The Aftermath of "You're Only Half": Multiracial Identities in the Literacy Classroom

Children grapple with the complexities of race and what it means to claim membership in racial categories.

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The children in Ruth's fourth/fifth-grade classroom had been engaged for weeks in a literacy project in which they researched and shared an aspect of their cultural background. The children interviewed their parents, consulted books and the Internet, wrote reports, gathered artifacts, created art projects, and, finally, put together a poster presentation to share with peers from other classrooms. The project seemed to be an important curricular move in this highly diverse urban classroom. Ruth wanted to demonstrate that knowledge from home cultures is valued, allow children time to share that knowledge with one another, and make visible the rich

array of life experiences represented by children in this classroom.

For the public presentations of their projects, the students stood beside their posters and answered questions as children visiting from other classrooms walked around the room. It seemed to have gone well—an observer would have seen students speaking knowledgeably and comfortably about their work as guests wound their way through the room, pausing to ask questions of individual children. It was only after the visitors left that Ruth discovered that the afternoon had not been a positive celebration for some students. Zack lingered in the classroom after school, looking upset. He shared that two girls from another class had said, "He's only half. He's not really from South Africa," when they viewed his project. He said, "Why would they say that? That makes me mad. Just because I'm not all African." While they were talking, Stephanie walked over and said that people had said the same thing to her. She said that sometimes people think she's Indian, but she's black and white. Ruth asked Zack and Stephanie what they would like to do. She offered to call a class meeting the next day if they wanted to discuss these issues with their classmates. They agreed that they would like to share their experiences. The next morning, Zack, Stephanie, and their classmate Jeff (who identified as Filipino/white) led their peers in a discussion that engaged complex issues of race and identity.

The public presentations of the project resulted in feelings of hurt and frustration for these three biracial students as other children questioned their claims to their own racial identities. However, it was also the public presentations of the projects—specifically the issues of multiracial identity that the presentations raised—that transformed the culture project from a rather straightforward attempt to acknowledge and celebrate diversity into a critical literacy project in which children grappled with the complexities of race and what it means to claim membership in racial categories. In this article, we share these children's experiences and reflect on what it takes to value multiracial identities and support children as they tackle important issues of race that those identities raise.

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Engaging Issues of Race in the Literacy Classroom

It is neither common nor easy to begin conversations about race with children. However, research shows that elementary students can effectively engage with substantive issues of race and culture, and it calls for increases in opportunities for children to discuss these complex topics in school and for additional research on how these issues play out in classrooms (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Enciso, 1997, 2003; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Sperling, 2003). Much of the talk about race that does occur in K–12 schools is centered on racial discrimination (often discussed as an issue of the past) and through stories of key leaders of the civil rights movement or other prominent people of color (Banks, 1997). Framing racism as an issue of the past and confining talk about race to the accomplishments of a select few individuals from various "minority" groups is a safe stance to take toward a fraught topic. Yet, it is crucial to engage in the goal of "making race visible" (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003) if we are to confront and understand race as both a central way in which we define ourselves and one another and as a construct that continues to be a significant factor in how our society parses its resources.

The racial and ethnic diversity of this classroom—biracial children, first-generation immigrants from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Pakistan, Mexico, second-generation Vietnamese and Finnish Americans, Native American, and white children—shaped the nature of the children's discussions of race. How these issues play out in classrooms is highly dependent on the identities represented in the room. For instance, discussions of multiraciality would be very different in a context such as Hawaii, where many people claim multiracial identities. In this classroom, the biracial children's experience contrasted to that of the varied, but seemingly stable, racial and cultural identities of most of the other children in ways that opened up a dialogue about the concept of race and how it operates in individual lives and in the larger society. As Williams (1996) notes, "No other social reality than that of racially mixed people questions the one-dimensional racial structure upon which America has founded and built its national identity" (p. 193). The very presence of biracial experience changes the landscape of race, opening to question the too-often invisible and seemingly static boundaries surrounding racial categories. Attention to multiracial experience allows for different kinds of conversations about race than could otherwise occur (Root, 1996). Given the increasing number of biracial and multiracial children in schools, it is crucial to consider multiracial identities in conceptualizations of

critical literacy projects that engage issues of race.

Engaging multiraciality in literacy necessarily complicates fixed notions of racial categories. These three biracial children provided examples of times, both within the culture project and at other points in their lives, when others had (mis)placed them into racial categories. Their experiences illustrate the conception of race that informs our perspective—a view of race as a socially constructed category, rather than representing inherent traits or fixed meanings (Hall, 1990; Malik, 1996; McCarthey & Crichlow, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1994). We are socialized early to recognize racial categories that are central to how individuals are sorted into particular social locations in society (Omi & Winant, 1986). As Orellana and Bowman (2003) emphasize, social categories such as those used to mark race and ethnicity are too often treated as "fixed and often essentialized categories rather than as multifaceted, situated, and socially constructed processes" (p. 26). If children are provided opportunities to confront and examine fixed racial categories, they are more apt to see and question the ways that those categories operate in society to the benefit or detriment of groups of people.

Those fixed categories, and the stereotypes and assumptions that so often accompany them, leave all people of color "marked" by race in ways that vary greatly, but that are almost always subordinate to whiteness and that have very real effects on social and economic positions in the United States. In contrast, white people in the United States often assume themselves to be "unmarked" by race, for to be "of color" is to be something other than white (Frankenberg, 1997). It is this notion of whiteness as the assumed norm by which other categories are measured that is at the heart of racial inequality and is why "whiteness is a construct or identity almost impossible to separate from racial dominance" (Frankenberg, 1997, p. 9). Multiracial identities potentially disrupt the white/"of color" dichotomy and, thus, call into question the assumptions on which racial inequality is based. This may be particularly true when individuals claiming multiracial identities can "pass" as white, as was the case with one of the children in this classroom.

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Situating Our Inquiry and Ourselves

In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, the students in this classroom spoke a total of nine home languages and included practicing Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists, as well as poor, working class, and lower middle-class households. Our understandings of the children's encounters with race in this highly diverse classroom are informed by a broad view of literacy as a set of practices that both shape and are shaped by the social and cultural context in which they occur. This perspective also views literacy practices as inherently political, reflecting, revealing, and, potentially, challenging power relations in specific contexts such as classrooms and the wider society (Gee, 1992; Hornberger, 2000). The literacy project that launched the conversations we describe here took place in the second year of a two-year research study of children's experiences across literacy and mathematics (Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf, in press; Kazemi & Dutro, 2002). The project was a collaboration between university-based researchers in the fields of literacy (Elizabeth) and mathematics (Elham), Ruth, and the 23 children in this fourth/fifth-grade class. Elizabeth and Elham were often in the classroom, taking observational notes, interviewing children, and audio- and videotaping class discussions.

As we consider children's racial identities, we think it is crucial to also discuss our identities and how they positioned us in relation to the events we explore in this article. Supporting children in their understanding of race requires that we as adult educators examine our own assumptions about and experiences with race and identity. Ruth is middle class, lesbian, and white of English background. Born in Scotland and having lived in Canada as a small child, she is a first-generation American, yet is not perceived as such because of appearance, language, and education. When Ruth came out as a lesbian in her early thirties, she gained another dimension to being an "invisible" minority. She often finds herself in company that assumes she is heterosexual, which helped her empathize with her students who were perceived by other students in ways that did not agree with their self-perception. Elham was born in Tehran, Iran, and was raised as a Muslim. She is middle class, heterosexual and not a person of color in the American use of this term, but neither is she white of European ancestry. She identifies as Persian or Iranian and was regularly treated with malice in her youth because of

Helping Ourselves and Students Understand White Privilege

White privilege is not a term that white teachers usually use to describe themselves or their view of teaching and learning. The term evokes deep discomfort and fear of being accused as racist. Yet, many classrooms reflect the mainstream culture that is dominated by whites and so are forums of white privilege. McIntosh (1997) explains white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets which [you/they] could count on . . . like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks" (p. 122). This *invisible package* makes some individuals more powerful than others and, at the same time, claims to be accessible to all but is not. Although the American Dream promises that if people work hard enough they will advance, the reality is that color matters. Teachers claiming to be "colorblind" are demonstrating a worldview, although usually unintentionally, of saying they don't see color and so are perceived as only seeing white.

Our goal here is to support teachers in thinking and talking about issues of privilege among themselves and with students as a way of raising consciousness and inspiring new ways of thinking about beliefs, access, power, and responsibility. The following materials may be helpful in considering white privilege.

Professional Readings

McIntosh, P. (1997). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. In B. Schneider (Ed.), *Race in the first person: An anthology* (pp. 120–126). New York: Crown.

Moore, V. A. (2003). Kids' approaches to whiteness in racially distinct summer day camps. *The Sociological Quarterly, 44,* 505–522.

Paley, V. (1995). *Kwanzaa and me: A teacher's story.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Thompson, A. (2003). Tiffany, friend of people of color: White investments in antiracism. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 16*(1), 7–29.

Children's Books (for adults, too)

Ada, A. F. (1993). *My name is María Isabel.* New York: Aladdin.

hooks, b. (2002). *Be boy buzz.* New York: Jump at the Sun.

hooks, b. (2002). *Homemade love.* New York: Jump at the Sun.

hooks, b. (2004). *The skin I'm in.* New York: Jump at the Sun.

Lee, S., & Kokin, L. (1992). *Got me a story to tell. A multiethnic book: Five children tell about their lives.* San Francisco, CA: St. John's Educational Threshold Center.

Machado, A.M. (1996). *Niña Bonita.* La Jolla, CA: Kane/Miller.

Mora, P. (1999). *The rainbow tulip.* New York: Viking.

Pinkney, S. (2002). *Shades of black.* New York: Scholastic.

Tyler, M. (2005). *The skin you live in.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

—Ruth Trinidad Galván and Richard Meyer

her Iranian descent. Her two children are bi-ethnic Persian and white. Elham felt a strong affinity to several groups of children in this classroom, especially new immigrants and Muslim children. Elizabeth is middle class, heterosexual, white, and of the mixed European, fourth-generation American heritage that is, arguably, the ultimate "unmarked" racial category. She attended racially integrated schools and never experienced having her racial identity called into question. Her children are biracial white/Japanese American and each of her children, who self-identify as biracial Asian Americans, has encountered adults and other children who (mis)categorize them.

After "You're Only Half": Grappling with Racial Categories

When the children met on the rug the morning after the poster presentations, the biracial children launched a discussion that raised critical and complex issues of race, racial identity, and racial categories. Excerpts from that debrief discussion represent how the children and Ruth grappled with these issues and illustrate the role that multiracial identities played in shaping the nature of their talk about race. These children's words and experiences provide the basis for our implications regarding the role that multiraciality might play in engaging issues of race in elementary classrooms.

Prelude to the Debrief Discussion

In anticipation of the visits from their peers in other classrooms, students first took time to share their posters. After spending the morning reading, looking at, and asking each other questions about the projects, the class gathered in a circle. Ruth invited them to share one thing that they learned from someone else in the classroom. What followed was a rather straightforward sharing as the children tried to contribute something unique to what had already been shared. For instance, they recalled very specific details, e.g., the color of the flag, the name of a game, particular words, rituals, kinds of candy. This sharing contrasted sharply with the discussion that would occur as a result of the biracial children's experiences with the poster presentations.

Launching the Discussion: "We didn't fit the category"

The morning after the public sharing of the projects, Ruth called the children to the rug for a class meeting. Ruth began the discussion by praising the children's work on the culture projects. She told them that many people in the school had complimented them on their work. She said, "Mostly what you wrote and you showed were things that you knew about. You didn't do boring reports about things that you didn't understand. You did reports that were real, about stuff that you found interesting and that you wanted to tell us. So people were just darned impressed with you." She emphasized the original goal of the project—to explore topics that had personal meaning and significance. Ruth then opened the floor.

Ruth: *So what thoughts do you have on your minds that you would like to talk about? Whatever you want to say.*

Zack: *Oh, the thing that happened yesterday. I was really, really, like . . . mad yesterday like at some people, at Miss B's class and Miss C's class because they were like "You were from South Africa?" and they were like asking me a whole bunch of questions.*

Ruth: *Can you explain a little more about what you thought they were trying to tell you and how?*

Zack: *Well, the way I see it is that just because I'm not black that I can't be from Africa.*

Ruth: *Stephanie.*

Stephanie: *I felt the same way too because they were saying "You are from Africa?" like really rudely. I just pretty much felt the same way Zack was feeling because, just because, we didn't fit the category, like the white category or the black category doesn't really mean anything. I mean if it says that on the poster, then they should accept that.*

Ruth: *um, Jeff.*

Jeff: *Ms. C's class, a girl, um, I think, yeah, it was a girl, and she says* [mocking voice]*, "You're Filipino?! No way. I don't believe you." And, I didn't like that 'cause it doesn't matter what color you are, it just matters where you come from and who you are.*

Zack begins to speak before Ruth finishes her opening question. It is at his and Stephanie's request that this meeting is being held and he seems anxious to introduce his concerns. Given that much of this discussion will invite the other students to "read" the biracial children's experiences, it is important that Zack introduce the topic and that the other two biracial children in the room follow his lead. Stephanie introduces quite sophisticated language about racial categories to interpret the visiting children's rude comments. This is language that gets picked up by the group and appears periodically throughout the rest of the discussion. She locates herself and Zack outside of fixed racial categories of black and white and begins to call the meaning of those categories into question—"just because we didn't fit the category . . . doesn't really mean anything." She then introduces an idea that captures one of the primary arguments the children raise throughout the conversation—if it says it on the poster then it should be accepted as truth. The posters represent children's attempts to define themselves, to fix aspects of their identities to cardboard with glue and permanent marker, and they believe those self-claimed identities should be accepted by peers. However, even as Zack and Stephanie argue that the categories of black and white "don't mean anything," it is in relation to those categories that they are defined by others, and they use the terms associated with those categories to talk about themselves.

Jeff shares his own experience of having his racial identity questioned. Jeff's is an interesting story of racial identity and the assumptions we make. We had known Jeff through his fourth- and fifth-grade years in this classroom. It came as a surprise to us and to his peers when he chose the Philippines for his culture project and began to talk about himself as Filipino. We had assumed Jeff was

white, but, in fact, his mother was biracial and his grandmother had been raised in the Philippines. His classmates initially questioned the focus on the Philippines, but they soon accepted that he had a legitimate claim to that country and Jeff *became* Filipino over the course of this project in the eyes of his classmates. Jeff, who had been constructed as white based on his appearance, was then constructed as Filipino based on his expressed claim to Filipino heritage. He saw himself as different from the other white children in his class, and his classmates, too, began to categorize him differently. In this excerpt, Jeff explicitly introduces "color" as a marker of racial identity for the first time in the conversation. Of the three biracial children in the class, Jeff is the only one who would be classified "white" on the basis of his appearance. Indeed, it is his whiteness that led other children to question his claim to their category (as the next excerpt will show, the children believed that the girls who questioned Jeff were Filipino). Jeff argued that racial identity is based on "where you are from" and "who you are," neither of which can be determined by the color of your skin.

Asserting Identity: "You're only half"

Tavor: *When I was doing my work I heard that some, like, girls, they—that were Filipinos—they said to the girl, like, "you know Jeff, he's only half Filipino."*

Jeff: *Yeah.*

Zack: *That's what they said to me, "You're only half."*

Ruth: *So, the message you were getting was that if you were only half, some way or another, it doesn't count.*

Jeff: *I can know more stuff about the Philippines than they do and I'm half.*

Tavor's comment serves to confirm and affirm the stories of the biracial children. This exchange is also the point at which biraciality is described as being "half" for the first time, with Zack and Jeff criticizing their peers' use of "only half" to describe them and Jeff using "half" to describe himself. The biracial children were being judged by others—and positioning themselves—against a presumption of the racial "purity" of their peers. They are "half" in comparison to classmates who are "whole." Jeff's

> **Who you are is something that you get to determine.**

suggestion that legitimacy is not based on appearance but on knowledge seems an important argument for someone whose appearance positions him outside his claimed identity—he may not fit neatly into others' assumptions about racial categories, but having knowledge of the Philippines makes him as or more legitimately Filipino than those who were questioning him.

Claiming Legitimacy: "They don't know me like that"

Tavor: *People look at us and they say we're from Africa. But, then, Zack comes and says he's from Africa and they think he's not.*

Ruth: *So they will say he doesn't look like, he's not as dark as you, you've got [certain kind of] hair, therefore . . .*

Zack: *Therefore, he's not black and he's not from Africa. But, they say that cause they don't know me. Yeah, and people can't say that. They may know my name or something else about me, but they don't know me like that, my culture.*

Ruth: *And the problem, you know, the people who this gets uncomfortable, are people who are mixed, people who have part of this heritage and part of this heritage, and so then they don't end up fitting anywhere. Like when people look at you they don't quite know how to judge you, like, "oh, what is he?"*

Tavor raises the issue of the biracial children's legitimate claim to their countries in comparison to those children in the class whose families recently immigrated. When he refers to "us" and "we" in "people look at us and say we're from Africa," he means the group of children in the class whose families relatively recently immigrated from African countries, emphasizing once again the particular ways that issues arose given the cultural make-up of the class. Who can question your legitimate claim to a country in which you or your parents were born? If you've recently lived in the country you are studying, then surely you must represent, both physically and culturally, who people in that country *are*. Zack argues that identity is something that lies within—who you are is something that you get to determine; it can't be competently judged on superficial information, such as names, and is certainly not visibly apparent. Ruth affirms Zack's comments, emphasizing that biracial people don't fit into others' preexisting racial categories, which might lead others to question biracial people's self-defined identities.

Questioning Assumptions: "People thought I was Indian"

Zack: *In my old school, people thought I was Indian, because I'm tan like this. And, then, like, in the summer, I get darker*

and then when I went to one more school . . .oh, yeah, it was the next year at that school, and they were like, "you're black now!?" [laughter] They thought I had, like, a twin brother or something.

Ruth: *So, you get thought of as being Indian. Stephanie said some people think that you're Mexican or Indian [Stephanie nods], and Jeff, do you usually get thought of as being white?*

Jeff: *Yeah, and from like. . . well, my dad was, I think my dad was from Scotland or England.*

Ruth: *Right.*

Jeff: *So, that's why I'm light.*

Ruth: *So, people just make that judgment about you.*

Jeff: *Well, they* can't *make that judgment.*

Ruth: *Well, they* can. *Well, they do.*

Jeff: *Well, they do. It's not right.*

Ruth: *But it's not right.*

Zack begins this exchange with an important point about the mutability of skin color. His story illustrates his sense of the absurdity of categorizing on the basis of skin color when, in his case, it can simply be a matter of spending a summer in the sun that causes other people to read his race differently. Surely, there must be a twin—he couldn't be Zack the Indian one month and Zack the African American the next. Zack's peers attempted to fit him into racial categories that were familiar and understood, constructing him according to their understanding of the intersection between racial categories and skin tone. Ruth continues his emphasis on the mutability of categories by framing her next comment with "you get thought of as being" members of particular racial groups, thereby putting categories into question and framing them as constructs of human thought rather than as fixed realities. This provides an opening for Jeff to explain his "lightness," as opposed to his whiteness, and why he is *thought of* as white. He asserts that it is not right that others judge him as white, and Ruth agrees, affirming his indictment of all of us sitting in the room who had, in fact, made just that judgment about him.

Zack explicitly engages whiteness as a possible mask for other racial identities.

Each of the biracial children is an example of the complexities within racial categories—Zack and Stephanie certainly refer to themselves as examples of how assumptions of identity can't be made based solely on color. However, Jeff becomes the ultimate example of the complexities that color can mask because he can "pass" in ways that Zack and Stephanie cannot. Zack and Stephanie are always "of color," it is just not readily apparent to others how to classify them. Jeff's racial classification seems straightforward, yet he is "different." His apparent whiteness leaves him "unmarked," with all the privileges that ascribes, yet he works hard in this conversation to construct a "marked" whiteness for himself. Jeff serves as the perfect example around which Zack can construct an argument in the next exchange about the differences that might be masked by racial categories.

What Categories Mask: "Different from regular white"

Following Jeff's comments about his own relationship to whiteness, Zack explicitly engages whiteness as a possible mask for other racial identities.

Zack: *So, look, Jeff is white. And, how many other white people are there in this classroom? [Some of the children and Ruth raise their hands. Zack counts softly to himself] OK, there's 8 people. There's 8 white people. And, how many of them are, but are different? How many are like different from regular white?*

We find this a powerful moment in the conversation. Imagine the children, sitting in a circle on the floor, white children with hands raised and Zack counting them. The argument he is forming relies on others self-identifying in particular ways. His argument also relies on constructing Jeff as "white," but not "regular white." Zack is forming a sophisticated argument about racial categories and identity. The racial category "white," he suggests, masks difference—you may look white and not be white at all. As in his earlier example of being read as "Indian" one month and "black" the next, he makes the point that racial categorization based only on appearance is meaningless—make a quick judgment and you're likely to be wrong. Sitting on the floor among them could be any number of white people who are not really white, are not "regular" white. Zack's questioning of whiteness has significant implications, for destabilizing the category 'white' shakes the very foundation on which racial differentiation and inequality is built. A "regular" white still exists in his argument, but only through self-designation is it possible to differentiate regular white from different white. If whiteness is not pure, cannot be presumed "regular," then it can no longer retain its claim as the norm against which other categories are labeled inferior.

Lessons Learned

Ultimately, the research, writing, drawing, and gluing that consumed the children's time during the culture project were not ends in themselves, but instead served as an opportunity to explore important ideas about race that were raised through the biracial students' experiences. As the experiences of these students make clear, these issues are complex and the shape that children's experiences will take is intimately bound to particular contexts. However, we believe that these children's experiences have implications for all literacy classrooms.

Multiracial Identities and Literacies of Race in Classrooms

First and, perhaps, most important, the conversations led by the biracial children provide an example of how multiracial identities challenge the mirage of stable and static racial categories and introduce new "literacies of race" in the classroom. These biracial children pointed to their own and others' racial categories, including whiteness, and, thus, began to question the dichotomy between "white" and "of color." This is in contrast to the literacies of racial categorization that were clearly in play during the poster session; the children visiting from other classrooms expected the students' projects to meet their assumptions for how someone from the country or culture looked. Clear multiracial identities—the ability to point to parents of different racial backgrounds—do disrupt the idea that all people can be placed into the categories we know so well. However, as Williams (1997) argues, the even more difficult, but important, move is to then question the stability of those assumed stable racial identities, as Zack did for whiteness. Questioning the "purity" of whiteness and the "otherness" of "of color," is to question the myths upon which racism rests.

Recognizing the Literacies of Race that We and Our Students Live in Classrooms

One of the reviewers of this article stressed that a crucial question in raising issues of race with children is, "Who is taking up the emotional work of learning these new literacies of race?" This question resonated with us and pushed us to consider how our own racial positions impact the kinds of conversations about race that can and should occur in classrooms and how the emotional work of taking up these issues is distributed in classrooms. Indeed, one of our worries is that this emotional work can fall largely on children who identify as multiracial and on other children of color, and we believe it is crucial to avoid the trap of using students of color to "teach" white students and teachers about race (Banks, 1997). Because of the role these biracial students played in bringing their issues to the class and in leading the discussion, we see the debrief discussion as avoiding this trap, but it is an issue that requires care and represents a risk of this work. Another aspect of the "emotional work" issue involves the marked or unmarked racial positions inhabited by adult literacy educators and how those positions necessarily impact how teachers and students experience race in classrooms. For instance, the decision of white teachers to engage with issues of race is itself a sign of privilege (non-white teachers do not have the luxury of opting not to think about race). Williams (1997) argues that the status quo of racial inequity will remain as long as race is seen as "other than whiteness" and is a topic met with uneasiness and denial by those with racial privilege.

We see two moves of self-reflection as necessary for teachers who want to engage with issues of race in literacy classrooms. First, teachers need to examine their own relationship to race and how their racial positioning marks them or not, privileges them or not. This self-reflection moves beyond acknowledging racial positioning; *examining* that positioning involves thinking very specifically about how race functions in our lives. What can we know and not know about race based on our own marked or unmarked positions? Critical race theorists assert that this effort to make race and its functioning visible should involve the telling of stories, stories that illustrate the very real, everyday ways that race makes a difference (Delgado, 1990; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Williams, 1996). For white teachers, crafting these stories requires seeing themselves as having a race—it requires seeing whiteness *as race* rather than an unmarked norm or "unpacking the invisible knapsack" of white privilege (McIntosh, 1990).

Questioning the "purity" of whiteness and the "otherness" of "of color," is to question the myths upon which racism rests.

Second, we must become aware of our own willingness to engage issues of race and acknowledge and explore the role that race plays in sustaining inequity in our schools and society. Are we uncomfortable when race is raised as an issue? What is the source of that discomfort? Maybe being one of the only non-white teachers in a school makes a teacher feel spotlighted whenever race enters the conversation; maybe a white teacher feels guilty and

defensive at the idea that well-meaning white folks can unconsciously perpetuate racism. Do we believe that race continues to play a central role in sustaining inequity and that we have a role to play in challenging that status quo? What are the consequences of our answers? What are the stories that lead to our answers? These are stories that can be shared with children. Children will, as these students did, have their own stories to share. This kind of self-reflection is emotional work, and we should at least ensure that we share the emotional work that will befall children like Stephanie, Zack, and Jeff whenever we take on issues of race in classrooms.

Conversations about race require particular contexts—safe spaces in classrooms, outlets for teacher learning, and texts.

Creating Contexts for Examining Race

Conversations about race require particular contexts—safe spaces in classrooms, outlets for teacher learning, and texts. The conversations that occurred in the debrief discussion required a safe space in which to air important ideas and relate personal experiences. The students were used to gathering on the rug for discussions. These conversations occurred each week as a routine way in which to review the week's events in the classroom and provide opportunities for children to raise issues that they felt needed to be discussed. Through this practice, the children learned to frame their comments positively and constructively. Ruth also called class meetings to discuss specific issues, either on her own or at the request of children. Although some children spoke more than others in these meetings, most seemed comfortable with the process and counted on this forum as an opportunity to raise concerns.

One way to consider how to build classroom contexts for complex discussions is by learning from other teachers' attempts. Ruth's role was crucial to how this case unfolded and raises issues about what teachers might need to learn to skillfully facilitate conversations with children about identity and social categories. As Gay (2000) emphasizes, the teacher enacting conversations about race needs to act as "cultural mediator," helping students to build understandings of differences. At the very least this requires some comfort with discussing issues of race, some effective frameworks for leading those discussions, and the creation of classroom communities where complex issues are routinely discussed in a safe atmosphere. Cases like this one can provide rich texts for teachers to study collectively. Cases of critical literacy in practice can strengthen teachers' capacity to anticipate and respond productively to the tensions that such enactments will undoubtedly create. Through reading and talking with one another about our own and others' classroom practice, we can examine the opportunities gained and missed and the discomforts and tensions that are part of engagements with the complex, emotionally fraught, and crucially important topic of race. Such work can help teachers gain a much deeper awareness of curricular possibilities, strengthening our own understandings of racial categories and how we and the children we teach are positioned and position ourselves within and outside of those categories.

The texts we bring to the classroom and the questions we ask are yet another aspect of the context we build for engaging literacies of race in the classroom. As in the culture project, the nature and focus of conversations of race are often organic to children's experiences within particular projects. However, we have long known that literature provides one of the richest contexts for beginning and sustaining conversation on important issues. Reading and discussing literature with multiracial characters and themes can both validate the experiences of children who claim those identities and serve as contexts through which to raise issues of racial categories and how they are constructed. Although there are too few books at the elementary level that include multiracial characters or explore issues of multiracial identity, we have included a selected list of both fiction and nonfiction titles that make multiracial experience visible (see Figure 1).

Whether discussions of race are raised through children's projects or through the literature we bring into classrooms, teachers can encourage critical discussions by posing questions that encourage children to view issues from multiple perspectives, to interrogate their own and others' assumptions, and to think about how ideas about race construct us even as we question those ideas. The paths to supporting a critical literacy classroom are many, but we suggest the following questions, culled from our reading of research and theory in critical literacy, as effective starting points for critical discussions of race:

- Who benefits [from this text, practice, situation]?
- In whose interest [is this written, is this policy made, was that statement made]?

Ada, Alma Flor. (2002). *I Love Saturdays y Domingos.* **New York: Atheneum.**

A girl recounts the joy of her weekends, Saturdays spent with her Euro-American Grandma and Grandpa, and Sundays (los domingos) with Abuelito and Abuelita, her Mexican-American grandparents.

Adoff, Arnold. (1992). *Black Is White Is Tan.* **Illus. E. McCully. New York: Harper Collins.**

A day in the life of a White/African American family, this was the first children's book to feature an interracial family when it was published in 1973.

Burstein, Fred. (1993). *The Dancer.* **New York: Simon & Schuster.**

A Japanese American/Latina girl walks through her city neighborhood with her father on the way to dance class.

Cisneros, Sandra. (1997). *Hairs/Pelitos.* **New York: Dragonfly.**

Through descriptions of the kinds of hair in one multiracial Latino family, a girl and her mother discuss the diversity within their family.

Davol, Marguerite. (1993). *Black, White, Just Right!* **New York: Whitman.**

An African American/White girl celebrates the diversity within her family in descriptions that challenge stereotypes.

Gaskins, Pearl Fuyo. (1999). *What Are You? Voices of Mixed Race Young People.* **New York: Holt.**

This collection of interviews, essays, and poetry by 40 young adults ranging in age from 14 to 26 relates their experiences growing up in the United States. Their racial identities represent a wide blend of cultures: European, African, Asian, Native American, Jewish, Arabic, Caribbean, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander.

Hamanaka, Sheila. (1999). *All the Colors of the Earth.* **New York: Harper.**

This beautifully illustrated text describes a diverse array of children's skin tones and hair in terms of natural phenomena (". . . the roaring browns of bears"; ". . . hair that curls like sleeping cats in snoozy cat colors").

Igus, Toyomi (2001). *Two Mrs. Gibsons.* **Los Angeles: Children's Book Press.**

A narrator describes her life growing up with her African American grandmother and Japanese mother. She contrasts the women's habits, attitudes, and personalities, and the activities she shares with each.

Kaeser, Gigi, & Gillespie, Peggy. (1997). *Of Many Colors: Portraits of Multiracial Families.* **University of Massachusetts Press.**

Photographer Gigi Kaeser and interviewer Peggy Gillespie profile 39 families with multiracial children. The authors explore the joys and frustrations inherent in being multiracial in a country that officially recognizes only five racial categories.

Monk, Isabel. (1998). *Hope.* **New York: Carolrhoda.**

An African American/White girl visits a favorite aunt and, learning the story behind her name, feels proud of her biracial heritage.

Wing, Natasha. (1996). *Jalapeno Bagels.* **New York: Atheneum.**

When Pablo must bring something to share for his school's International Day, he wants to bring something from his family's bakery and finally decides on jalapeño bagels—a choice that reflects his Mexican American and Jewish heritage.

Figure 1. Annotated bibliography of children's books featuring multiracial characters

- What was the purpose [of the text, practice, policy, statement]?
- How would someone else [or a different character] have experienced this differently?
- What beliefs (or values or assumptions) about race lie behind that statement (or action)?
- What would you have done differently?
- Have you ever experienced something like this?
- Why haven't you (or why have you)?
- What language do we use to talk about these issues?
- Where do those terms come from?

These questions are starting points, trailheads, on a largely uncharted, but very important, journey.

Final Reflections

No map, no recipe, no script exists for how to effectively engage children in discussions of race. We are distinctly aware of two things as we write this—first is that this lack of script, and the uncertainty it signals, may be one reason why research shows a dearth of critical discussions of race in elementary classrooms; second is that our literacy curricula are increasingly scripted (literally), and this surely makes it even more difficult to create space for the critical work of engaging the literacies of race that we and children live within and outside of classrooms. However, it is imperative that we forge ahead to create that space. As Enciso (2003)

explains, it is important to attend to "strategies and pedagogies [that] are deliberately constructed to create a space for the possibility of not knowing" (p. 173). This is demanding work, but necessary if we are to challenge racial inequity.

Ladson-Billings (1992) emphasizes that teaching should involve students and teachers engaged in a collective struggle against the status quo. Arguably, the status quo is challenged only if an activity such as this classroom project enters into the territory—or similarly complex terrain—raised in the debrief discussion. Had that discussion not occurred, some of the children may very well have left the project with ideas about the food, games, and religion of some of the cultures represented by their classmates. The biracial children would have left the project with no outlet for the anger, frustration, and confusion they felt when others questioned their right to their claimed racial identities. Given the debrief discussion, Zack, Stephanie, and Jeff were able to assert their identities as biracial people, and the children left the project with some sense of the complexity of racial categories and the myths inherent in preconceptions of what those categories mean. Our story of this classroom provides an example of children engaged in the critical work of identifying and questioning the racial positions on which racial inequity is built. That, demands and all, is worth doing.

Authors' Note

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