



Problems encountered by students in learning the theme of racism in Richard Wright's Black boy

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Abstract

Racism is one of the themes explored in literary arts. Systematic investigations into the teaching of the theme of racism in English novels in senior secondary schools in Anambra State have been scarce. The aim of this study therefore is to investigate the teaching of the theme of racism in English novels in senior secondary schools in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State. The objective of the study was to identify the problems encountered by students in learning the theme of racism in Black Boy in senior secondary schools and to identify possible remedies to the constraints for effective teaching and learning of the theme of racism in Black Boy in senior secondary schools. The study adopts a descriptive survey design. Purposive sampling technique was used to select Richard Wright's Black Boy for the study. The instrument used for data collection was the questionnaire. The theoretical framework adopted for this study was McClelland theory of achievement and motivation. The study reveals that the unfamiliar background of the author constitutes a problem for 90% of the respondents, thereby making it difficult for both students and teachers to determine the setting, theme, and other things about the novel. The study concludes that the learners need proper understanding of the theme of racism to adjust properly in their environment. The paper recommends that the government should employ more English teachers, especially at the senior secondary level.

1. Introduction

The world is populated by different races of human beings who are endowed with the capability to communicate with one another in one form of language or the other. It is the systematic use of language that remarkably sets human beings apart from other animals.

Literature is life, and it mirrors the society. Literary artists use the various elements of literature, such as setting, subject matter, theme, plot, character, and characterization, language, style, and so on, to create their literary works of art. Literature is classified into three major genres, such as prose, drama, and poetry, which are taught in various schools. The novel is the most notable sub-genre of prose. Novel is a straightforward piece of writing that involves a long chain of narratives and events arranged in a rather patterned, well planned in chronological manner towards a logical and desired end (Asika, 2015). Different themes are used by the author to bring out the overall idea or subject matter in his/her novel. The word theme denotes the central idea of fictional works such as novels, plays, poems or short stories

Wright's Black Boy is one of the novels taught in secondary schools. Secondary schools in Ihiala Local Government area of Anambra state are not left out. The theme of racism in Black Boy is one of the themes of novels being taught in secondary schools in Ihiala Local Government Area. Ihiala Local Government Area is made up of ten communities, namely, Okija, Ihiala, Uli, Azia, Amorka, Mbosei, Orsumoghu, Ubuluisiuzo, Lilu, Iseke.

Some researchers like Dennis (2015), Obika (2016) and Olushola (2017) have carried out researches on racism focusing their attention on different perspectives but none has carried out a study on teaching the theme of racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in senior secondary schools in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State. This necessitated the present study on effective teaching and learning of the theme of racism to take place in the schools in the area.

Despite the continued wave of enthusiasm for the promotion and development of English literature, there still appear to be causes of disillusionment. The teaching and learning of the theme of racism in *Black Boy* which is an aspect of English literature is still apparently beset with drawbacks in senior secondary schools in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State.

It is therefore necessary to investigate, and ascertain the nature and magnitude of the problems, hence the study of teaching the theme of racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in senior secondary schools in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State is the major concern of the research.

The scope of the study is "Teaching the theme of racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in senior secondary schools in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State." The study is limited to one hundred SS2 students and ten English Language teachers randomly selected from secondary schools within the communities that make up Ihiala Local Government Area. The selected schools include Okija Grammar School, Okija; Abbot Boys' Secondary School, Ihiala; St. Anthony's Secondary School, Azia; St. Augustine's Secondary School, Mbosi; and Community Secondary School, Iseke.

The aim of the study is to investigate the teaching of the theme of racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in senior secondary schools. The main objective of the study is to identify the problems encountered by students in learning the theme of racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in senior secondary schools.

The present study seeks to answer the question of what problems are encountered by students in learning the theme of racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in senior secondary schools. In the first place, the study will benefit learners through reading of the text to have better understanding of the theme of racism. This is because given enough time and opportunity, every learner is a potential achiever. When the teacher uses the correct method in teaching the theme of racism to students, they will understand the concept of racism better and also know that literature does not fall from Heaven but from the experiences within the environment.

They will understand that literature is a mirror of life and mirror of the society and they will be encouraged to use their own personal experiences and the experiences of others and other happenings in the society to create their own novel or literary art. Again, the outcome of the research will expose the students to the attitude of the author, Richard Wright to life, considering his background, the students will understand that anybody that is focused in life will surely achieve, his heart desire.

Racism is the belief in the superiority of one race over another. It may also include prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against other people because they are of different race or ethnicity, or the belief that members of different races or ethnicities should be treated differently. Modern variants of racism are often based in social perception of biological differences between people. These views can take the form of social actions, practices or beliefs, or political systems in which different races are ranked as inherently superior or inferior to each other, based on presumed shared inheritable traits, abilities or qualities.

Wilson, (1999) sees racism as "an ideology of racial domination" in which the presumed biological or cultural superiority of one or more racial groups is used to justify or prescribe the inferior treatment or social position(s) of other racial groups. Through the process of racialization, perceived patterns of physical difference such as skin colour or eye shape are used to differentiate groups of people, thereby constituting them as 'races'; racialization becomes racism when it involves the hierarchical and socially consequential valuation of racial groups. Racism is analytically distinct from racial discrimination and racial inequality. Racial discrimination concerns the unequal treatment of races, whereas racial inequality concerns unequal outcomes (in income, education; health, etc.). While racism is often implicated in both processes, contemporary racial inequalities and

forms of discrimination are not always the immediate result of contemporary racism (Pager Shepherd, 2008). The sociology of racism investigates the relationships between these three phenomena, asking when, how, why, and to what extent they reproduce, one another. In the post-Civil Rights era, with (overt) racism now widely condemned, one challenge for social scientists is to conceptualize and measure its more subtle and diffuse manifestations and lasting effects.

Racism cannot be defined without first defining race. Arhong, a social scientist is of the opinion that 'race' is generally understood as a social construct. Although biologically meaningless when applied to humans' physical differences such as in colour have no natural association with group differences in ability or behaviour race, nevertheless has tremendous significance in structuring social reality. Indeed, historical variation in the definition and use of the term provides a case in point. The term race was first used to describe peoples and societies in the way we now understand ethnicity or national identity. Later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Europeans encountered non-European civilizations, Enlightenment scientists and philosophers gave race a biological meaning.

They applied the term to plants, animals, and humans as a taxonomic sub classification within species! As such, race became understood as a biological, or natural, categorization system of the human species. As Western colonialism and slavery expanded; the concept was used to justify and prescribe exploitation, domination, and violence against peoples racialized as non-white. Today, race often maintains its 'natural' connotation in folk understandings; yet, the scientific consensus is that race does not exist as a biological category among humans - genetic variation is far greater within than between racial groups, common phenotypic markers exist on a continuum, not as discrete categories, and the use and significance of these markers varies across time, place, and even within the same individual (Fiske, 2010).

For most social scientists, 'race' is distinct from 'ethnicity'. A major distinction is the assumption of a biological basis in the case of race. Races are distinguished by perceived physical characteristics, which are thought to be fixed, whereas ethnicities are defined by perceived common ancestry, history, and cultural practices, which are seen as more fluid and self-asserted rather than assigned by others (Cornell and Hartmann, 2006). Thus, Asian is usually considered a 'race', whereas Tibetans and Bengalis are considered ethnicities. Although ethnicity and nationality often overlap, a nationality, such as American, can contain many ethnic groups (e.g., Italian-Americans, Arab-Americans). Yet, all three categories race, ethnicity, and nationality are socially constructed, and, as such, groups once considered ethnicities have come to be seen as races and vice versa. Moreover, some groups who are now taken for granted as 'white', such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews, were once excluded from this racial category.

Dennis (2015) has a study on "Sociology of Racism". The study traces the relationship between racism, racial discrimination and racial inequality. The paper posits that although some social scientists decry the conceptual broadening, most agree that a multivalent approach to the study of racism is of social importance and analytically useful for understanding the persistence of racial inequality in a purportedly post-racial society. The paper concludes that rather than simply studying overt categorical hostility of explicitly, racist laws and their effects, some sociologists have developed more nuanced understanding of what racism means, how it operates, and how it relates to racial inequality. The study is related to the present one because they are on racism. They differ because the present work is on teaching the theme of Racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in senior secondary schools in Ihiala. This article contests the contention that sociology lacks a sound theoretical approach to the study of race and racism, instead arguing that a comprehensive and critical sociological theory of race and racism exists. This article outlines this theory of race and racism, drawing from the work of key scholars in and around the field. This consideration of the state of race theory in sociology leads to four contentions regarding what a critical and comprehensive theory of race and racism should do.

Obika (2017) studied "Racism: Experiences encountered by academics working within British Universities." Through a close engagement with the empirical/material, this paper analyses the effects of the structural and systemic nature of racism as experienced by my respondents. The account is focused around three key themes including micro aggressions and institutional racism, caching, promotion and support. The findings of this paper have illustrated that there is limited

support and mentoring available for academics of colour/difference which works to exclude them from the system. The paper concludes that to understand the root causes of the persistent position of disadvantage experienced by academics of colour difference, a conceptual dialogue, is required around institutional racism, Eurocentric knowledge production, and the impact of structures of whiteness.

Olushola (2017) has a study on "Racism: Origin and theory". The paper is a review of the theoretical development of the concept of racism. The paper focuses that the declining significance of race, symbolic racism, colour-blind racism, and unconscious racism missed the structural regressions brought on by the southern strategy to mask indirect and covert ways to continue racial expression. As a result, the new Jim Crow was missed in race relations since the 80s. A reconsideration of the theory of racism calls for a strategic approach to the relations research. The paper concludes that there are fundamental questions about racism explained by the theory of racism. The finding of the study is that since 1981, the theory has developed as an alternative to the theory of racism that can anticipate and accurately identify changes in White racial attitudes and behaviours as the outcome of intentional human agency, the study is related to the present one because they are on various perspectives of racism. They differ because the present work is on teaching the theme of Racism in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in senior secondary schools in Ihiala.

The theoretical framework for this study is McClelland theory of achievement and motivation. Professor David McClelland of the famous Harvard University was of the view that human beings are naturally moved to achieve. He and his colleagues propounded the theory of achievement motivation in 1960. Through research on human motivation, McClelland came to the view that there were three motives for individuals with high need for power. The motives for such people are power, affiliation and achievement.

McClelland points out that regardless of our age, sex, race or culture, all of us possess one of these needs and are driven by it. This theory is also known as the Acquired needs as McClelland put forth that the specific needs of an individual are acquired and shaped over time through the experiences he has had in life.

McClelland noted that there are three people that love affluence and social recognition. McClelland observed that most of such people have the need for power. For such individuals, then, there is the need to strive for excellence and success in their fields of endeavour. This theory can be considered an extension to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. For McClelland, every individual has these three types of motivational needs irrespective of their demography, culture or wealth. These motivation types are driven from real life experiences and the views of their ethos.

The need for achievement as the name itself suggests is the urge to achieve something in what you do. It is the need that drives a person to work and even struggle for the objective that he wants to achieve. People who possess high achievement needs are people who always work to excel by particularly avoiding low reward, low risk situations and difficult to achieve high risk situations.

The need for power is the desire within a person to hold control and authority over another person and influence and change their decision in accordance with his own needs or desires. The need to enhance their self-esteem and reputation drives these people and they desire their views and ideas to be accepted and implemented over the views and ideas of others. The individuals motivated by needs for power have a desire to control and influence others.

The need for affiliation is the urge of a person to have interpersonal and social relationships with others or a particular set of people. They seek to work in groups by creating inertly and lasting relationships and has the urge to be liked by others. They tend to like collaborating with others to competing with them and usually avoid high risk situations and uncertainty.

This theory is relevant to the study because given the life and background of Richard Wright, in his effort in writing his novel *Black Boy*. The need for power, achievement and affiliation is the motivating force behind his creativity in his novel. By studying racism in *Black Boy*, the students will be motivated to learn how to achieve their own needs (Ezejiegwu, Chukwura & Mokuwe, 2012).

2. Method

The research design for this study is descriptive survey, According to Nworgu (2015), descriptive survey are those studies that aim at collecting data on, and describing in a systematic manner, the characteristics, features or facts about a given population. These studies are only interested in describing certain variables in relation to the population. In this study, descriptive survey was used to carry out a study about the teaching of racism in Richard Wright's Black Boy in senior secondary schools in Ihiala Local Government Area.

The study was carried out in senior secondary schools in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State. The local government is made up of ten towns. The ten towns are :Okija, Ihiala, Azia, Mbosi, Uli, Iseke, Amorka, Orsumoghu, Ubuluisiuzor and Lilu. The secondary schools chosen from each of the ten communities are :Okija Grammar School, Okija, Abbot Boy's Secondary School, Ihiala, St. Anthony's Secondary School, Azia, St. Augustine's Secondary School, Mbosi and Community Secondary School, Iseke

The researcher administered 100 questionnaire to 100 students in the schools under study. 10 questionnaires were equally administered to 10 teachers in the schools and all were returned representing 100%.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings on the problems encountered by students in learning the theme of racism in Richard Wright's Black Boy in senior secondary schools. The analysis is organized into four main areas. Table 1 presents the percentage of teachers who use resource materials in teaching the theme of racism in Black Boy. Table 2 shows the methods used by teachers in teaching the theme of racism in senior secondary schools. Table 3 presents the number and percentage of how often students study English novels, particularly with reference to the theme of racism. Meanwhile, Table 4 presents students' opinions on the factors that make it difficult for them to understand the theme of racism in Black Boy. These tables provide a clearer explanation of the instructional, methodological, and learning-related challenges affecting students' understanding of the novel.

Table 1. Percentage of Teachers Who Use Resource Materials in Teaching the Theme of Racism in Black Boy

Resources Material	Remarks	Number of Teachers	Percentage of Resources Materials
Radio sets	-	60%	Highest
Tape recorder	-	20%	None of the teachers uses resource materials
Video tapes	-	10%	
Film stripes	-	10%	
Projectors	-	-	
None	10	100%	

Table 2. Methods of Teaching the Theme of Racism in Senior Secondary Schools

Teaching Method	Remarks	Number of Teachers	Percentage of usage
Reading the text in class	7	70%	Highest
Discussion	-	-	
Written works	2	20%	
Dramatization	-	-	
Story telling	1	10%	
Memorization	-	-	
Loaded question	-	-	

Table 3. Number and Percentage of How Often Students Study English Novels with Particular Reference to the Theme of Racism

Resources Material	Remarks	Number of Teachers	Percentage of Resources Materials
Once a week	8	80%	Highest
Twice a week	2	20%	
Once a term	-	-	
Twice in a term	-	-	
Once a month	-	-	
Never	10	100%	

Table 3 reveals that 80% of the respondents agreed that they study English novels with particular reference to the theme of racism once in a week. This constitutes week. This constitutes a problem hence the number of times the students were taught about the theme of racism determines their experience in the course.

Table 4. Number and Percentage of the Student’s Opinion on What Constitutes Difficulties for Easy Understanding the Theme of Racism in Black Boy

Responses	Number of Teachers	Percentage of Teachers	Remarks
Difficulty in understanding the settings	30	30%	Highest
Difficulty in understanding the idea being expressed	20	20%	
Topic not well taught by the teachers	25	25%	
Difficulty in understanding the language	25	25%	
Total	100	100%	

Table 4 shows that difficulty in understanding the setting of the text constitutes a problem for 30% of the students, while difficulty in understanding the idea expressed by the author constitutes a problem for 20% of the students. In addition, the topic not being well taught by the teacher constitutes a problem for 25% of the students, and difficulty in understanding the language also constitutes a problem for 25% of the students.

In Table 1 which looked at the number and percentage of teachers on the use of resource materials in teaching theme of racism in Black Boy, it indicated that none of the teachers uses resource materials in teaching the theme of racism in Black Boy and this constitutes a very serious problem and makes both teaching and learning very difficult.

Table 2 sought to determine the methods employed by teachers in teaching the theme of racism in senior secondary schools. The findings showed that the highest method of teaching adopted by teachers in teaching the theme of racism in senior secondary schools is reading of the text in class (70%), written work has 20%, storytelling 10% while discussion, dramatization, memorization, guided question has 0% respectively.

Table 3 identified the frequency at which students study English novels with particular reference to the theme of racism. Here, the table showed that 80% of the respondents agreed that they study English novels with particular reference to the theme of racism once in a week. This constitutes a problem hence the number of times the students were taught about the theme of racism determines their experience in the course.

Table 4 looked at the number and percentage of students’ opinion on what constitutes to the difficulty in understanding the theme of racism in Black Boy. The table indicated that difficulty in understanding the setting of the text constitute problem to 30% of the students, difficulty in understanding the idea being expressed by the author constitutes problem to 20% of the students, topic not well taught by, the teacher constitutes problem to 25% of the students while difficulty in understanding the language also constitutes problem to 25% of the students.

4. Conclusion

The study shows that students’ difficulties in learning the theme of racism in Richard Wright’s Black Boy are mainly caused by limited understanding of the novel’s setting, language, and ideas, as well as inadequate teaching methods and the lack of instructional resources in the classroom. The findings indicate that teachers mostly rely on reading the text in class, while methods such as discussion, dramatization, questioning, and the use of audiovisual materials are rarely applied, making the learning process less engaging and less effective. Therefore, students in secondary schools should be encouraged to read other English novels beyond the recommended texts so that they can broaden their literary understanding and improve their ability to interpret themes such as racism. Adequate time should also be allocated for the teaching and learning of English novels, while the government should employ more qualified Literature-in-English teachers, especially at the senior secondary school level, to reduce teachers’ workload and support effective teaching and learning. In addition, teachers should diversify their teaching methods by using dramatization, regular written assignments, effective questioning, and discussion-based approaches to make lessons more

interesting, meaningful, and stimulating, so that students can understand the real meaning and themes of novels rather than merely memorizing the texts.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors in this publication declare no conflict of interest regarding the title, data, location, and results of the research.

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Supplementary Materials

This study does not include any supplementary materials.

Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. AI were used only to improve readability and language under strict human oversight; no content, ideas, analyses, or conclusions were generated by AI.

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