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Talking to Children About Race

The Importance of Inviting Difficult Conversations

Recently, preparing to purchase holiday gifts for her teacher, I asked my daughter if she had any interest in buying children's literature for her teacher's classroom library. "I noticed," I told her, "that your teacher doesn't have many books with black protagonists or bilingual characters. I have ideas for new books we could give her." My daughter frowned and gently pleaded with me, "You're right, but *please*, Mom. Not now. If you want to do that at the end of the year, that's fine. But not now." When I asked her why she would feel more comfortable giving books later, she indicated she did not know her teacher's stance on race. "We haven't really talked about it," she said, "and you just don't know about some people and how they will react." Although her teacher had never done anything overtly racist, the *absence* of doing or saying something inclusive had, in fact, demonstrated to my daughter that the teacher *could* be racist. According to Tatum's (1997) definition of racism, described later in this article, my daughter probably would be correct. I then wondered about my child's reluctance to challenge the status quo. Was even *she* unwilling to bring up race? In her eyes, school is not an "okay" place to bring up such issues. Perhaps, as a white child, such issues do not easily occur to her, either.

The hard questions this situation evoked prompted this exploration of why white teachers and parents tend to be reluctant to talk to children about race and racism, why white parents and teachers should overcome their resistance to doing so, and what potential models might help open such conversations. I am a white woman, mother, and teacher, and I send this appeal to fellow teachers *and* parents of young children to join the work long conducted by teachers and parents of color. Many black families report holding explicit discussions with their children about race, privilege, discrimination, and relationships between members of different ethnic groups (Hughes & Chen, 1997; Phinney & Chavira, 1995). Little research evidence of a parallel ethnic socialization process for white children exists.

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**WHY DON'T WHITE ADULTS TALK TO THEIR CHILDREN
(AND STUDENTS) ABOUT RACE MORE FREQUENTLY THAN THEY DO?**
Researchers suggest many white teachers have a hard time talking with their children or one another about issues of race (e.g., Copenhaver, 2000; Glazier, 2003; Willis, 1995, 2003). What makes issues of race so difficult for some adults—particularly whites and particularly in mixed-ethnicity settings—to discuss, even with their own children? It is difficult to analyze why white adults often fail to talk to children about race without analyzing the factors in their adult lives that reinforce this silence.

The Subject Does Not Come Up

“Most whites,” David Shipler (1997) notes, “rarely think about race. If you are black in America, however, the chances are that you think about race every single day” (p. 447). It is not on the radar of many white parents and teachers because whiteness is so rarely scrutinized. That is, those who live with daily privilege often find difficulty recognizing and acknowledging its presence in their daily lives. Peggy McIntosh (1989) identified the invisibility of white privilege in the lives of white men and women—and, I argue, children—and little has changed in this regard. In my research (Copenhaver, 2000, 2001a), I noted this trend among primary grade children; the process of silencing begins early.

We Lack Sound Understandings of What Race Really Means

Definitions of race evade us. We know that it does *not* mean “biology”; biological definitions of race have been rejected by the American Anthropological Association (1998) and by approximately 80 percent of cultural anthropologists, who hold that the identification of “separate and homogeneous races” is impossible (Lieberman & Kirk, 2004, p. 139).

If race is not biological, does its lack of biological validity exempt us from complex discussions of it or efforts to ameliorate the everyday problems it causes? If we live in “homogeneous” white communities, should we avoid “stirring things up”? The response, of course, is “no.” As Weis, Fine, Weesen, and Wong (2000) explain, “Race is a social construction . . . but ‘race’ in a racist society bears profound consequences for daily life, identity, social movements, and the ways in which most groups *other*” (p. 40, cited in Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003, p. 2). Race continues to influence educational expectations and life opportunities (Fine & Weis, 1998; Hallinan, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Larson, 2003; Stipek, 2004; Tettegah, 1996). Whites are affected by racism; they (we) just may not be conscious of how it shapes their (our) lives.

The temptation among many well-meaning whites to resist acknowledging the importance or even the presence of race only reinforces blindness to the harmful effects of racism. This “colorblind” response (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Helms, 1992), a liberal attempt to foster equity, indirectly acknowledges the power socially constructed race carries and presumes something worthy of being “overlooked” exists. As Garcia (1999) notes, “By acting ‘as if’ we do not see color, we reinforce the distance between us, rather than the similarity” (p. 308).

Hiding Behind the Meritocratic Myth

There continues, among many whites, a belief in a meritocratic society, which can lead to a risky com-

placency about the achievements of Civil Rights era heroes—as if the hard work of overcoming racism has been largely accomplished. These beliefs deemphasize one’s own racial group membership and, according to psychologist Beverly Tatum (1992), “may allow the individual to think that race has not been or will not be a relevant factor in one’s own achievement” (p. 10). Research with white preservice teachers indicates the meritocratic myth continues to be evident as a symptom of white privilege denial (Burant & McClure, 2004/05; McIntyre, 2002) and may prevent many white teachers from acknowledging racism or discussing it.

Fear

Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, many white people find conversations about race difficult because they fear saying something unexpected or unseemly. Avoidance is the easiest way to ensure a person will not say something likely to be taken the “wrong way” by a listener. Open conversations about race, especially in multi-ethnic adult peer groups, risk tapping into our accumulated experiences. Therefore, when a white person makes a comment he or she believes innocent or complimentary, that comment (e.g., “You look great today; you’re always so well-dressed!”) likely will be interpreted on the basis of the listener’s prior history rather than the speaker’s conscious intent. Perhaps a speaker is conveying an attitude that is too familiar, dismissive, or racist for the listener to tolerate or has used terms associated with racist intent—even if the speaker is unaware of the racist history of the terminology—and alienated a friend. Perhaps he has used a first name when such familiarity is not yet appropriate in the eyes of an acquaintance.

Any of these acts, in the right context, could be perceived as (and be) racist. If confronted about the discomfort their remarks prompt, whites are less likely to engage in similar conversations again and may withdraw from participation (Park, DiAngelo, Nguyen, 2004; Willis, 2003). The demand on members of oppressed groups is even weightier. Shipler (1997) quotes Bruce King as saying, “People who are oppressed have to put so much energy into rethinking, into going back over situations over and over . . . again, always hoping that a comment maybe wasn’t meant the way it sounded. Did they really mean that? What did they mean? Why am I angry right now if they didn’t mean it?” (pp. 448-449).

We can become paralyzed by these acts of second-guessing. The demands, emotional and intellectual, of discourse about race, and across races, can effectively silence us. Nieto (interviewed by Aaronsohn, 2000) describes the process, particularly for teachers, as walking on eggshells and explains, “It just scares me to think that so many topics are off limits because if they’re off

limits, how can we ever grow?" (p. 6). Ladson-Billings (2000), in her urgent appeals for educators to provide African American children high-quality education experiences, identifies the reification of whiteness and inadequate teacher preparation as some of the obstacles to educational equity for children who have been "othered." The real consequences of racism—in individual behaviors and institutional structures—affect us daily, but the desire to avoid conflict, controversy, or offense often adds to the reluctance of white teachers and parents to openly confront these issues with their children.

Conquering racism requires the concerted, conscious, continuous efforts of many. Anti-racist work can be accomplished only through the combined efforts of both the oppressed and the privileged, by willingly engaging in conversations and inquiries that present complexity and difficulty, and by reflecting on the dire consequences of avoidance behaviors. If our children feel empowered by participating in discussions of race and racism, perhaps they will be less paralyzed than we; perhaps, by breaking the silence, we can enable social action. Simply talking with our children about race surely will be insufficient for eradicating racism (Blinder, 2004), but this mediation provides a step often missing from the ethnic socialization of white children and the school experiences of children of color, and it may provide a means by which institutionalized racism becomes visible to those who otherwise overlook it.

WHAT IS RACISM?

Racism is a system of advantage based on race. Beverly Tatum (1997) says

Because racism is so ingrained in the fabric of American institutions, it is easily self-perpetuating. All that is required to maintain it is business as usual. I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. (p. 11)

When white people do not disrupt unfair systems of privilege, they are—willingly or unwillingly—*on* the moving sidewalk, receiving white privilege and inadvertently enabling racism. Certainly, not everyone agrees with Tatum's definition of racism, for it runs counter to popular ideas about racism being perpetrated by individuals with malicious intentions. It also makes racism an affliction exclusively of whites, since whites are the recipients of systematic race privilege in the United States. Her definition, moving racism from the *individual* sphere and into the *institutional* sphere, places responsibility on the shoulders of those who benefit, *institutionally*, from this discrimination.

Perhaps this is why Nieto (2003) recently issued a specific call for white teachers and researchers to make

a concerted effort to conduct research on racism:

The responsibility for exposing and confronting racism has for too long been on the shoulders of African Americans and other people of color. It is time to share the burden, and it is up to teachers and researchers of all backgrounds to do so. If this is to happen, White educators need to make the problem of racism *their* problem to solve. This means nothing less than directly engaging in difficult conversations and actions that seek to address racism. (p. 203)

CHILDREN'S RACE NEGOTIATIONS IN ACTION

Open discussions of race are conspicuously absent from our faculty lounges and our classrooms, especially in the primary grades (Copenhaver, 2001a; Polite & Saenger, 2003). Although children explore issues of race in the "unofficial worlds" of school—at their unsupervised interest-group tables, on the playground, in the lunchroom—adults can be amazingly resistant to seeing and hearing them.

In their ethnographic study of preschoolers, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) observed young children demonstrate understandings of the privilege that whiteness carries, making conscious attempts to manipulate the racial and ethnic labels imposed on them by others, hiding their conversations about race—and their discriminatory behaviors—from their adult caregivers, and defining who is and who is not "other" in their efforts to negotiate their own identities. When presented with observational transcripts clearly documenting children's race understandings, many teachers and parents considered their young children "confused" about race and ethnicity or claimed children were experimenting; they would not seriously acknowledge children's curious, authentic, and often painful negotiations of race. One of the many dire consequences of adult denial is that young children of color tend to bear the burdens of racism without acknowledgment and support from their caregivers. Van Ausdale and Feagin explain, "For children of color, particularly for African and African American children, notions of color, race, power, and white superiority were constant pressures [in the preschool]. Learning race and coping strategies were more a matter of survival than experimentation" (p. 181). For some children, the challenges of racism presented obstacles for them on a *daily* basis.

During my observations in primary grade classrooms, engaged in participant observation with young children, I have observed similar dynamics—an adult silence about race issues, combined with a strong enactment of racialized relations among young children. I will illustrate how my concerns have grown during my years as a literacy researcher and provide representative examples of the types of interactions that teachers often are unable to see and hear.

During a one-year intensive ethnographic study of children's responses to literature in a suburban multiage K-2 classroom, I used all-day, cross-space observations to note children's relationships outside the official classroom (Copenhaver, 1998). I discovered that, although children sat in heterogeneous groups during in-class work at assigned centers and writing tables, girls segregated themselves by race in ways unlike their male peers. Although boys played integrated "team" sports together at recess and often sat together with their recess playmates during "choice" times, girls racially segregated upon selecting seats at the carpet area during read-aloud, joining the lunch tables, choosing classmates to accompany them on errands, and playing during recess. Occasionally, I asked the girls about my observations. (Note: In the following transcripts, I use the terms and abbreviations "black" (B) and "white" (W) because these are the terms children used to racially self-identify, despite wide variation in actual ethnic identifications.)

During recess, I stand with two of the black girls:

Jeane: Why don't you play with white girls like Janene and Lesley? [Asking, not directing.]

Precious: I do, but they be tellin' me to go away. [Indicating that this rejection is a recurring event.]

Later, when I'm near the group of white girls playing, I ask them:

Jeane: Why don't I see you play with Kanisha (B), Kyra (B), or Precious?

Mandy (W): I don't know.

Later that week, I ask Kanisha about play friends:

Jeane: Why don't you play with Candice (W) and Amanda (W)?

Kanisha: They already have somebody to play with.



Photos courtesy of author.

I ask the same question of Amanda and Candice when they come up to see me and visit:

Amanda: Cause we have a club for me, Candice, and Mandy.

Although Precious and Kanisha articulated the exclusionary practices I witnessed, white girls in this study tended to provide vague answers with limited or no acknowledgement of their elitism. Kyra, for example, attempted to integrate Lesley's peer group on the playground daily, and the girls playing with Lesley consistently excluded her. Even if some of the children's responses above attempt to explain their interactions with *individuals* rather than members of a *group* identified by race, my witnessing of the consistent ways black girls were excluded from these groups suggests to me that white girls' refusal to engage Kyra, Kanisha, Precious, or Asha in their play related to more than the *individual* characteristics these girls possessed.

Segregation surfaced at lunchtime, too, as children sat at one, long, foldable lunch table reserved for their class. The division fold ran across the middle, separating one half of the children from the other. Children who packed lunches from home went directly to the table to be seated wherever they wished. Children who purchased free or reduced lunches moved through the lunch line and *then* were seated in the remaining seats. Each day, the white girls, nearly all of whom packed lunches, were seated at one end of the table by the time the black girls and I completed making our tray lunch purchases and entered the lunchroom.

At lunch, I became curious about how the girls decided to seat themselves and if they perceived the seating patterns I observed. I was also curious about the fact that when the black girls recited their lists of "best friends," they included many white classmates

who never played or sat with them. I asked the black girls, "Who do you sit with at lunch time?"

Kanisha: I sit with Precious and Asha, but sometime I sit by Dana (W).

Precious: No, sometime Dana sit by her. [Differentiating their "togetherness" as an act of proximity when Dana is at the table, on the other side of the fold, but not considered "with" Kanisha.]

On another day, as we left the lunch line, Precious and Asha had an angry disagreement. As Precious and I went to the table, with our trays, to sit down, Precious tried to sit as far from Asha as she could. This seating choice meant Precious would be sitting closer to Lesley and the black/white table fold. When Precious and I began to sit down, Lesley became upset and protested that Precious could not sit there. Precious stood, getting upset and crying. She looked over to Sandy (another white child). "Whaaat?!" Sandy asked. Precious sat down when I moved in between her and Lesley and seated myself in the contested chair, holding out another seat for Precious to join me and reassuring her it was okay, an interventionist decision with researcher ramifications beyond the scope of this article.

The recess exclusion became impossible to overlook. White girls secured one another as playmates and found ways to resist Kyra and her black peers' efforts to integrate the group. For example, one afternoon I observed Lesley tell Dana and Mandy, her white classmates, "Get ready, we're practicing the play." Lesley and Mandy earlier had spent part of Writing Workshop developing a skit based on a Lois Ehlert book. Kyra came over to where they rehearsed the skit, and Mandy told her, "Go away, we're doing a play here," but invited Sandy, another white girl, to participate. Much later in the recess period, Asha, Kyra, Misha, Kanisha, and Precious surrounded the practice and watched. Lesley yelled to her playmates, "Follow me," and all the white children followed her to a new practice location at the other side of the playground. It was somehow understood that the black children were not invited, and the black girls remained behind.

The children in this class played out variations on adult race relations even though they did not explicitly speak of race. No single example from my notes, in isolation, would be convincing of a pattern of behavior. However, episodes like these occurred daily during read-alouds on the playground, and during lunch and their exploration clubs. The teacher of these children expressed surprise at the exclusionary practices found outside official academic environments. She had long created opportunities for her students to work side-by-side in interracial groups and inclusive of children with exceptionalities, and the children did so fairly

harmoniously inside her classroom. Children engaged in writing workshops were seated in integrated groupings, and the teacher encouraged cross-race interactions when conferring with children and in explorations of children's literature with race themes. When children were left in charge of their playmates and seating arrangements, however, the white girls continually segregated and enacted daily discriminatory barriers to prevent their black female classmates from joining their play. I might be tempted to dismiss these findings as unique to this particular school or classroom if I had not encountered similar findings in other schools in other states and at other grade levels (e.g., Copenhaver, 2001a), including schools where the economic disparities between black and white students were less pronounced. I might be inclined to feign color-blindness and explain the girls' behaviors as more friendship-driven than race-oriented, but I believe this explanation would sadly overlook the reality of the role(s) race played in their friendship opportunities.

White children's reluctance to discuss race or racism can be considered symptomatic of their socialization into color-blindness, at least in adults' presence. More recently (Copenhaver-Johnson, Bowman, & Johnson, in review), I have been observing 1st-graders encounter a black Santa Claus in the picture book *The Night Before Christmas* (Rosales, 1996). Most, but not all, white children dismiss this black Santa, but they nearly never say that the reason behind their dismissal is because the Santa is black. "I have a confession to make," one white 1st-grader commented in a class I recently observed. "The real Santa is fat, so this [in the book] can't be the real Santa." The children dismiss Santa on the basis of his beard length, the fact that Rudolph does not appear with his other reindeer, and the incorrect style of buttons running down his suit. White children do not openly reject the Santa on the basis of his race or recognize it as a salient characteristic, although a few black children *do* challenge the character's authenticity on the basis of race. "There's no Black Santa," Julius, a black student, nonchalantly insisted. Shaina and Ilona, both black, noticed Santa was black right away. Ilona noted, "That don't look like Santa Claus." When her teacher asked her, "What do you mean?," Shaina jumped into the conversation, answering for Ilona. "That's the black people's Santa Claus, for us." Responses across four different observations with four different classes of 1st-graders in the past two years have revealed white children's similar, consistent efforts to "dance around" the issue of Santa's race—as if they do not see it, or cannot speak of it. When the remarks about Santa's fatness fade, the white children turn to Santa's beard length. "Santa Claus has a really long beard," Clinton, white, explains, "but he [the Santa in the book] doesn't, so *he's* [a white Santa figurine] real."

What prompts the children's responses? These children who inadvertently reinforce racist ideology—on the playground, in the lunchroom, reading about Santa—all speak reverently about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. They praise Ruby Bridges' courage for integrating William Franz Elementary in New Orleans, and they show contempt for the protesters who harassed and threatened Ruby on her way to school. Why, then, are the children's exclusionary racist tendencies so much in conflict with their "talk" about civil rights in the official classroom worlds?

I believe children's confusion (or inconsistency, at a minimum) results from the pervasive culture of silence. One of the few times adults in white children's lives consistently remember to talk to them about race is when they study black history. White children tend to associate fairness and equality with struggles encountered and won "back then," and do not apply these concepts consistently to what they do "right now." By contrast, the families of black children report that they discuss racial issues openly with their children (Copenhaver, 1998, 2001a; Hughes & Chen, 1997; Phinney & Chavira, 1995), and I have spoken with many black primary grade children who voluntarily describe specific cultural socialization practices (e.g., watching in-home videos about civil rights, Dr. King, and Malcolm X, and talking with family elders about black history). Like Precious and Kanisha, these children express their awareness of white peers' exclusionary behaviors and speak easily of race. Damon recalled, "When Jamie [sister], Mom, and Leon mom, they came down to visit from Cleveland. . . . Then we went to a restaurant, and then I said, 'There are so many white people.'" His comments, in the context of a free response to literature, show how his own race awareness seemed relevant to his response and natural to articulate. In another class, Julius recently refused to drink a sample of orange juice during a 1st-grade farming unit, explaining to his teacher that the poster illustration showed a white person picking the orange. His black classmate, Chantel, when drawing and coloring a picture of George Washington, renamed him "George Bush"—adding a brown skin tone and drawing in "a brain," a feature she suggested he "needs" and would acquire with brown skin. Sheyenne, a black child in a 3rd-grade class, quietly protested her white teacher's interpretation that Dr. King's dream of equality for all had been achieved and that their racially integrated school was evidence of this accomplishment.

These young African American children recognize race, talk about it, and occasionally enter their perspectives into "official" classroom conversations. Their white peers, however, often deny contemporary racism. When Thomas, a biracial 1st-grader, asks his class, "What if we was all friends in here, black people

and white people?" during a reading of *Martin's Big Words* (Rappaport, 2001), two of his white classmates protest, to his surprise, "We are!" When I read aloud *Malcolm X: A Fire Burning Brightly* (Myers, 2000) with a small group of 2nd-graders (Copenhaver, 2001a), Sheyenne asks, "What if there's only one white person here [at school], and that person was Kris?" I repeat the question back to her, "How *would* that change things, Sheyenne?" Kris, the white classmate, protests after Sheyenne answers, "Kris, her mom'd be like, 'You ain't going into school no more 'cause there's only blacks.'" Vicky, a white 1st-grader responding to *Martin's Big Words*, says, "You should be nice to them, whatever color they are," using markers of reciprocal distancing (Larson & Irvine, 1999) to distance herself from people of color while expressing the official "line" of her class; this sentiment, too, conflicted with the discriminatory practices and stereotypical beliefs her teachers and I observed her expressing during the year.

Children's behaviors toward one another are complicated by the reality that many children grow up in largely race-segregated neighborhoods, so the friendships they cultivate outside of school tend to be mirrored inside of school. Their lives are directly affected and shaped by the symptoms of racism. Comer (1989) speaks to the importance of averting racism and suggests we begin this work in early childhood; years of working with young children affirm for me that he is correct. The silence of white adults about race and racism does affect our children.

WHY DO WE NEED TO TALK TO OUR CHILDREN ABOUT RACE TODAY? HOW MIGHT OUR DISCUSSIONS SOUND?

We need to talk to our children because children notice the messages our silences send. When we fail to acknowledge race with them, we increase the probability that white children, especially, will recognize discussions of race as off-limits with adults, will infer that whiteness is normative, and will harbor stereotypical interpretations of the cultural differences they *do*, in fact, observe. Discussions of race also validate the perceptions that children of color hold and help disrupt the quiet discriminatory practices otherwise occurring without adult mediation.

Recognizing that silence reinforces to children the perception that discussions of race are taboo (Tatum, 1997), two white 1st-grade teachers, Joy Bowman and Angela Johnson, have worked to open conversational threads that move discussions of race and racism into their official classroom worlds. The teachers, firm believers in Ladson-Billings' (2000) notion that racism is a "learned behavior, and, as such, it can be unlearned" (p. 211), have successfully used several strategies to create supportive environments for their

urban, ethnically diverse students' explorations of race and racism. Their classrooms have helped me better understand empowering possibilities for teachers and young children. The following suggestions for opening dialogue result from our observations across the two years we have studied read-aloud in their classrooms. Although I feel certain other ways of fostering interaction among children exist, our work together has focused on fostering responsive read-aloud settings that open conversations about race and prevent the damaging silence.

Read Books That Deal Directly and Indirectly With Issues of Race and Racism

Joy and Angela were unsure, when we first began our work together two years ago, if 1st-graders could handle texts with explicit race themes. They felt, however, that reading these books could facilitate their students' future abilities to adopt multiple perspectives and talk openly about issues of contemporary racism they *already* had experienced. The teachers' confidence grew as children responded eagerly to the texts. Many of their peers remained skeptical, like the parents in Van Ausdale and Feagin's (2001) study. "At first," Joy reported in a recent interview, "I don't think [all of the] other teachers understood why we were reading books like *White Socks Only* (Coleman, 1996) or *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 1995) with our 1st-graders. They didn't think young children could even understand these books. But they did." "In fact," Angela added, "children were noticing subtleties in the themes that I hadn't even noticed. We too often underestimate what children can handle." Joy, for example, recognizing children's interest in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and at the request of her 1st-graders, decided to read *I've Seen the Promised Land* (Myers, 2004) to the children, even though this text is quite long. Instead of overlooking the text completely as an above-age read-aloud choice, she read the book just a few pages at a time. Angela shared excerpts and photographs from *Through My Eyes* (Bridges, 1999) after her students responded eagerly and curiously to *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. Several of their colleagues now regularly share race-related literature with their students.

To get acquainted with culturally conscious literature (Sims, 1982) and help ensure they were selecting texts by authors known for authenticity and sensitivity, both teachers enrolled in an advanced multicultural literature course at a local university, secured grant funding to supplement their classroom libraries with high-quality books reflecting race-oriented themes, and engaged in read-aloud practices that supported children's inquiry about race. Both teachers explained that the best African American children's literature was only infrequently found in book club flyers. They had

to actively seek it out themselves. Their efforts also helped them overcome their own limited experiences with cross-racial literature. Once the teachers secured a range of books from which they and their students could choose to read, children were invited to respond freely to the texts as they were read aloud.

Modify the Expectations and Participant Structures of Read-Aloud

Joy's and Angela's goals included helping students voice genuine responses to the literature and gain confidence entering even their most tentative wonderings into group conversations. Therefore, the teachers modified traditional read-aloud strategies to help children respond to books in ways that tapped their curiosities and wonderings about race. Angela said, "I have learned that it's more meaningful and the conversations are more relevant to their lives if you read fewer books but take more time with each one to really *hear* what they have to say."

In addition to taking more time with each book, the teachers adopted an interactive read-aloud style found to be suited to their students' discourse patterns (Copenhaver, 2001b). After reading aloud each page of the text, each teacher paused and waited for any children's responses, a method designed to elicit what Hickman (1992) has called "free response" to literature. This invitation permitted children to voice wonderings and respond *to each other* about those wonderings as they occurred to them. Sipe (2000) found that children voice most responses during, rather than after, read-alouds. The teachers believed they could capture students' in-the-moment questions and observations by making read-alouds highly interactive.

In order to help children listen to one another, the teachers relied on a student-student participant structure, rather than on an Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) participant structure (Mehan, 1979). This method allowed emergent conversations among children to develop more fully. The teachers believed it was important that children learn to converse directly with one another, particularly as they engaged in inquiry about race and racism, rather than having the teachers evaluate every student comment and steer the conversations. (The teachers *did* mediate conversations when they deemed it appropriate, often to request students' elaboration on responses.) Over time, Joy reported her growth in "stepping back and allowing children to direct the conversations. I actually listen differently now." An example of Joy's faith in children's ability to respond to one another occurred during a reading of *White Socks Only*, at the point in the story where the protagonist encounters the water fountain labeled "Whites Only," misunderstands the sign, removes her shoes to reveal white socks, and steps up to take a drink:

Tay (B): *She's gonna be in really big trouble.*

Joy: *Why, Tay?*

Tay: *Because the sign says "Whites Only."*

Tasha (W): *I think they mean white people only.*

Thomas (Bi): *I think the white people gonna think she's white 'cause she gots a white dress on.*

Brent (B): *It's gonna be for white people only.*

A racist man appears in the story to accost the girl for violating the whites-only restriction:

Brent: *It does have to be for white people only. I knew it. (quietly said)*

Tatiana (B): *He's mean! (referencing the racist man)*

Bethany (W): *It sounds like he's a big old bully.*

Brent: *That's not nice. Even if he's mean, we shouldn't talk like that.*

The teachers created read-aloud settings that were conducive to inquiry and conversation. In order to make these adaptations work in the context of read-aloud conversations about race, they also had to suspend an expectation that children's "comments and questions" about the book be immediately relevant and noticeably "on-topic." Both teachers mentioned the role of "on-topic-ness" in suppressing young children's responses. "Sometimes," explained Angela, "you don't understand the relevance [of a child's comment] immediately. Maybe you don't 'get it' then, but you get it later." The teachers presumed a logic guiding children's connections and questions and hoped to support children's confidence in asking questions.

In Joy's class, while reading *Martin's Big Words* (Rapaport, 2001), the children pondered the Montgomery bus boycotts in ways she had not expected:

Tasha (W): *What would happen if that [segregation] was with angels? Black and white angels?*

Thomas: *Like if God was black and Jesus was white.*

Amy (W): *Yes, what if Mary married a black?*

Thomas: *I think there's white angels and black angels, too.*

Brent: *If it was like this, black angels would be in one cloud and whites in another.*

This exchange allowed children to make comparisons to areas of life, namely faith and religion, that were important to them. They transformed the text—projecting racism into other settings and taking new perspectives on it. Although the temptation by many teachers would be to step into this conversation, we have found the student-led discussions—even as topics shift into "taboo" areas such as religion—lead to long-term explorations of ideas that children often pursue together. Children make similar comparisons to television programs, real-

life experiences, and film as they respond to stories. After considering the question of segregation in heaven, Brent imagined, aloud, that his mother would never allow him to ride a segregated bus, and other children reflected on how their own buses today transport both black and white students. Later, the class pondered the color of the devil, asserting that it would not be fair for him to be black, as some children had been told. Inquiry about race rarely comes neatly packaged and manageable; Joy and Angela have learned to become comfortable confronting the unexpected.

Take Children's Interests, Curiosities, and Questions Seriously and Provide Appropriate Resources

Both teachers initiated follow-up when children's interests became evident, and they took children's wonderings seriously. In Angela's class, children noticed and asked why their picture books about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. did not depict Dr. King's assassin—or many other white people, for that matter. In response to their questions, Angela brought to class several additional texts for student-generated research on the roles of white people in the Civil Rights movement and the circumstances surrounding Dr. King's assassination. Cross-race and cross-gender research groups emerged as children congregated together to make "big books" based on their findings, comparing the faces of white people painted in Faith Ringgold's (1998) *My Dream of Martin Luther King* to the photographs in Carol Greene's (1999) *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Man Who Changed Things*.

In Joy's classroom, children noticed that several of their books about the Civil Rights Movement included time lines and asked if they could make their own wall time line about Dr. King's life. In response to their interests, Joy provided children with the opportunity to write and illustrate a classroom time line based on their research, and children worked in cross-gender, cross-racial groupings in order to research text and illustrations for the time line (see photo on p. 14). When children uncovered more questions in this process, they wrote letters to Coretta Scott King.

One particularly successful effort, in 2004, occurred in response to students' strong interest in the book *White Socks Only* (Coleman, 1996). Children asked questions about the author's life experiences and wondered about the hidden meanings of the text, so the teachers spearheaded a project to raise funds in order to bring the book's author, Evelyn Coleman, to their school and to host a community fair for local families. For much of the year, teachers and children sold potato chips and chocolate bunnies to raise funds to bring Ms. Coleman to the community. At the community event, the teachers and other school personnel arranged

to provide families with free samples of high-quality multicultural literature, including many race-themed texts they had shared with students during the year. Black and white students of all grade levels eagerly met with Ms. Coleman to ask their questions.

Include Black Characters in a Range of Literature—Not Just Literature About Black History

It was also important to the teachers that the children become accustomed to seeing black characters in books—meeting characters in situations like ones the children were familiar with in contemporary life rather than exclusively in historical texts. Both Joy and Angela acquired and read books that not only spoke to situations in their students' lives but also featured black characters. For example, in *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998), a child examines her community, looking for signs of "something beautiful." In doing so, the child runs across a woman who appears to be homeless. Many children were familiar with homelessness and eviction from homes for being unable to pay rent. When their classes read *Visiting Day* (Woodson, 2002b), in which a black girl and her grandmother visit the girl's father in prison on "visiting day," a range of children—black and white—recalled visiting their own mothers, fathers, and uncles in jail or, as one child shared, "I never had one visiting day with my dad. He can't see nobody." *Our Gracie Aunt* (Woodson, 2002a), in which two children are taken into the protective custody of their aunt when their mother is unable to care for them, prompted the children to compare their own experiences staying home alone or encountering children's services. Black and white children both told their own celebratory "hair" stories in response to *I Love My Hair* (Tarpley, 1998) and their own "moving day" stories when they read *The Leaving Morning* (Johnson, 1992).

These books, set in contemporary times and portraying families and children having recognizable experiences, provided white children a chance to respond aesthetically to characters who were black and provided black children with black protagonists in literature *outside* of Black History Month studies. The resulting conversations about these types of books (in which the themes were not about race, yet the characters were black) provided a chance for children to realize the similarities of their positive *and* challenging experiences. Although the children didn't speak directly to racism issues, the books deepened their sense of community and built the trust critical to open conversations about race.

One measure of children's developing comfort engaging in dialogue about race was how easily white children began identifying books as having black characters. When reading *Be Boy Buzz* (hooks, 2002), several children observed that all the characters were

boys and "no girls!," but Gabe (W) asked, "Why is everybody brown?"

Joy: Say it one more time. Why is everybody round?

Gabe: No, why is everybody brown?

Joy: Oh—why is everybody brown?

Cory (W): They might be all black.

Charles (B): They might be all different colors.

Gabe: Maybe, maybe because the guy who made this book is brown?

Although the assumption that a book with all black characters must have been written by someone who is "brown" demonstrates a presumption of whiteness, Gabe's remark demonstrates the possibilities that arise once children actually have a chance to voice what they wonder. His assumption was discussed and compared to the reality of the author's and illustrator's identities. We have to talk before we can reconstruct our perspectives. Joy's and Angela's approaches, while still evolving, have enabled children to perceive school as a place where conversations about race are considered valid and important.

CONCLUSION

The unlearning of racism is unlikely to happen in the absence of a significant person (or people) in a child's life actively disrupting the definition of situation (Goffman, 1959) established and sustained by institutional racism. The earlier we can problematize the assumption of whiteness, the better.

Since we (collectively—a generalization I risk repeatedly making about white parents and teachers, although many white caregivers *are* engaged in this work) have often resisted the complex and painful examination of whiteness, and have, in this process, "other-ized" nonwhites, many white children experience a troublesome disequilibrium when they *do* hear information about race or are encouraged to talk about it. Black families, realizing the discrepancies between home and society, often prepare their children for how race is enacted outside the home (Clark, 1983; Hughes & Chen, 1997). White children whose families and teachers do not want to "call children's attention" to issues of race are therefore not preparing children for existence in a multiethnic society (in which these children will receive unearned privilege); are not preparing them to make sense of the media images they will encounter; and are not helping them recognize, name, and disrupt the racism present in their childhood peer settings.

Our children's youth does not insulate them. One 1st-grader participating in my current study reports his father's hanging of a "Whites Only" sign at his home. While I do not interpret his comment as necessarily reflective of a one-to-one correspondence with the literal

world (Dyson, 2003; Oyler & Barry, 1996), his insight, even *if* an imaginary construction, demonstrates his awareness of the parental racism his teachers have noted. His voicing of this observation allows him the chance to reflect on something he otherwise might have taken for granted or assumed he would be unable to discuss openly with adults. It allows his teachers the chance to better understand what he does say and respond sensitively and thoughtfully to him.

Talking with children about race is also helpful because *we* need to learn how to do it, and our children need to observe us actively trying to learn. White teachers may often risk being labeled as promoting a particular “agenda” with students (see McIntyre, 2002), may fear stumbling over our words or saying something offensive, or may feel guilty about the ramifications of racial privilege we possess but that many of our students do not. Teachers of color have found themselves vulnerable, too, as they initiate conversations about race, because they are often in the minority among their peers and do not always believe their white colleagues share the opinion that antiracist education is everyone’s work. Joy Bowman and Angela Johnson have found that the benefits of dialogue outweigh the risks of comfortable silence.

An antiracist stance requires teachers to rethink curriculum from a critical perspective. Researchers point out that white teachers tend to view progressive curricular choices as culture-free (Delpit, 1988; Reyes, 1992; Siddle Walker, 1992; Willis, 1995) when, as Willis asserts, “A Eurocentric, mainstream cultural view dominates” (p. 42). An antiracist stance can enable us to recognize and invite conversations about the differences we and our children *do* observe between people, take note of those differences that may be linked to cultural understandings (see e.g., Irvine, 1990), and consciously monitor and reject generalizations based on stereotypes. These conversations may be difficult, and they require courage and honesty (Frisby, 1992), but they may achieve outcomes through *experience* that our Black History Month *exercises* cannot.

Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) capture the significance of helping our children negotiate these painful realities and develop antiracist dispositions and attitudes:

[I]t is not really helpful, in the short or long run, to present children who are experiencing (or generating) racism first-hand in their everyday worlds with the idea that racial oppression is a minor condition or that victory over it is just around the corner. . . . The more children know about the seriousness of racial-ethnic oppression and its consequences, the more they will be equipped to contest it in their present and future lives. (p. 209)

Our children are ready for these conversations. As

Polite and Saenger (2003) remind us, “Communities of silence cannot be moral communities” (p. 275). It is time for many of us to invite the conversations our children are ready to hold.

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