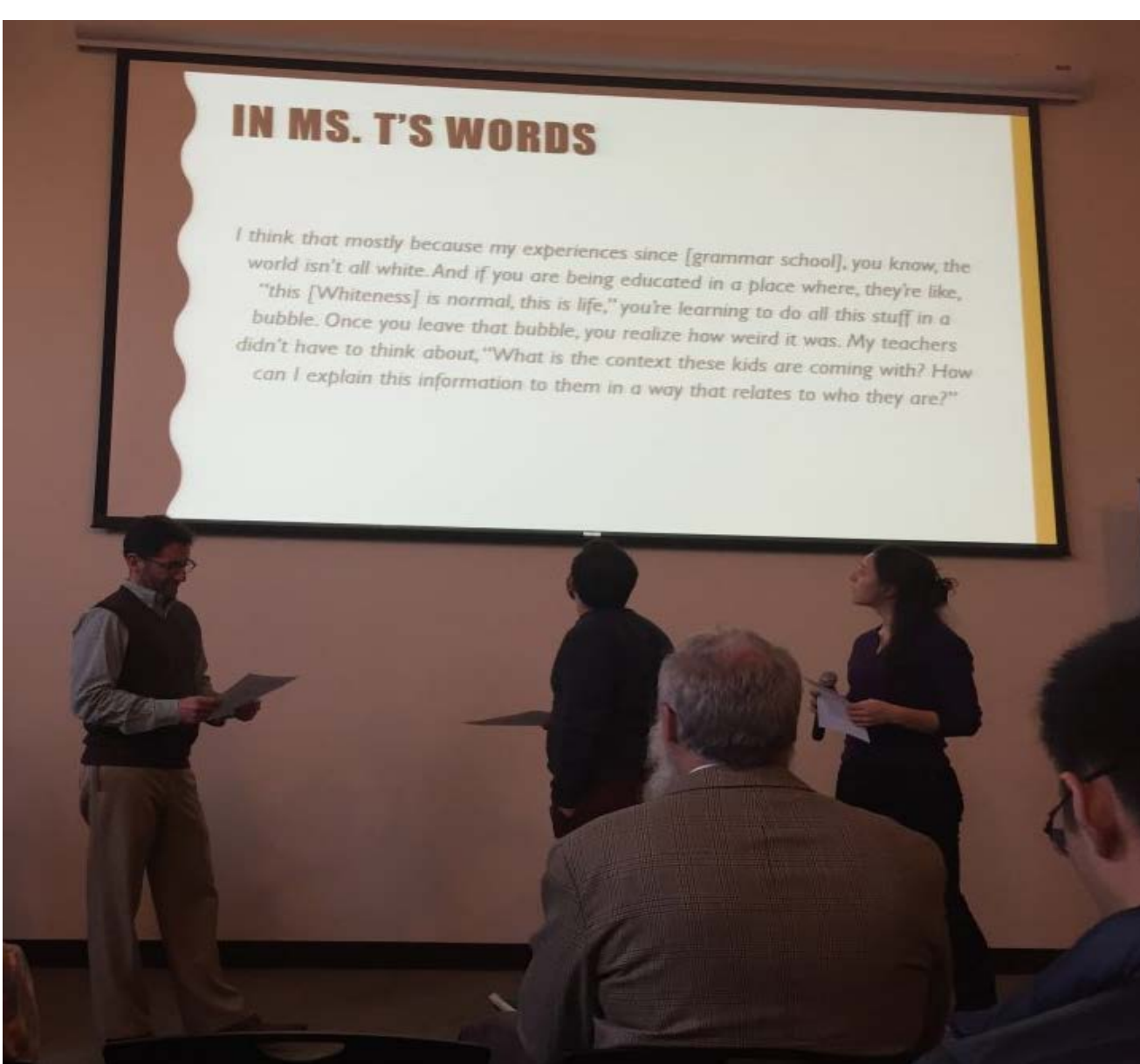
This study illustrates how *Readers Theater*, when used as a pedagogical tool in the teacher education classroom, encourages pre-service teachers to engage with productive opportunities for self-reflection and discussion about how race, racism, and whiteness interact with curriculum, pedagogy, and students' schooling experiences. Specifically, this presentation uses qualitative case study methods—including vignettes, observations, and interview data—to show how pre-service teachers critically examined not only their pedagogical beliefs, but also specific examples of how school structures and expectations for teaching help to shape teachers' classroom practices and relationships with students. This research suggests that *Readers Theater* can be used as a tool with which to develop critically reflective pre-service English teachers; the strategies and discussions presented here offer opportunities to identify and understand how race, whiteness, and racism interact with curriculum, pedagogy, and students' relationships with literature.

### WHY READERS' THEATER?



Credit: <http://trevorcalmei.blogspot.com/2012/06/readers-theatre-ideas-for-improving.html>

- The power of RT can be seen in its ability to engage learners in constructing their own language growth, reflecting meaning in the fullest sense of personal and cultural relevance, developing students' individual language abilities, and supporting self-initiated activity. (Liu, 2000, p. 359)



- The readers theater experience stimulated participants to thoughtfully reexamine personal experiences and reconsider past actions and interpersonal communication.... This opportunity to reflect promotes personal awareness and insight. (Pardue, 2004, p. 61)

### DEFINING RACIAL LITERACY

- Racial literacy is an understanding of the powerful and complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups.
- Racial literacy involves a discernment of the structural, political, and economic circumstances or antecedents that underlie racism and disadvantage.
- For a racially literate person, race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feedback, and assessment of conditions within society and people's lived experiences.
- Relationships between race and power, and the psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions of race are emphasized.
- While acknowledging individual agency, a racial literacy perspective admits the institutional and environmental constraints on individuals' actions.

(Skerrett, 2011, p. 314)

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do participants make sense of their racial identity development in a course that examines race and racism?
- In what ways can participants' concept development be attributed to class activities in which Readers' Theater pedagogy is employed?

### CONTEXT/METHODS

Participants were UWEC students enrolled in an English course focused on race and racial representation. This qualitative study explores how students made sense of their lived experiences (e.g. in school and the broader community) and racial identity development in a course that uses literature and other texts to examine whiteness, race, and racism. In this course, the instructor and students explored whiteness, race, and racism in text, classroom discourse (using extant data in published studies), schools (as portrayed in literature and text), policy, curriculum (k-12 curriculum), and also the lived experiences they bring to the classroom setting. This project focuses on the use of Readers' Theater as a pedagogical method to critically address race and racism.

### DATA COLLECTED

- Student-produced artifacts;
- Classroom discussion of Readers' Theater scripts;
- Semi-structured interviews;
- Focus-group discussions.

### SAMPLE READERS' THEATER SCRIPT/ANALYSIS

<b>Scene I:</b>  Mr. Kurt: A hate crime is when you do something out of hatred toward a different group.  Jay: There was much more racism in Emmett Till's time.  Meg: I don't think it has to do with race or what color you are, I think it has to do with social status.  Jamie: I hate the way the media makes fun of red heads. South Park does this all the time.  Mr. Kurt: If there are people at our school who are racist, what can we do, as the next generation, to change that?  Meg: If they think we're racist, they just shouldn't come here. Not all of us are racist.  Cabe: My grandpa on my mom's side was in the KKK. But I didn't grow up hating Black people.  Meg: In my opinion, if you're racist, you're racist, that's just the way you are. If that's how they choose to live, then that's just who they are.	<b>Scene I, continued</b>  Mr. Kurt: If there are people at our school who are racist, what can we do, as the next generation, to change that?  Meg: If they think we're racist, they just shouldn't come here. Not all of us are racist.  Cabe: My grandpa on my mom's side was in the KKK. But I didn't grow up hating Black people.  Meg: In my opinion, if you're racist, you're racist, that's just the way you are. If that's how they choose to live, then that's just who they are.	<b>What do we notice? Think about?</b>  Mr. Kurt: A hate crime is when you do something out of hatred toward a different group. Jay: There was much more racism in Emmett Till's time. Meg: I don't think it has to do with race or what color you are, I think it has to do with social status. Jamie: I hate the way the media makes fun of red heads. South Park does this all the time. Mr. Kurt: If there are people at our school who are racist, what can we do, as the next generation, to change that? Meg: If they think we're racist, they just shouldn't come here. Not all of us are racist. Cabe: My grandpa on my mom's side was in the KKK. But I didn't grow up hating black people. Meg: In my opinion, if you're racist, you're racist, that's just the way you are. If that's how they choose to live, then that's just who they are.
<b>Scene II:</b>  [Students have just finished reading the article. Mr. Kurt has not yet asked a question or made a comment.]  Adam: Isn't that kind of a bit racist?  Mr. Kurt: What makes you say so?  Adam: Making the goal lower because the person's black?  Shane: Racism is pretty much discriminating against you because of the color of your skin, and this is exactly that. They are setting different goals for kids based on race...	<b>Scene II (continued):</b>  Mr. Kurt: Do you know what the term white privilege means? [Students collectively indicate that they are not familiar with this term.]  Mr. Kurt: I can give you a very small example: What color are flesh-colored Band-Aids?  Cabe: [Incredulous in tone] You're comparing this to Band-Aids?!	<b>Scene II (continued)</b>  Mr. Kurt: What color skin does every Disney character have, except for one?  Cabe: [Dramatically slams both fists on his desk and leans forward indignantly] Now you're comparing it to Disney?!
<b>Scene II (continued)</b>  Cass: The thing about the Band-Aids, I think they're over thinking it, because I never thought...  Mr. Kurt: [Dramatically leans toward Cass and responds to her in a mock whisper:] Psssst...Because you're white!  Mr. Kurt: What if the Band-Aids were black, and we called them "flesh colored Band-Aids"?  Cass: Well yea, then we would think about it.  Meg: In this one Crest toothpaste commercial, they're checking peoples' mouths for germs. The black girl's mouth is dirtier than the white person's mouth.  Vito: Now it's gonna bug me any time I put on a Band-Aid.	<b>What do we notice? Think about?</b>  Adam: Isn't that kind of a bit racist? Mr. Kurt: What makes you say so? Adam: Making the goal lower because the person's black? Shane: Racism is pretty much discriminating against you because of the color of your skin, and this is exactly that. They are setting different goals for kids based on race. Mr. Kurt: Do you know what the term white privilege means? [Students collectively indicate that they are not familiar with this term.] Mr. Kurt: I can give you a very small example: What color are flesh-colored Band-Aids? Cabe: [Incredulous] You're comparing this to Band-Aids? Mr. Kurt: What color skin does every Disney character have, except for one? Cabe: [Dramatically slams both fists on his desk and leans forward indignantly] Now you're comparing it to Disney? Adam: The thing about Disney, I honestly...like...Mr. Kurt, you're an awesome teacher, but I don't think Disney has anything to do with it. Mr. Kurt: Really? Did you notice how every evil character has darker skin? Did you notice how the crows sound black? The hyenas [in the Lion King] sound black? Cass: The thing about the Band-Aids, I think they're over thinking it, because I never thought... Mr. Kurt: [Dramatically leans toward Cass and responds to her in a mock whisper:] Psssst...Because you're white! Mr. Kurt: What if the Band-Aids were black, and we called them "flesh colored Band-Aids"? Cass: Well yea, then we would think about it. Meg: In this one Crest toothpaste commercial, they're checking peoples' mouths for germs. The black girl's mouth is dirtier than the white person's mouth. Vito: Now it's gonna bug me any time I put on a Band-Aid.	<b>Scene II (continued)</b>  Meg4: In this one Crest toothpaste commercial, they're checking peoples' mouths for germs. The black girl's mouth is dirtier than the white person's mouth.  [And let's not forget Vito].  Vito: Now it's gonna bug me any time I put on a Band-Aid.

### DISCUSSION

#### CRITICAL REFLECTION

K: What I would do differently is – show more examples – the kids don't really believe it. Give them articles that show evidence. I do really like that he makes it...it's not a very hateful discussion. It's more meaningful."

- Readers' Theater encourages teacher education students to examine pedagogy from a far—to witness the teaching of difficult concepts and topics at a safe distance, in order to consider the affordances and challenges in individual classroom episodes.

#### EMPATHY

C: I think what stood out to me was the kids' anger. Just the fact that he would say things "oh because you're white" – and they got angry. But I do understand where they're coming from, because I did go through that. And I think it shows, because Mr. Kurt did say, in one of the lines, you learn racism because you grow up with it. And you catch on, and you hear your parents and people around you talk about that stuff, and you catch on.

- Readers' Theater instills a sense of empathy – not just for the teacher teaching challenging content, but for students consuming it.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SITUATED-NESS OF CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

T: "Every other month is white history month" – do the students really know what he's getting at? You can say that, but maybe the students don't understand why every other month is white history month. Or sometimes, why is it that Band-Aids are racist? So stating that clearly.

- Readers' Theater can highlight spaces in which teaching challenging content (e.g. racism and racialized cultural artifacts) requires historical context in order to create a more meaningful teaching and learning experience. I.e., an exploration of where/how critical analyses of context and power are needed.