

Santa Stories: Children's Inquiry about Race during Picturebook Read-Alouds

Jeane F. Copenhaver-Johnson, Joy T. Bowman, and Angela C. Johnson

Trusting children's inquiry attempts in literature-based conversations helps two classroom teachers and a university researcher to engage potentially controversial content and advance children's understandings about race and power.

Teachers of literature today possess a unique opportunity to help young people use their experiences with reading to disrupt habitual and stereotypical ways of understanding difference and to construct responses wherein their developing cultural identities are voiced, rehearsed, and revised. (Faust, 2000, p. 30)

The children in Joy Bowman's first-grade classroom are reading Martin's Big Words (Rappaport, 2001); throughout the read-aloud, they have used conversations to make sense of the themes of the story and the realities of their lives, wondering, "Would a bus driver be arrested for sitting and driving a bus if the driver were Black?" and "If it hadn't been for Martin Luther King, you wouldn't be our teacher." When children approach the page where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated, they begin to ponder the segregation of Heaven and Hell. Thomas (a biracial first-grader) muses, "Like, it's like the Black people was down there (pointing down, referencing Hell) and the White people was up there (referencing Heaven). That wouldn't be fair." Other children participate in the conversation and implore Joy to give them guidance. (Fieldnotes, December 2003)

While these questions were not on Joy's agenda, they reflected children's curiosities as they responded to the book, to issues of race and power, and to one another. Their questions, in response to literature, hold considerable potential for helping children rethink assumptions that uncritically privilege Whiteness.

In this article, we consider the possibility Faust (2000) poses—that classrooms might be places where children explore, through children's literature and with the guidance of teachers, real questions and, together, negotiate relationships between race and power. We share stories from two first-grade classrooms (those of Joy Bowman and Angela Johnson) in which children's literature

has evoked inquiry-oriented conversations about race—organic, spontaneous, and sometimes difficult conversations. In these classrooms, inquiry isn't something that "happens" and is "over/finished" at the end of a conversation or school day. Our examples show the tentativeness of White teachers learning to negotiate these spaces with their students as they work to become "transformative intellectuals" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985). Our hope is that sharing our efforts will encourage White teachers who become nervous when children broach the subject of race. Teachers who invite these conversations assume the responsibility of helping children overcome dysconsciousness—"an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given" (King, 1991, p. 135).

We (Joy, Angela, and Jeane, a university researcher) are White researchers who have studied children's responses to read-aloud for several years. Here, we would like to share a critical period in our early research history—episodes in which Joy's and Angela's students responded to Melodye Rosales's *'Twas the Night B'fore Christmas* (1996) and met a visiting Black Santa Claus at school. These stories, our "Santa Stories," will help us demonstrate how teachers might employ children's literature to open race-oriented conversations by reading books that challenge normative race assumptions and evoke inquiry.

We preface this article by noting that we are not recommending teachers read about Santa Claus in school; doing so privileges a perspective already widely promoted in popular media, marketing, and some families' traditions. It is, however, a tradition in the region where this study occurred and had not—until the time of this research—been significantly challenged. We hope this work invites other teachers to reconsider this practice.

HOW CHILDREN AND TEACHERS TALK (OR DON'T) ABOUT RACE: CONTEXTS FOR ADVANCING UNDERSTANDING

When well-meaning parents, caregivers, and teachers hush children's attempts to work through new and existing understandings about race, the adults' responses often suggest to children that their curiosity is unwelcome. Children continue to act upon and negotiate understandings of race and power, but they often learn to do so with one another, away from adults—on the playground, in the cafeteria, and elsewhere. Ample evidence exists that young children are aware of race and recognize the power associated with Whiteness (Aboud, 1988; Holmes, 1995; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

Conversations with children, such as those prompted by read-alouds of picturebooks in which issues of race and power are highlighted, can teach adults how children are considering and experiencing issues of race and diversity. The discourses evoked as children respond to read-alouds also can open the floor for bias, prejudice, misinformation, and overgeneralizations (Larson & Irvine, 1999; Leland et al., 2003; Tatum, 1997). However, rather than silencing potentially controversial content, we can tap the power of literature-based conversations to advance children's understandings about race and power and can trust children's inquiry attempts to lead us into meaningful action. Finding ways to support children through this process is paramount for teachers committed to work against racism and embrace an inquiry-oriented approach to literature discussion. It is particularly important that White teachers, who represent the majority of elementary school teachers in the United States, engage in this work (Yasin, 1999; Nieto, 2003).

BELIEFS GUIDING OUR QUESTIONS: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LISTENING TO CHILDREN

Our work began with a shared philosophy that children are "capable-and-seeking-connections" (Dresang, 2003, p. 29). Based on our own observations and the work of other researchers (e.g., Ballentine & Hill, 2000; Copenhaver, 2001; MacPhee, 1997; Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson, 1999/2000), we knew children were making meaning of race, but we knew little about how they were doing it. When Jeane proposed studying

children's inquiry-oriented responses to children's picturebooks, Joy and Angela offered their first-grade classrooms as research sites. They believed their young students could consider complex topics and issues, that they were already negotiating these issues, and that supportive, inquiry-oriented settings could support children's talk.

Our work was guided by two bodies of work: Rosenblatt's (1938/1995) vision of literature response as a way to foster democratic education and social imagination, and Lindfors's (1999) notion of inquiry as social language acts meant to elicit support in developing understandings. Rosenblatt explained the reader's involvement in literary experiences as seeking "to gain insights that will make his [*sic*] own life more comprehensible" (p. 7). From our perspective, such insights cannot occur in the absence of inquiry. As Rosenblatt (1969) explained:

... in many instances the inductive process is conceived rather narrowly. . . . Carefully contrived questions lead them [students] to notice the significant elements in a work and thus to arrive briskly at the appropriate interpretation. . . . A more fertile kind of inductive process, however, would grow out of a situation in which the students themselves raise the questions. (p. 1010, emphasis ours)

Inquiry-oriented practices invite children to actively engage others in their efforts to refine, revise, affirm, or change perspectives (Lindfors, 1999). Read-aloud participant structures can be shaped to foster these specific kinds of interactions.

A belief in these theories shaped the ways Joy and Angela responded to children during conversations. In an effort to see what questions and insights children would pose (Rosenblatt, 1969), both teachers attempted to refrain from directing conversations or prematurely jumping in to correct or challenge students' remarks. We acknowledge that readers might wonder which perspectives were privileged by the teachers' willingness to listen rather than correct. It is also true, however, that premature response to the unexpected (or hurtful) contributions of some children can prompt children to take conversations back "underground," a risk we did not want to take early in our study. The *silencing* of discussions of

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race and power has been long integrated into classroom practice, but we hoped to disrupt this model and *elicit* conversations that challenge, interrogate, or even seek to reinforce existing relationships between race and power. When the teachers each read Rosales's (1996) book, the children taught us that inquiry is not an event but a process.

Much scholarship on literacy and inquiry is focused on *questioning*, not inquiry (which may or may not take the form of questions), or is focused on building communities of inquiry (e.g., Mills, O'Keefe, & Jennings, 2004) or carrying out inquiry studies or units (Tower, 2000). Wells (1995) and Schall and Kauffmann (2003) express the sort of inquiry style we were curious to see and that both Rosenblatt (1938/1995) and Lindfors (1999) have suggested as contexts for learning: that of genuine literate conversation. In children's conversations, we found inquiry evidenced in many ways, such as explicit questioning, hypotheses posing, wondering aloud, and challenging classmates' perspectives.

Based on our initial goals, we resisted developing an explicit agenda for each read-aloud. Cai (2003) contends that "reading the various cultural messages in a book about people of color should not end with narcissistic self-reflection but should eventually lead to a change of perspective on the Other" (p. 281). We agree with the significance of perspective change, but our sense is that such change is unlikely to happen right away and is impossible in the absence of inquiry. We feared overdirecting children's conversations would result in stories of how *teachers* inquired about race and literature rather than stories of *children*, over time, helping one another perceive their worlds in new ways. We wanted to validate children's talk about race, establish the classrooms as places where questions of race and power were explored, and help elicit insights children may not have been invited to voice in cross-cultural settings before being in these classes. To create this environment, our first task was to learn what assumptions and observations children were already making relative to race.

METHODS

The public school where Joy and Angela taught serves children whose families belong to the

"working poor" (Shipler, 2004) and who live in ethnically diverse, urban neighborhoods. All 33 students enrolled across the two classes agreed to participate and comprised a purposeful sample (Glesne, 1999). Of these, 23 children self-identified "White," and 10 self-identified "Black" or "Mixed."

We have followed the children's terminology for racial identifications. In cases where children only occasionally mentioned a "Mixed" heritage but generally called themselves "Black," we chose the more frequent identifier. The White students in the classes represented a range of cultural backgrounds, and although children sometimes used the term "Hillbilly" to self-identify, they usually called themselves "White." We indicate each child's preferred racial identification in our transcripts and use pseudonyms for confidentiality, understanding that categories for self-identification are not necessarily fixed or suggestive of one's strongest identity markers (Ogbu, 1974).

During the 2003–2004 school year, Jeane became a participant-observer (Spradley, 1980) in each classroom two mornings a week, audiotaping read-alouds, collecting field notes, interacting with children, and analyzing children's other, literature-related conversations. Together, the

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three of us maintained anecdotal records and copies of children's response-related drawings or writing and met regularly to share notes, discuss observations, and make sense of what we were noticing in our data. We focused on the cultural knowledge children

brought to literacy events (Zaharlick & Green, 1991), the emerging interpretive communities (Karolides, 1997), and the roles teacher response played in shaping children's inquiry opportunities.

However, both response and inquiry are internal phenomena, representing experiential changes or extensions of perspective. Therefore, we attend to children's *mediated* responses—those responses that children have made evident through verbal interaction, body movements (Smith, 1997), and/or artifact generation. For our purposes, inquiry was suggested by the signs a child used to engage others while making efforts to understand, but inferring that child's intent posed a significant challenge.

SIZING UP SANTA: CHILDREN'S INQUIRY VOICES

In December, Joy and Angela read aloud books from different traditions as they and the children explored the end-of-year holidays celebrated by different cultures. Here, we share narrative excerpts from the notes we collected during the read-alouds of *'Twas the Night B'Fore Christmas* (Rosales, 1996) and from the children's subsequent meeting with a guest Santa Claus. We use this alternative, narrative format because isolated examples from data often fail to reflect the social nature of collaborative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The Rosales text is subtitled *An African American Version*, referring to the original poem and features an African American family living in 1904, text narration in a version of Southern Black English Vernacular, and a Black Santa Claus. Joy and Angela use a read-aloud format in which they read each page aloud, show the illustration, and pause to welcome student comments. They participate in discussions but direct children to talk to one another (rather than to the teacher) and try to elicit conversations (rather than "lessons") about books. For the convenience of readers, but at the risk of reinforcing dichotomous understandings of race and gender, each child will be identified as Black (B) or White (W), and Male (M) or Female (F), at his or her first appearance in the following narrative.

*(Narrative Compiled
from Fieldnote Excerpts)*

Angela brings a copy of the Rosales book to the carpet area where read-alouds are held. As she begins the reading, children marvel at the rhyme, tell how excited they think the children in the story are to be expecting Santa and presents, and tell how they, too, have recently put up Christmas trees at home. Tamika (BF) reports that she saw Santa at the mall over the weekend, and others add, "Yes, me, too!" Jesse (BM) reports that he knows Santa's real name; "It's Saint Nick!"

The children appear to be visibly engaged in the story until Angela turns to the page where

Santa is clearly pictured for the first time and is revealed to be Black.

Shandra (WF): *(exclaiming)* He's Black!

Travis (WM): *I thought he was White!*
(Travis's face looks concerned, puzzled.)

Another White child, Vicky, seated at the front of the group, wrinkles her brow. She moves to the back of the room and sits with Shandra against the back wall. When Jesse, a Black peer, responds, "I went to the Carousel, and they had stockings . . .," Shandra interrupts and demands of Angela, "Can you read it already?"

Angela first attends to Jesse's comment and then continues reading, and as other children



Joy encourages meaningful discussion as she reads aloud.

respond to the story, Shandra and Vicky sit quietly in the back of the group. They reach over to the counter where Angela has left two small Santa figurines—one Black and one White. They hold the figurines, flip them over, and look at them carefully, trading quietly during the read-aloud. At one point, Shandra raises her hand and, when Angela calls on her, says, "You know, Santa, in real life, he's White, but in

the book, he's Black."

Angela replies. "I've never seen him. But I do have just as many books where Santa is Black as I do where he's White."

Shandra implores, "But you *do* have books where Santa is White?"

Angela responds that she does, something Shandra already knows because the class has read other books with a White Santa. As the book goes on, Shandra and Vicky continue to examine and exchange the figurines.

Finally, Shandra and Vicky stand up with the small figures. "We know," Vicky announces. "This is the *real* Santa Claus" (holding up the White Santa), "and this is the *helper* Santa Claus" (holding up the Black Santa). They smile and sigh as if they've finally made sense of the text.

Immediately, the hands of two students shoot up. Since their hand raising so closely follows Vicky's announcement, we expect they will protest

their classmates' interpretation, and Angela calls on them to share. Instead, however, Tamika asks if she can bring her grandma's cookies to class, and Jesse mentions seeing Santa (race unidentified) with one of his cousins. The potentially teachable moment has elapsed. Toward the end of the read-aloud, Vicky and Shandra chant along with Santa on the final page, "Merry Christmas to All! Y'all Sleep Tight!" moving their respective Santa figures as if they are chanting, too. As Angela brings closure to the reading, Vicky quietly murmurs, looking down, "These might be brothers or cousins or something."

Angela notices later in the day that children have resumed discussion of Santa (whether Santa can be Black or White, whether there can be multiple Santas, whether some are "real" and some are "not") at their writing tables and invites them to draw their representations of the story. The representations of Santa are uniformly White (see Figure 1).

About a week after the readings of the Rosales book, Angela and Joy hear that a Santa will be at school and children are scheduled for class vis-



Figure 1. Even after an in-class discussion of Santa's race, students' representations were uniformly White.

its with him. This Santa is Black. As the children come around the corner to see him, Jesse, Armand, and Chance, all Black, begin jumping up and down. Armand begins calling, "Santa, Santa!" and turns around to tell the boy behind him, "I told you he's Black!"

Travis and Jeff, both White, reply that this visitor is not Santa—that he can't be Santa—but Carrie (WF) challenges them, "I met the brown Santa." In this setting, unlike the read-aloud where Jesse made little protest of his White friends' interpretations, he becomes vocal. "Yes, he is Santa," he proclaims. "That's the Santa that tells the White Santa what kids want."

Back in the classroom, later in the day, children are in small groups, and Angela asks about their visits with Santa. In one group, Jeff, Travis, and Alex (all White) state that this Santa wasn't fat enough to be real and conclude that Santa, therefore, must be White like the K-Mart Santa. Jeff says, "He was fun, but he wasn't White." Jesse, who disagrees with the White boys' conclusions, mumbles to the group a final protest, "He's brown." Angela challenges the children, asking, "Is it possible there could be more than one Santa? I'm not saying there is or isn't. I've never caught Santa." They consider this, and Armand leans close to her to individually share, "Santa's brown. Uh huh. I caught him in my house one time, and he's brown." She visits another small group of White children.

Angela: *So what did you all think about meeting Santa?*

Shandra: *That's not really, he's really real, but that one is not real. The other Santa comes to us; he goes this way (picks up the White Santa figurine and makes it fly through the air).*

Tammy (WF): *(grabs White Santa Figurine from Shandra) This is our Santa.*

Angela: *What makes you think that Santa can't be Black?*

Shandra: *That's just the way it goes.*

Angela: *Is it possible that they could work together?*

Shandra holds up the White Santa and says, "Yeah. Maybe he broke his neck," and Tammy concedes that maybe they're "partners." As Angela leaves the group, the girls begin zooming the Santas through the air together.

In Joy's class, during the read-aloud, the children's discussions focus little on race but rather why Santa must call his reindeers' names in order (although he doesn't in this book, they are familiar with a children's video in which he does) and why they have short tails. Amy (WF) predicts, "I know what's in this book—a skeleton!" to which Brent (BM) replies, "Yep, 'cause I seen the movie!" referencing the film *The Nightmare before Christmas* (Burton & Novi, 1993). They wonder about the magic in Rudolph's nose, why he's absent, and how Santa keeps from catching on fire when he comes through the chimney. The children compare the sleigh to the one in *Welcome Comfort* (Polacco, 1999), compare the father's character to the dad in *Poppa's Ichy Christmas* (Medearis, 1998), and make connections to the film version of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (Howard, 2000). Brent wonders what a "conjure man" is, and when Joy tells him it's someone who does magic, Brent exclaims, "So he [Santa] *does* do magic!" When Joy reaches the page where the father and young daughter peek out the window, the children expectantly call out "They're gonna see Santa!" Thomas (MM) adds, in a singsong voice, "But we don't know what color Santa is," in the spirit of "I-know-something-you-don't-know." Casey (WF) picks up the book's dust jacket, commenting, "He's really Black." Later, remarks are made about how, perhaps, this Santa and the more familiar White Santa are brothers since people can be "mixed."

Amy: *I think he's mixed with Black and White.*

Casey: *Me, too, like an Indian.*

Joy: *I've never seen Santa.*

Children: *(together—these comments) Yes, you have! At the mall!*

Joy: *Oh, yes, I've seen those but not the real Santa.*

Thomas: *It's like in Welcome Comfort . . . when the boy got older. I think that Santa, at the North Pole, he said, "You can take my place."*

Joy: *Who will?*

Thomas: *White Santa. I think they friends and taking turns to be Santa.*

Even though there is little other attention to race in the book discussion, it comes up when

they, too, visit the Black Santa at school. Brent, who made no observable comment on the race of Santa in the book, is the first to speak when he sees Santa.

Brent: *This Santa is Black!*

Casey: *He's not really Santa. [Not denying that Santa can be Black but denying that this particular person could be Santa.]*

Brent: *Yuh huh. [Yes]*

Thomas: *I'm gonna touch his beard. Is he a Black Santa or a White Santa, 'cause I wanna know? I know; I know. The White Santa, he'll be sleeping, and he'll say, "Take my place Brown Santa"—white first, then brown (uses his palms and the backs of his hands to illustrate how they take turns). White St. Nick, he got a long beard, and Brown St. Nick, he got a short beard; it's upta here on Brown Santa.*

Amy: *Nuh un [no]. I know . . . it's like the White [Santa] goes to White people's houses and the Black [Santa] goes to Black people's houses.*

By now, Brent has approached Santa.

Brent: *Are you a Black Santa? There ain't no Black Santas!*

Santa: *Son, what color do you see?*

Brent: *Black, but under your socks you might not be!*

Santa: *Lookit here (and he pulls up his pant leg a little).*

Brent: *This is a Black Santa! He's got Black skin and his black boots are like the White Santa's boots.*

Reading aloud Santa books—even alongside other holiday stories that do not include a Santa—engages the teacher in the reinforcement of this myth and is problematic enough that we are in dialogue with families about this school tradition. However, we felt these read-alouds and subsequent, related conversations meaningfully illustrated how children were thinking about, and experiencing, race.

Santa's existence in the imaginary worlds of children, in ways consistent with the cultures of their families and the popular media to which

they have been exposed, made these inquiries novel because the debate over his race was likely to never be resolved. That is, even if the teachers had wished to “lead” children to some conclusion, there would be no way to provide final closure on this source of disequilibrium. *Children* became the fact checkers. It was quickly apparent that the burden of proof to qualify as “real” was on Black Santa and his advocates. Several of the White children’s responses and wonderings evidenced dysconscious racism, “a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges” (King, 1991, p. 135). Children understood the power Whiteness conveys.

ACCEPTANCE AND NON-ACCEPTANCE: CHILDREN GENERATING SANTA THEORIES

In their study of children’s responses to shopping mall Santa performers, Thompson and Hickey (1989) found most children between the ages of five and nine accepted a range of Santa performers at the mall. Children responded to each Santa as “real” even if he was less talkative than traditional Santas, much younger than traditional Santas, possessed a natural beard of another color that became visible to a child, or was thinner than other Santas. The Santa performers in their study, however, were all White.

Although Joy and Angela read other books in which White Santa appeared, in no read-aloud had observations about Santa’s race (or the authenticity of the other White Santas portrayed) ever been voiced. Children’s responses were much like those in Thompson and Hickey’s study (1989); the children uncritically accepted a range of Santa representations. However, once students began responding to the Rosales text, the observable disequilibrium some children demonstrated conveyed the unchallenged authority of White Santa’s existence in the minds of *all* the children; this disequilibrium prompted children to develop or dismiss competing theories about authenticity, roles, and power for Black Santa.

For example, even though Brent’s initial reaction was to embrace the real life, visiting Santa as Black, his peers’ questions about whether this guest could be a real Santa (or really be Black) caused him to temporarily doubt the Santa’s authenticity and seek “proof” from the visiting

Santa. Children crafted new ideas to explain what they saw, and some interpretations were clearly more privileged—more feasible or believable—than others, in the children’s minds.

Initially, we were disturbed to hear children making statements (i.e., “helper” Santa explanations) that so clearly demonstrated their knowledge of the relationships between race and power (and their extrapolation of these power relationships into their Santa understandings), but this book, and these discussions, opened a dialogue that continued all year. Children’s initial discussions about race can feel messy, unpredictable, and troubling to White teachers, because they illuminate for us the assumptions we adults have inadvertently been privileging or reinforcing. It is an alternative discourse infrequently invited in schools, and, unfortunately, a discourse for which we have too few models.

Children had spent years “reading” Santa in the cultures of their communities. Therefore, as they responded to *’Twas the Night B’fore Christmas*,

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they drew upon the resources of their own lives. They referenced other stories they had read together (e.g., Medearis, 1998; Polacco, 1999) and drew upon their experiences at shop-

ping malls and in the “real life” of their memories and imaginations “seeing” Santa deliver presents in their homes. They used other film and video media such as *Sesame Street*, *Dr. Seuss’s How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (Howard, 2000), and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Burton & Novi, 1993) to compare to the text and visually critiqued the Santa figurines Angela kept in her classroom. Most of these media privilege a White Santa representation as the unquestioned norm.

Comparative strategies enabled children to develop hypotheses to explain the existence of this “supplementary” Santa and to determine his role in the rituals the children had come to believe. In their efforts to make sense, children developed “helper” theories, “collaboration” theories, “job-sharing” theories, and “family” theories to explain Black Santa’s presence. While we were chilled by Vicky’s explanation of the “helper” Santa, her marginalization of the Black Santa reflects much of what we know about the early development of ethnic prejudice (Aboud, 1988). We could not expect Shandra’s and Vicky’s attitudes toward this Santa of children’s literature

to be separate from their upbringing and beliefs given their limited exposure to media that challenged those understandings about Whiteness and power. Simply reading literature cannot instantaneously change deeply entrenched, stereotypical belief systems, particularly when the realities children live reinforce the systems of inequality feeding the stereotypes. Angela challenged Shandra to extend her thinking; no peer asked Shandra to rethink her point of view.

Only during private discussions with their teachers or at the face-to-face meeting with Santa did some children raise alternate explanations of Santa's role(s), and even then, they did not directly challenge Shandra or Vicky. We are unsure of the extent to which this public silence may have been reinforced by the teachers' passive participation in the discussions, but we believe it is evidence that children recognized the power afforded "naturally" to White Santa. Vicky's "helper" theory was the only such theory we heard from the children, but it was immediately recognizable to us as a reflection of the racial inequalities she knows.

The "collaboration" theories children developed included the notion that the job might be one of mentorship and turn taking. Thomas's proposal that the White Santa might be like the Santa in *Welcome Comfort* (Polacco, 1999), and that the White Santa might tell the Brown Santa to "take my place," may indicate that Thomas perceives these Santas less hierarchically than Shandra and Vicky did. One Santa would do the job as long as it was meaningful, and then the other (equal) Santa would take over.

The "job-sharing" theories invited speculation on the relationships between the race of the Santa and the race of the children served by that Santa or the race of the Santa and the particular duties he carries out. Children proposing these theories speculate that perhaps there *is* a Santa to serve Black children and a Santa to serve White children or that the Santas otherwise split their duties. In some cases, these relationships appeared to mirror "separate, but equal," as in Amy's comment, "It's like the White [Santa] goes to White people's houses and the Black [Santa] goes to Black people's houses." In other cases, the relationships between the Santas simply seem more efficient; maybe, the children propose, the Black

Santa tells White Santa what the children want, and White Santa takes care of delivery.

A final explanation generated by the children is the theory that the Santas are family—"brothers" or "cousins." The children who posed this explanation lacked enough detail for us to determine how children were imagining roles being divided. Shandra poses it as an afterthought at one point, but the other children who mentioned it had experienced interracial families.

In any case, no child ever openly questioned the reality of White Santa. Some White children, however, did dismiss the idea of Black Santa. Shandra commented that the "real life" Santa is White. Tammy used a marker of identification to convey that the White Santa is her ("our") Santa, and she devoted no further attention to the Black Santa. In fact, she seemed impatient with the discussion and eager to be included in Shandra's "us." In other cases, White children flatly stated Black Santa was not "real." However, they did not explicitly state their challenge in terms of Black Santa's race.

Instead, most children used other questions to determine the "realness" of Santa. They examined his boots, the length of his beard, his chubbiness, and even the shape and quality of his toy

bag to challenge his "realness."

They also employed naming practices to distance the Black Santa—and thus remove his power—using phrases such as "the Santa in the book" or "the

funny Santa," rather than naming the character simply "Santa," the name of familiarity invoked in all earlier read-alouds. Similarly, in a study with preschool children, Silvern, Surbeck, Kelley, Williamson, Silvern, and Taylor (1984) found that no child openly stated that the Black Santa was unreal because he was not White. Further, we found studying our discussions with children that no child proclaimed the "realness" of the Black Santa in a way that excluded the "realness" of White Santa. No "stand-alone" Black Santas were proposed by any of the children. Even Armand, who had observed Brown Santa, did not deny the reality of the White Santa.

Children, as participants in face-to-face discussions, also were likely to consider the ways their classmates might interpret and respond to their comments. Therefore, White children who rejected the Black Santa knew that openly stating a rejection

Simply reading literature cannot instantaneously change deeply entrenched, stereotypical belief systems.

on the basis of race could jeopardize their status in classrooms where their peers' official definitions of situation (Goffman, 1959) in read-alouds had, up to that point in the year, conveyed commitments to fairness, inclusion, and social justice. Children's techniques for dismissing the Black Santa without directly acknowledging race mirror those many Black adults recognize as veiled racism (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Shipler, 1997). Children like Jesse understood the power of the White children's interpretations and their White Santa; except in the presence of Black Santa, his comments were hushed and only spoken in a small-group setting.

We are not surprised at the children's need to "figure out" the place of Black Santa in their world of imaginary characters. Most Santas in shopping malls are White, and representations of Santa in most other children's books, holiday artifacts, and popular media portray a White or race-ambiguous Santa. Parents of the Black children involved in our study reported to us that their children were exposed, almost exclusively, to representations of White Santas outside of school. We argue that this representation is often the dominant presence in school, too; a child who tried to spell "Santa" during writing workshop time looked up the term in a picture dictionary (Reid & Crane, 1985) and was greeted with an illustration of White Santa. When we have asked other teachers if they know or use books with Black Santa representations, very few share that they own such books or have ever read them. Some groups of experienced teachers have even expressed surprise at the question.

OUR REFLECTIONS: WHAT DID WE LEARN?

As White co-researchers, we realized that sharing this work with others entailed some risk. We chose to share examples of our practice, however, because these are the circumstances under which genuine conversations often occur—in the moments for which we have not rehearsed. Joy and Angela operated in accordance with a philosophy that we must know the origins of children's questions and curiosities before we can begin providing opportunities that help children refine those perspectives and challenge those realities.

Since we experienced children's Santa Stories, Joy and Angela have more purposefully invited

conversations about race. Every teacher will sometimes make mistakes in creating spaces for race-oriented talk, but Joy and Angela have become more comfortable participating in the conversations *with* children and less afraid of imposing a point of view or judging prematurely. Now Joy and Angela regularly reflect on whose stories are (or are not) being told, find alternative ways to elicit the responses of children who are often silent, and develop what we believe to be sensitive strategies for expressing that they do not share a particular point of view a child puts forth. We have all learned that we have the power and the obligation to voice observations Black children might not yet feel, or *be*, safe contributing.

We mentioned that these read-alouds represented the beginning of open conversations about race in these classrooms. When children returned from winter break, Joy and Angela began purposefully including books with race themes (i.e., books that deal directly with issues of racism) in their teaching. While it is beyond the scope of this article to report our observations from the rest of the year (see Copenhaver-Johnson, 2006), we thought it important to recognize that the students in Joy's and Angela's classrooms *did*, over time, demonstrate some of the "changes of perspective" Cai (2003) references.

Some of the children's inquiries led to action and a sense of agency in conducting and publishing research. For example, Jesse, Jeff, and Cassidy (WF) spontaneously initiated research on Dr. King's assassination after Jesse pointed out that none of the several books on hand showed James Earl Ray, Dr. King's assassin, and most texts did not include many representations of White people at all. They wondered where the White people were, why they were not illustrated in the texts, and why Ray could have wanted to harm Dr. King. Their research resulted in a student-led, long-term project involving both Black and White classmates. Armand and Carrie made a big book biography of Dr. King's life. Thomas and his classmates constructed and illustrated a timeline of Dr. King's life. Aside from several projects, linked to children's specific interest in Dr. King, the substantive work of inquiry continued as children requested other books that openly discuss race: *Nappy Hair* (Heron, 1997), *White Socks Only* (Coleman, 1996), *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 1995), and

We have all learned that we have the power and the obligation to voice observations Black children might not yet feel, or *be*, safe contributing.

Through My Eyes (Bridges, 1999). These books prompted deeper, ongoing discussions about race, power, history, and diversity.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the children's freedom to continue exploring these issues depended on Joy and Angela's willingness to allow children to lead discussions to the topics of their interest, to provide ample textual resources, to *listen* to children, and to begin disrupting dysconscious racism. We hope our stories show the value of giving up the eggshell walk that permits power differentials and the dominant discourse to go unchallenged in many classrooms. We make no promise that taking on Nieto's (2003) challenge is easy; in order to do so, White teachers must evaluate the degree to which they and their students have experienced, or benefited from, racism and be open to challenging this reality.

We found we could more easily elicit children's inquiry responses to race-themed literature when we allowed children to express "first draft" thoughts free of judgment and interruption. In time, we have been able to lead children to more critically interrogate White privilege, but initial feelings of safety support response. In fact, as Rosenblatt (1938/95) notes, when we teach students to question, but ultimately accept their decision to embrace or challenge prevailing cultural "truths," we eventually "grow" citizens who will subject even the taken-for-granted to "the most skeptical scrutiny" (p. 14).

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Jeane Copenhaver-Johnson is assistant professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University. **Joy Bowman** and **Angela Johnson** teach first grade at Springmill Elementary School in Mansfield, Ohio, and are graduate students at The Ohio State University.

Making Space for Talk about Race

The following strategies have been helpful to us as we invite children's responses to race themes in literature.

- First, we have tried to create as safe a response environment as possible, although "safe" environments are difficult to provide when Whiteness is privileged.
- Second, we plan ample time for reading aloud and invite children's responses *during*, rather than *after* the reading so their insights aren't lost in a rushed read-aloud.
- Third, we demonstrate our own wondering talk (e.g., "I wonder . . .," "What if . . .?" "Have you considered . . .?") in response to children's ideas so that we can challenge and explore ideas without critiquing the contributing child. Sharing our genuine uncertainties helps children see that knowledge is constructed (rather than

fixed) and that we are willing to search alongside them to find answers to their questions and give voice to their realities.

- Finally, we find it important to encourage children to talk to one another. Strict rules for participation (e.g., hand raising) may signal that children are talking only with the teacher; generating various participant structures has worked for us in eliciting child-child dialogue—an empowering form of classroom conversation.

Children's understandings, realities, and wonderings, shared in the context of literature-based conversations, hold the potential to disrupt racism in ways that we teachers, alone, cannot. We hope other teachers and children will join us in this important work.

—Jeane F. Copenhaver-Johnson