Harry Potter and the Deconstruction of Racism: An argument for the use of the *Harry Potter* book series as antiracist teaching text

EDU5466 Racism and Antiracism in Education

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April 15, 2018

Introduction:

In the summer of 1997, my world, and the worlds of millions of other people were changed forever. This was the year that the original *Harry Potter* book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997), was first published, bringing to life the adventures of a group of three young wizards who become best friends while learning magic at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This now critically acclaimed series has produced six more books (and eight blockbuster films), which have been translated into 80 different languages, sold more than 500 million copies worldwide, and won multiple awards, becoming the best-selling book series in history (J.K. Rowling, 2006). Over the course of the seven books, Harry Potter and his friends, Ronald (Ron) Weasley and Hermione Granger, complete their seven compulsory school years at Hogwarts. Every year (each book covers one full school year, from Harry’s birthday on July 31st to the end of term the following spring), Harry, Ron and Hermione, along with a multitude of other magical and non-magical beings, find themselves in the middle of some sort of harrowing situation, almost always culminating in a battle against Lord Voldemort, arguably the darkest and most evil wizard of all time.

After the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, my nine-year-old self was hooked. For the next ten years (the final installment of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, was released in July 2007), I and children all over the world grew up alongside Harry and his friends. Matkov (2013) remarks how the narrative itself grows up with Harry, as the books are largely written from his perspective. Instead of writing about a series of unconnected adventures by ‘The Boy Who Lived’, Rowling allowed the narrative to grow more and more sophisticated as the years go on, and Harry and his friends encounter more and more difficult situations. Specifically, the series explores themes of family, courage, loyalty, love and friendship, to name a few, all of which are universal to the human experience. In this way, “Rowling maintains a consistency throughout the entire series, writing about a number of mature topics in ways that children can access and adults can analyze” (Matkov, 2013, p. 2). I believe this point to be especially important – the *Harry Potter* series is expertly written in such a way that my then nine-year-old self, and my current self twenty years later, can both take immense pleasure in following along in Harry’s adventures. Based on such extensive popularity (the last four books in the series set records for speed of sales), it becomes necessary to question just what values and messages are being disseminated by the *Harry Potter* series.

One of the most reoccurring themes in the *Harry Potter* series is the comparison between and struggle of “good” versus “evil”. Specifically, I argue that the general principles driving the “good” characters as well as the “evil” characters are primarily race-based (Walters, 2015). Walters (2015) argues that “[t]he characters that are on the “good” side, or Harry Potter’s side, are the characters which work to understand and ameliorate discriminatory beliefs maintained by those who follow Lord Voldemort and the principles he advocates” (p. 3). Matkov (2013) comments on how Rowling employs familiar tropes and concepts to characterize the Wizarding world, the most prevalent being racism. During my initial examination of the research, it was the instances of racism, such as the continued discrimination against magical creatures based on socially constructed categories of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’, as well as the perceived superiority of so called “pureblood” wizards, which stood out to me the most. This revelation caused me extreme dismay, as well as a general questioning of everything I thought I knew about my all time favourite book series. Is the *Harry Potter* series racist?! However, upon further analysis, as well as a deepening of my own understanding of what racisms, as well as their counterparts can be, I feel there is another side to this seemingly racist tale. There is undoubtedly an intricately woven thread of racism, structural inequalities for particular groups, and the superiority of “pureblood” wizards over all others. However, as Horne (2010) points out, many readers have noted how the *Harry Potter* books are “deeply invested in teaching their protagonists (and through them, their readers) how to confront, eradicate, and ameliorate racism through its depiction of the racism that underlies Voldemort’s campaign against ‘Mudbloods’ (a term which will be explained in further sections)” (p, 76). Perhaps there really is more to this series than I thought.

This paper will argue that the *Harry Potter* book series can be used as a text to both identify and question instances of structural racism, while simultaneously teaching distinct antiracist practices. To accomplish this, I will identify examples throughout the series which demonstrate how the *Harry Potter* books recreate dominant notions of racism, specifically looking at social hierarchies, racial categorization, and the subsequent discrimination against magical and non-magical beings who are designated to be of a lesser, ‘*other*’ status by those in the dominant position. I will link these examples to current research which build on the themes of dominance and white supremacy (Gillborn, 2006; Leonardo, 2004) and race as a social construction (Lichtenberg, 1992; Lewis, 2003). Following this, using examples from the series, I will establish how the attitudes and behaviors of the specific characters of Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and Albus Dumbledore work to counteract the previously introduced racist narratives. Together, Harry, Hermione and Dumbledore point out the problems in the wizarding world’s racist politics and ideologies and strive to attain equality for all beings, regardless of magical capabilities. To conclude, using both my own analysis, as well as Horne’s (2010) work on the question of race in *Harry Potter*, I will summarize my arguments demonstrating why this book series can be used as a text to teach antiracism. To begin, I first introduce the idea of racism and discuss how it is represented in *Harry Potter*.

Magic is Might: Instances of Racism in *Harry Potter*

This section will look at examples of racial categorization and discrimination against all magical and non-magical beings who are deemed to be inferior to the dominant “pureblood” wizards, particularly enacted by Lord Voldemort and his followers. However, before jumping into how racism is represented in the book series *Harry Potter*, I will begin with a brief section discussing the possible definitions of and terminology surrounding racism. Firstly, let me begin by explaining what I mean by ‘definitions of racism’, as defining racism could be the work of a thesis all on its own. Racism, like culture or identity, although seemingly permanent, is actually quite fluid, and therefore near impossible to truly define. Frankenberg (1992) identifies racism as a system of differentiation based on one group’s experiences of difference, opposition and/or threat from another group in relation to one’s race. Hughey et al. (2015) define racism as “the practice of treating people differently based on their membership in a racial group, however defined” (p. 1475). Lichtenberg (1992) moves away from the idea of racism as occurring in the heads of individuals but argues rather that it is the systems in place in public institutions and practices that create and perpetuate racial exclusion and inequality. In this way, racism is a social structure, rather than a singular event (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). Events generally have a definable beginning, middle and end, while racist structures exist everywhere, are learned (knowingly or unknowingly), and can give licence to certain types of racist behaviours. All this being said, one idea that seems to hold true is that racism is about exclusions, which are produced and reproduced by the acts and sentiments of people. Racism shapes everyday lives, holding certain groups in dominant positions and other groups in submissive positions (Leonardo, 2004), based on the arbitrary determination of the superiority of one ‘race’ over another. This statement is further reflected in the hierarchical division of the social class system in the *Harry Potter* series. The following section will introduce examples of racism in *Harry Potter*, building on the argument that the series can be used to identify and question representations of larger instances of racism in the world.

Racism can be seen in the hierarchy of “races” within the wizarding world. I say “races” because instead of integrating the themes of racism and discrimination using the traditional concept of “race” or ethnicity, Rowling accomplishes this by creating a multi-layered world of magical/non-magical beings and creatures (Minteer, 2016), with distinctions largely based on one’s “blood status”. Walters (2015) argues that “more so than any other theme, the theme of keeping “pureblood” wizards in a place of power is central to the plot of the *Harry Potter* series” (p. 5). As taken from Walters (2015), a brief outline of the five race divisions in *Harry Potter* is as follows:

1. Muggles (non-magical people)
2. Muggle-borns (witches/wizards with magical abilities but non-magical parents)
3. Half-bloods (witches/wizards who are not pure-blooded, but also not Muggle-born)
4. Purebloods (those with complete magical ancestry)
5. Squibs (a non-magical child with magical parents)

Walters (2015) also adds, “less acknowledged, but none the less important, are those concerns expressed by the other sentient beings, namely house elves, goblins, centaurs, and giants” (p. 5). It is this structural hierarchy of “races” that brings me to introduce the first example of racism in *Harry Potter*.

Through her own imagination, Rowling created the racial structures in the *Harry Potter* series. Perhaps it is because I am a long-time *Harry Potter* fan, but to me these racial divisions *make sense*. Why is this the case? To answer this question, I introduce the concept of discourse, which Hall (1997) describes as the language used to talk about or the knowledge created to understand a topic. Carver & Harrie (2017) would argue that Rowling capitalized on dominant racial discourse which is already present in society to make certain her narratives would be easily accessible to her audience. Rowling has represented the racism we see in the everyday structures of our own non-magical world in the fictional world of *Harry Potter*. At the top of this racial hierarchy are the “pureblood” wizards, the categorization of which Lord Voldemort views as superior to all other beings, and therefore the only one worthy of power.

Lord Voldemort (who ironically is of “half-blood” categorization, a fact which he frequently downplays throughout his dealings with the rest of the wizarding world) enacts racism through his desire for domination of “pureblood” wizards over all other beings in the *Harry Potter* world. This example of Voldemort’s plot to have “pureblood” wizards dominate all other categories of races can be compared to Leonardo’s (2004) arguments surrounding white privilege, white supremacy and white racial domination. People racialized as ‘white’ enjoy privileges largely because they themselves have created a system of domination under which they can thrive as a group (Leonardo, 2004). The same argument can be applied to “pureblood” wizards, led by Voldemort and his followers (the Death Eaters). “Purebloods” are at the top of the racial hierarchy in *Harry Potter*, meaning they are the dominant group, and anyone who falls outside of that categorization should be eliminated to complete the “purification” of the entire wizard species. Walters (2015) goes so far as to equate Lord Voldemort to Adolf Hitler and highlight the similar political and social maneuvers they each made to ensure the continued domination of their respective “race”.

In his campaign to eradicate all others but “pureblood” wizards, Lord Voldemort, his Death Eaters, and all other of his followers, enact racist behaviors towards those whom they deem to be inferior to them. To maintain their dominance, these “pureblood elitists” must enact and re-enact their supremacy constantly. Lewis (2003) argues that racialization, or the process of making race, is a continuous process which “involves questions of who belongs where, what categories mean, and what effects they have on people’s life chances and opportunities” (p. 285). In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), Voldemort required all Muggle-born wizards to prove their magical lineage, and those who could not provide adequate evidence as to the origins of their magical capabilities were forcibly removed from their families (a striking comparison to the removal of people of Jewish decent from their homes by the Nazis in World War II). Based on their negative view of all other “race” categories in *Harry* Potter, Lord Voldemort and his followers continually behave in discriminatory ways against members of these categories in order to assert their dominance. In another example, to assert his dominance over Ron’s sister, Ginny Weasley (who is a “pureblood” who associates with “half-bloods” and “Muggle-borns”, and for such reason is considered a “blood traitor” by some), Zabini Smith (also a “pureblood” and one of Lord Voldemort’s followers) states coldly: “I wouldn’t touch a filthy little blood traitor like her whatever she looked like” (*Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince,* p. 150). This is another example of how racial discrimination is used in the *Harry Potter* series to assert one group’s socially constructed dominance over another.

This section has looked at examples of racial categorization and discrimination against magical and non-magical beings who are deemed to be inferior to the dominant “pureblood” wizards, particularly enacted by Lord Voldemort and his followers. I have demonstrated how Lord Voldemort, as the leader of the “pureblood elitists”, and his followers, exercise their dominance through racist behaviors over members of all other, socially constructed races. Next, the following section will build on this foundational work and demonstrate with concrete examples from the books, how certain characters in the *Harry Potter* series work to dismantle these racist tendencies, furthering the argument for the use of *Harry Potter* as a text to teach antiracism.

*Harry Potter* as an Antiracist Text

*“It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities”* (Ablus Dumbledore).

This paper argues that the *Harry Potter* book series can be used as a text to both identify and question representations of racist structures in society. The previous section has examined instances of racist discrimination and the domination of a socially constructed “race” of “pureblood elitist” wizards over those who they consider to be inferior to them. What will follow will present the other side of my argument: that although there are instances of racism in *Harry Potter*, the series also presents the reader with a distinct antiracist narrative, as well. I will introduce examples from the *Harry Potter* series, particularly through the ideologies and behaviors of Harry Potter himself, as well as his best friend Hermione Granger and his headmaster and mentor Albus Dumbledore, which serve to counter the instances of racism and instead promote universal inclusion and acceptance of all magical and non-magical creatures. To begin, I will discuss what it is I mean by antiracism, and then proceed to explain how *Harry Potter* incorporates its principles into its stories.

Horne (2010) defines antiracism practices as centering on “forms of thought and/or practices that seek to confront, eradicate, and/or ameliorate racism” (p. 77). Since the end of the 20th and into the beginning of the 21st century, there has been an incredible push in British, Canadian, and American education to include practices and policies which emphasize learning about and celebrating other cultures (Horne, 2010). Specifically, students are being taught to develop empathy, generate cross-cultural understanding and solidarity and to think critically about and question how ‘dominant’ perspectives have come to be (Horne, 2010). Horne (2010) argues that part of this understanding stems from “the creation of positive racial images” (p. 78). Having said this, notions of antiracism have also become prevalent today, as such students are taking their critical thinking and questioning into the world with them. Adults who, like me, grew up with *Harry Potter*, are realizing that there is more going on here than spells and adventures. As previously stated, Rowling uses “racial” structures and hierarchies in her creation of the wizarding world, and through such hierarchies “racial” discrimination occurs. However, it is also through these hierarchies that she is opposes discrimination, as well, offering an “ideological message challenging society’s discriminatory practices against those deemed to belong to the *other*” (Minteer, 2016, p. 1).

I have explained in detail how Rowling uses representations of structural racism in the *Harry Potter* series, however she also employs antiracist practices through the interactions and behaviors of key characters in the books. My first example of *Harry Potter’s* antiracist narrative lies with Harry Potter himself. Throughout the entire series, Harry undergoes intense growth and transformation as a person, from a little boy to a grown-up wizard, charged with saving the entire wizarding race from Lord Voldemort’s attempts at domination. Through intense moral struggle and while dealing with incredibly challenging situations, Harry remains a beacon of hope and an example of strong moral character. Although he could endorse the dominant racial hierarchy, Harry continuously denies the preconceived stereotyping of wizards from specific racial categories in which many of his classmates and some of his teachers believe. An example of Harry’s denial of racial stereotyping can be seen in his interactions with one of his teachers, Professor Slughorn, in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. In this scene, Slughorn is remembering Harry’s mother, Lily, who he had taught at Hogwarts back when she was a student. He muses, “Your mother was Muggle-born, of course. Couldn’t believe it when I found out. Thought she must have been pureblood, she was so good,” to which Harry replies “One of my best friends is Muggle-born […] and she’s the best in our year” (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince,* p. 70). This interaction demonstrates how some people, such as Professor Slughorn, fall prey to racial stereotyping of all other wizards than “purebloods” as inferior, and how Harry’s behavior, particularly by pointing out Slughorn’s prejudice, works to counteract structural racism in the world.

A second example of how *Harry Potter* works as a text to introduce antiracist teachings to its readers is seen in the behaviors of Harry’s best friend, Hermione Granger. Hermione is always working. Whether it be on an essay on the origins of Werewolves, or on brewing a Polyjuice potion, she makes a plan and executes it following the principles of logic. Hermione is also a Muggle-born wizard, effectively placing her in a submissive position in relation to the dominant classification of “pureblood” wizards. Stanley (2014) writes that “all antiracisms begin with the resistance of the racialized and the excluded. This resistance is what ultimately changes racism” (p. 6). Coming from her position of disadvantage, Hermione is a huge proponent of equality, a characteristic which can be seen in her campaign to free all House-Elves in Hogwarts. To fuel this crusade, Hermione created the acronym S.P.E.W (‘Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare’), into which she attempted (with minimal success) to recruit more supporters to her cause. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), Hermione was appalled at the working conditions she discovered the House-Elves were forced into and wanted to do something about it. Hermione’s inclusive mentality and behaviors towards those constructed as members of the subordinate categories portrays her as an ally to those who have historically been discriminated against. As Horne (2010) argues, “cultural and/ or physical differences between races should be recognized and respected; that different does not mean unequal” (p. 78) Through her work to end House-Elf discrimination, Hermione is an example of hope to be followed in the pursuit of an antiracist world.

My final example of antiracism in the *Harry Potter* series comes from Albus Dumbledore, the beloved headmaster of Hogwarts School, and arguably the one wizard whom Lord Voldemort ever feared. In addition to his roles as head of the school and Harry’s mentor, Dumbledore spends much of his time trying to convince others of the problems and inconsistencies with the racist politics within the Ministry of Magic and thus the wizarding world (Walters, 2015). One of such instances occurs in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), when Dumbledore and Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, get into an argument surrounding Fudge’s perceived political prejudices. During this altercation, Dumbledore exclaims, “You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be!” (Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, p. 708). Here Dumbledore reinforces Horne’s (2010) argument that racism, and therefore antiracism, “lies not only in individuals, but also in the institutions that grant privileges and power to certain racial groups in a society and restrict other racial groups from the same” (p. 79). As the *Harry Potter* series develops, “so too do the themes of prejudice and inequality, and each successive book adds to and reveals the underlying racial ideologies that the protagonists find themselves in conflict with” (Walters, 2015, p. 1). However, through interactions such as the one with Cornelius Fudge, Dumbledore’s character offers a continual counternarrative to these themes of racism, advocating instead for the recognition and respect of all cultures and races. In one of his most noteworthy quotes, Dumbledore reminds us that “We must all face the choice between what is right and what is easy” (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*). In this case, although not always (never) easy, antiracism is right.

Conclusion

One of the most prevalent themes in the *Harry Potter* book series is racial prejudice and discrimination (Matkov, 2013). J.K. Rowling echoes the current ideologies of imposed hierarchies, bigotry, purity and domination through her structuring of and representation in the magical world of *Harry Potter*. However, and as Minteer (2016) argues, “Rowling’s desire to address the issues of race and otherness is an important step in overcoming systematic political and social discrimination still present in the world” (p. 1). Building on the work of current research in the field, this paper has argued that the *Harry Potter* book series can be used as a text to shine a light to instances of structural racism in the world, while simultaneously teaching distinct antiracism practices. I have presented arguments for and examples of racism in *Harry Potter*, comparing Lord Voldemort’s desire for “pureblood” domination to dominant themes of white supremacy today, as well as pointing out the discriminatory acts which Voldemort’s followers partake in to reassert their dominant position over the *other*. At the same time, I have also presented the other side of the argument, demonstrating how the behaviors and interactions of key characters in *Harry Potter* serve to present a distinct antiracist narrative, indicating that even in the darkest of times, there is always hope, and that the struggle for understanding and ending racism is always worth it.

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