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'PULLING UP MYTHS FROM THE ROOT:' DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN ANTI-RACIST CURRICULUM ABOUT THE AFRICAN HERITAGE FOR THIRD GRADERS IN PUERTO RICO

By Isar P. Godreau and Hilda Llórens

Introduction

When defining the foundations of Puerto Rico's national culture, indigenous *Taínos* and Spanish influences are often referred to as the first and second roots respectively. African heritage is known as "the third root." This ranking reveals deeply entrenched racial hierarchies that position blackness as the least important or desirable element of Puerto Rican identity. This article is based on a five-year ethnographic research project that documents the impact of this racial hierarchy in the third grade classroom in order to provide educational materials to deal with the problem of racism in Puerto Rico. Here, we describe the research carried out with third graders, teachers, and parents in two elementary schools. We discuss the findings and elucidate the challenges faced in conceptualizing and designing an anti-racist intervention in one of the schools.

The Study

The study, "Beyond the Self: Towards an Integral Approach to an Anti-racist Pedagogy in Elementary Education," included a team of researchers working at the Institute of Interdisciplinary Research at the University of Puerto Rico at Cayey. The project's director (main author), and the co-author are sociocultural anthropologists who have used participant observation, textual, and discourse analysis to study racial dynamics in Puerto Rico. Three other women with expertise in community psychology, clinical psychology, and anti-racist community organizing also collaborated as part of the research team.

Firstly, we aimed to examine the institutional manifestations of racism in school curricula, textbooks, classroom lessons and extracurricular school activities. Secondly, we wanted to determine whether children who exhibited "black" physical features were routinely exposed to racism and discrimination in school, both in explicit and covert ways. The project's final phase included an anti-racist intervention in one of the schools.

Accomplishing an applied, anti-racist intervention is not an easy task in Puerto Rico (PR hereafter). Racial stereotypes and the stigmatization of blackness are sustained by a national ideology of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) that goes hand in hand with discourses of racial democracy and *mestizaje* or race mixture. Such discourses represent Puerto Ricans as the harmonious product of the mixture between Spanish, Taíno Indian, and African. However, ideologies of *blanqueamiento* also claim that Puerto Ricans have "evolved" by shedding most of their African "blood" through race-mixing practices that, over time, are believed to produce whiter or "less dark" individuals. As in other countries of Afro-Latin America, discourses of *mestizaje* and *blanqueamiento* are used by elites and institutions to exclude blacks, deny racism, disregard demands based on a racial identity, and offset any association with blackness through the affirmation of degrees of whiteness.

The effect this overt bias in favor of whiteness has upon the politics of identity is particularly evident in the population census of 2000 where only eight percent of the general population self-identified as black, and 80% as "white" (US Census Bureau, 2000). Thus, while on the mainland United States, the "one drop of black blood rule," classifies anyone with African-American ancestry as "black," in PR race mixture is predominantly understood as a whitening mechanism. This whitened view belies the reality of racial intermingling across the entire island and the fact that people of European ancestry never developed independently from African influences, but were on the contrary, subject to creolization before and after the period of Spanish colonization (Mintz 1959). Yet, African ancestry is strategically erased or downplayed in dominant representations and in self-identification practices, such as those manifested in the census.

Recent publications contradict public and official discourses about racial harmony and the inconsequentiality of race in Puerto Rico. Racial prejudice has been documented in the workplace (Hernández 2002), in schools (Godreau et al., 2008), in the media (Rivero 2000), in law enforcement (Santiago-Valles 1996), in health outcomes (Gravlee 2005 et. al.,), in the context of urban planning (Godreau 2001; Lloréns & Carrasquillo, 2008), in linguistic, aesthetic practices, and in cultural production (Godreau 2008; Lloréns 2005; 2008), and, finally, in the formation of a national identity (González 1985; Zenón Cruz 1974; Duany 2002; Géliga-Vargas et. al., 2008). Despite this evidence, public opinion and dominant discourses in Puerto Rico often characterize racism as a United States (not Puerto Rican) problem. Charges of racism are often dismissed with the contention that there can be no discrimination among a population that is so racially mixed and diverse, a discourse that

is also prevalent in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean (Dulizky 2005).

One outcome of this ideology is the lack of government sponsored, public policy geared at evaluating or mitigating racism. Consequently, the Department of Education has no specific guidelines or materials to deal with racial discrimination. Moreover, school social workers and students of education (e.g. future school personnel) do not receive training or assessment strategies for identifying and dealing with racist incidents in the school setting. Racism, in fact, does not even figure as a category in assessment or reporting instruments, different from other categories such as "inadequate emotional conduct," "inappropriate sexual behavior," or "drug-related conduct", which do. Furthermore, official documents such as hospital, school or psychological records rarely include the category of "race" on their forms, making it practically impossible to correlate incidents of violence and social marginalization to racial identity. As a result, the problem of racial discrimination is grossly underdocumented.

Methods

Our study aimed to document manifestations of racism in two elementary schools: one located in the central mountainous town of Cayey (population size 47,370) and another in the coastal town of Arroyo (population size 19,117) (Census 2000). Population census results for Cayey show 3.9% of the population identifying as "black," while the overwhelming majority, 88.2%, identified as "white." In contrast, in Arroyo 18% of the population self-identified as black, a percentage much higher than the eight percent national average. Although our study was not comparative, observing school dynamics and attitudes in regards to race and blackness in these two sites allowed us to document broader national discourses at work despite differences in local demography.

Our ethnographic research focused on the third grade because this grade's curriculum addresses the theme of PR culture explicitly and extensively, dedicating one unit to each of the three founding heritage-groups: the indigenous Taínos, the Spaniards and the Africans. During our school visits, we paid particular attention to how the unit about African heritage and the history of slavery was taught to third grade students. We also chose this grade because there is one homeroom teacher for most of the main subjects (e.g. math, Spanish, social studies and science) whereas in higher grade levels students have different teachers for each subject. This simplified our efforts to coordinate classroom visits and allowed us to observe other subjects, not just social studies.

In terms of methods, anthropology's long-standing relationship with the topic of "race" and its various insights regarding its complex, social construction, made us aware of the need to incorporate methodologies that would allow us to document its effects at both the institutional level and at the level of everyday practice. For example, during the first year, we combined textual analysis of third grade textbooks with personal interviews. Building rapport with teachers in participating schools enabled us to learn that besides using the official textbook teachers also used a previous (off the market) edition, which had even more problematic racial content than the current official textbook. Had it not been for such methodological insights and all the informal visits and observations, we would not have accessed this important information.

In the second year, we studied classroom materials (homework, classroom posters, stories and performances) that reflect dominant commonsense views about which heritages (or roots) were considered representative of PR culture, as well as the kinds of cultural practices and racial aesthetics that are privileged when it came to celebrating the island's culture. We also conducted visual analysis of more than 100 student drawings (see Figure 1). Once again, our training as anthropologists was beneficial as we not only paid attention to the visual content of images, but also to the quotidian dynamics of their production. We were able to document how students talked and critiqued one another while drawing

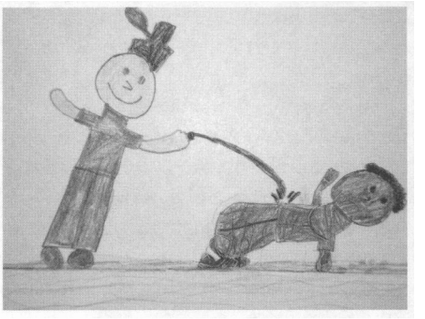

Figure 1. A Third Grade Student's Depiction of a Spaniard Whipping an Enslaved African

in the classroom, how they used textbook images and posters as models, and took note of the context of particular classroom dynamics which influenced their visual representations.

Overall, between 2006 and 2009, our team conducted more than 30 sessions of participant observation in both schools. Our observations were clustered during the times in the semester when the African Heritage unit was taught. Besides documenting classroom lessons, we observed if black children were excluded, treated badly, made fun of, ignored and/or marginalized in school activities. We also documented the ways in which children, teachers, and parents handled and made sense of these experiences. The team also carried out a total of ten formal interviews with teachers, eight focus groups with eleven teachers, 28 parents, two social workers, and one school counselor in both schools. Researchers also participated in and observed school-sponsored extracurricular activities such as the "PR Week."

Results of Study

At the individual level we found that despite the dominant silence on the topic of racism teachers and parents talked openly about racist incidents in their school. According to teachers, racial discrimination among students took the form of rejection, humiliation, mockery and even physical abuse. Students who are victims of racism often experience

emotional instability, anxiety, and isolation. Such experiences lead to feelings of marginality, dropping out of school or taking drugs. Parents who were interviewed added that other consequences of racism also involved acting out, misbehaving, and getting expelled from school, as well as low self-esteem. Following are some examples of racist incidents reported by teachers. A teacher from Cayey told us that:

> "there was a girl, who was probably about twelve years old, she studied in this school in the six grade, and she had many problems...other kids used to call her 'dirty black girl...who did not bathed...' eventually she was expelled from middle school. She was expelled because she used to get into fights. But of course! Why wouldn't she fight? Kids were always teasing her... when kids used to taunt her she used to fight, because she was a girl who fought."[1]

A teacher from Arroyo recounted that:

> "The other day in the lunch line I overheard a little girl tell her friend that 'I don't want to drink chocolate milk, because I don't want my skin to get dark, I want to get whiter.'"

A teacher from Arroyo reported that:

> "During a recent activity that I organized the children made masks, the girls made black rag dolls and we exhibited their creations. A kid, who had been my student in the past and that is now with another teacher, came to exhibit and said: 'Jesus there are a lot blacks here!' (referring to the dolls)... 'How nasty...so many blacks!' And I said: 'But that's a beautiful color. And you know your dad is a colored man. You came out lighter because of your mother!' The kid replied, 'Yes miss, but when I get married I will not marry a black woman. When I get married I won't do that.'"

Another teacher from Cayey said that:

> "I had an experience in the fifth grade with a little girl...other kids used to tell her that she did not bathe, the kids alienated her because she was black, because she had bad hair (sic.). That little girl was very sweet, she cried all the time, and she wet herself in the classroom because she was so nervous all the time."

The study revealed no significant differences between the two schools in terms of individual or institutional manifestations of racism. In both schools, teachers said they often intervened by scolding students who offended others or by comforting the victim. Evoking the ideology of race mixture was a common strategy as teachers confronted bullies by telling them that they were also black or part-black – making reference to a black relative in the student's family or telling them that all Puerto Ricans have an African heritage. In this way, assigning a mixed-race identity became a moral tool to undermine a bully's superior and arrogant stance towards black children. The problem with this strategy is that in the process of reprimanding bullies teachers often did not challenge the racist logic that defines blackness as an inferior trait, but rather represented blackness as a "shared stain," a common weakness that all Puerto Ricans have in their "mixed-blood." Other strategies such as emphasizing that "God loves everyone no matter the color of their skin," or that "black students should accept themselves as they are," also reinforced this notion of blackness as a flaw.

Furthermore, in line with speech practices in Puerto Rico, teachers, school workers, and parents were mostly uncomfortable using the word *negro/negra* to describe a black person. Instead they used euphemistic words like *trigueño/a* (wheat colored), *negrito* (the diminutive form of "negro"/ black) or *de color* (colored). The use of the word *pelo malo* (bad hair) to describe curly or kinky hair, and good hair (pelo bueno) to describe straight hair was also common. The existence of this racist binary in the mental landscape of teachers, parents and school workers works to associate black physical characteristics with that which is negative and unattractive, and white as desirable and beautiful (Godreau 2002; Lloréns 2005, 2008; Franco-Ortiz and Quiñonez-Hernández 2005). Furthermore, although in both field sites teachers and parents openly denounced and spoke out about incidents of racism at the individual/personal level, they seldom recognized the effects of racism at the institutional level limiting their ability to confront the problem in an effective manner.

At the institutional level, we found that social studies textbooks and other educational materials silence, trivialize and simplify Puerto Rico's African heritage and, especially, the history of slavery (Godreau et. al., 2008a). Textbooks and curricula compounded popular notions that in Puerto Rico all blacks were: slaves, inferior, unattractive, foreign, passive or entertainers (musicians or dancers) (Picó and Alegría, 1989). Moreover, blackness was relegated to the past or race mixing was evoked as a contemporary characteristic of PR identity (Lloréns, 2005). Furthermore, while the three "heritage groups" are addressed in the textbooks, the chapter on PR's African heritage is significantly shorter than the other two "roots" (Taínos and Spaniards) (Godreau, et. al., 2008:119). We found that teachers were ill equipped to face these curricular flaws, as they did not, for the most part, have a clear understanding of the history of enslavement, of the thriving communities of free blacks residing on the island during this same period or of the historical origins of the notion of race or racism. Finally, few children wanted to perform the role of slave or African in school plays and other extracurricular activities organized to celebrate PR culture. Associating a student with Africa or with black physical features was interpreted, in fact, as an act of mockery among children.

In collaboration with the anti-racist organization Ilé, and in order to discuss the effects of the institutional dimensions of racism with school personnel,

we offered an anti-racist workshop to fifteen social workers working in Cayey. We also held four meetings with a total of nine teachers and twelve parents in both schools to share with them preliminary findings about the institutional aspects of racism, focusing specifically on the textbook representation of African heritage. To encourage open discussion, we conducted these activities in semi-formal settings.

Upon examination of these meetings, we noticed that besides having deficient pedagogical tools teachers also lacked an effective explanatory framework that could enable them to understand and confront racism in their school. Overwhelmingly, they defined racism as a problem rooted in the mental health of individuals (bad behavior, low self-esteem) or in family upbringing. Teachers, however, did not associate racism with institutional practices or with historical factors (e.g. slavery). When teachers contextualized information about racism in PR society and in their own lives they spoke of skin color as playing a significant role in rivalries and rejection among family members. Furthermore, what they reproached in their narratives about racism was the *behavior* that marginalized, excluded, or humiliated but not the existence of a racial hierarchy itself. In the absence of explicit comments that humiliated blacks, teachers were therefore less willing to share their ideas or be as emphatic about the subject of racism when we critique the textbook or other institutional school representations that indirectly assigned a lower status to blacks.

The Challenges of an Anti-Racist Curriculum

The last phase of the project involved an anti-racist intervention to be conducted by the teachers (with the researcher's collaboration) in the two research sites. With this goal in mind, and in order to provide teachers with appropriate documentation for the intervention, we developed an anti-racist guide that clearly shows the connection between those individual experiences that upset and mattered to teachers and the racial hierarchies and myths embedded in school texts that were more "invisible" to them. The teacher's guide addresses the following: (1) the results of our study, (2) an inspirational message to the teacher as an agent of change, (3) testimonies of racist incidents in the schools, (4) information about the historical origins of racism, (5) definitions of race and racism (including institutional and interpersonal manifestations), (6) the goals of the anti-racist curriculum, (7) references for future consultation, and (8) an alternative unit about Africa designed for students (see Godreau et. al., 2009). The section on goals (6), explains the importance of challenging what we call racial myths that are embedded in textbooks, in public discourse and dominant opinion, and visual landscapes (see Table 1).

Myth	Alternative Message
1. Africa is a poor, primitive place of little importance in the world.	1. Africa is a diverse and important continent, and it is part of the modern/contemporary world.
2. All blacks were slaves before the abolition of slavery.	2. During enslavement there was a large and diverse group of free black people.
3. Slaves were passive victims of slavery.	3. The enslaved resisted slavery and fought to obtain their freedom.
4. The contributions of our African heritage are limited to music, folklore, and labor.	4. Africa's heritage is present in the cultural, intellectual, and scientific contributions made by Puerto Rican men and women.
5. Almost all black people disappeared with the race mixing or *mestizaje* that took place.	5. Black people have diverse physical characteristics and racial mixtures.
6. In PR racism no longer exists.	6. Racism exists today and it is everyone's responsibility to fight against it.

Table 1. Myths about the African Heritage in Puerto Rico and Alternative Messages

In addition, we developed posters challenging some of the myths which teachers placed in their classrooms (see Figure 2). In the process of developing this material for and with teachers, we discovered that creating anti-racist curriculum and implementing classroom interventions are much more complex processes than we anticipated. Challenges we faced included: (1) organizing the material in a visually interesting and engaging manner, (2) finding attractive images about PR's African Heritage, (3) deciding on effective classroom activities, (4) writing in a succinct, clear, concise, manner that is appropriate for teachers and their students, (5) obtaining feedback from busy, and often overworked teachers, and (6) negotiating the teaching time of the anti-racist curriculum with teachers.

The last three points were of particular importance because teachers ultimately implemented the intervention. For example, the anti-racist guide and curricular material we prepared was approximately thirty-eight pages in length. However, the official African Heritage unit designed for the third grade spans only ten pages and teachers only allot two weeks to teaching this unit. Hence, we decided to let teachers pick and choose whatever content from the curricular guide they felt was most important since, even if they ended up teaching a small fraction, their choice would be revealing to us.

Convincing overburdened teachers to take up this challenge also required building rapport with them and their supervisors. Yet, both schools experienced a great deal of turnover. We met three different principals in each school. Only one third-grade teacher and two social workers knew the study from its inception. Others had moved, retired or were teaching another grade level. Also, since in PR racism is a sensitive matter, levels of commitment to the study were varied. The combination of all these factors resulted in the implementation of the intervention in only one of the two research sites (Cayey). Nevertheless, the

Figure 2. Africa in Context. Poster Was Designed by Research Team and Will Be Given to Teachers to Display in Third Grade Classrooms

school principals in both sites allowed us to present the anti-racist curriculum to the entire school personnel during a 2.5 hour meeting, an opportunity that helped garner support for the project and the third grade teachers involved.

An important challenge we hope to confront with the continued dissemination of the project's findings is making the anti-racist guide more practical, pertinent, and accessible. Currently, we are developing a version of the guide that will link each myth to concrete findings about students' racist school behaviors and ideas. Each section will provide alternative information to counteract the six myths identified. Sections will include succinct historical data and facts as well as images and activities appropriate for the elementary level. The guide will also have a reference list, including textual, web, and video references useful to teachers. Our long-term goal is to produce an anti-racist guide that besides benefiting actual teachers can be used for future teachers at the university, teacher-training level. This, we know, is greatly needed.

Conclusion

After five years of research and engagement with this project, we have learned various valuable lessons. First, manifestations of racism and its effects are multi-dimensional, public and personal. Hence, an interdisciplinary team is not only beneficial to its understanding in school settings, but vital for the implementation of an anti-racist intervention. The incorporation of *Ilé* Inc., an organization that works to fight racism on the ground, was crucial as they helped conduct anti-racist workshops with teachers and school personnel using tools and techniques specifically designed to dispel the deleterious myths about blackness (and whiteness) in Puerto Rico. Second, disseminating the results of the study on a regular basis with parents, teachers, and school administrators, as well as taking their suggestions into account, became an important component of the research process. Teachers, for example, suggested research methods and helped design tests to determine a student's grasp of the alternative material before and after the intervention. In fact, the teachers were better equipped to produce questions and exercises appropriate to this grade level. Third, the ability to be flexible throughout the research process was essential as this allowed us to incorporate new methodologies, approaches, and collaborators with different kinds of expertise depending on the needs of the project. Finally, because the issue of race and racism is an extremely sensitive subject in Puerto Rico, an important aspect of this research was building rapport with school stakeholders over a long period of time. During these five years, we not only inquired about race and racism in the classroom, we also listened to the suggestions of parents, teachers and school personnel, and with their collaboration are producing a previously unavailable product (the guide) to deal with and mitigate racism in Puerto Rican schools.

The problem of racism can appear insurmountable as it is deeply entrenched in language and manners,

at the structural and individual levels, among families, and even mapped into the geography of the island. However, one significant finding of our study is that—despite people's blind spot to institutional racism—school stakeholders are eager to mitigate its interpersonal effects with alternative materials, embarking in a process of critical understanding that will simultaneously be a start to undoing racism—one teacher, one school worker, and one student at a time.

Key words: Puerto Rico, racism, elementary education

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