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## Silence in the classroom: Learning to talk about issues of race

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**T**he first graders and I crowd around a circular table during “down time” in the classroom. My new friends clearly enjoy their roles as informants. After educating me about the appropriate times to approach the reading center, how to make a purchase at the book fair, and how they are related to one another, I encourage them to talk about favorite books, but suddenly they grow quiet. They are unable to think of any they like. I want to know how they feel about African American literature since I study children's responses to multicultural literature and have not had an opportunity to observe the children reading books with African American characters. Although a truly multicultural curriculum would represent many diverse perspectives and experiences, I am, for the moment, most interested in how the children feel about African American literature. However, they are not forthcoming with responses, so I decide to be explicit.

Jeane: So, do you like any books with black characters in them?

[There is a sudden pause in our discussion. The children look at me. Finally, James breaks the silence.]

James: There ain't hardly no books about black people.

[They look at me as if I had asked them to tell me about the last time they visited the moon. I imagine they're thinking, "Is she nuts?"]

Aleah: I think they have some [books about African Americans] in the library.

[I saw them there one time.]

I go home that afternoon feeling depressed. I find it hard to imagine that many children in our schools still do not have access to literature that reflects their life experiences, cultural histories, or their family rituals. However, it is a sad reality that many children do not see characters like themselves in the books they find at school. Furthermore, when African American literature is introduced into the classroom, I observe an alarming dynamic take place. African American children and white children often respond to these books very differently, and I can see the discomfort some white children experience when responding to books with explicit race-related themes. Over time, I have come to see that the social stigma attached to candid discussions of racial themes creates a silence preventing explicit talk about race, and this silence leads to further, subtle segregation—even within multiethnic, otherwise harmonious classrooms.

### THE DISCOMFORT THAT FOSTERS SILENCE: A RESEARCHER'S HISTORY

I always grow a bit nervous before I meet with the parents of the children who participate in my studies. I am white, as any parent can see, and I know that the awkward moment will come when I tell parents that I study reader response and ethnicity and that I would like to include their African American child in my study. Such a request communicates that I am not color blind—that I clearly see racial and ethnic diversity in the classroom and that I do not feel that the children are all the “same”

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despite their varying shades of skin color. It also means that I occasionally will talk to their children about race-related issues. According to Shipler (1997), many whites experience this hesitation before engaging in candid race-related talk. I believe my hesitation is compounded since I know that I am a cultural outsider-at best, an “external-insider” (Banks, 1998, p.8) researcher-so I must work diligently to remain credible.

However, over the last three years, most of my butterflies-in-the-stomach have dissipated. The responses of families have been overwhelmingly positive. Moms, dads, and grandparents embrace this research. Why? They support a white woman researching issues of African American response to multicultural literature because they know that many of their children respond to books in ways different from their white classmates. They do not need me to tell them that. They know if I study responses to multicultural literature, then their children will encounter African American literature (Sims, 1982), and their children at least will have the chance to see characters like themselves in books. The parents support me because they want teachers who understand that color blindness is not the answer to helping their children learn. They want teachers who recognize their youngsters’ challenges in becoming bicultural and who acknowledge that traditional school practices often undermine their children’s self-confidence and opportunities to learn. These parents long for teachers who know enough about their children’s cultures to help them feel and be included in what is sometimes an alien and threatening environment, and the families welcome candid talk about how culture affects their children’s behaviors and responses in schools. Parents often sigh and tell me stories about themselves as children, about their older children who have already grown disenchanted by school, and how they want something better for the children I study. Parents do not dance around the issue of race. In their lives, they have not had the privilege of ignoring its existence. They are reminded of it every day. In the schools where I work, however, a visitor generally will hear little talk about racial issues.

I believe my own initial discomfort with acknowledging race and ethnicity is rooted in my childhood. If we (white, working-class) kids noticed difference, we quickly learned it was not appropriate to discuss. Our classroom libraries were not multicultural (although our classrooms were multicultural), and we never engaged in any race-

oriented dialogue in school. The absence of talk created an atmosphere of silence. I have since come to believe that these silences harm more than help, that all children are entitled to representation in the books we read to children, and that books might help break the silence in classrooms (Desai, 1997; Harris, 1996; Macphee, 1997; Rush, 1998; Tatum, 1997; Tyson, 1999). While I do not advocate choosing literature simply for its potential in “teaching” about race-such an approach would be preachy and inauthentic-I *do* believe that those of us who read to children should not shy away from books with strong race-oriented themes. And we should not silence the children who would learn to talk about what many white adults (including many teachers) find uncomfortable. I remain surprised that I should need to state these observations today, but my fieldnotes suggest that candid race discussions are not happening in schools. Furthermore, if classroom libraries lack literature with African American characters, how will African American children feel about reading? How will all children learn to value diversity if they do not know how to acknowledge its existence?

In this article, I will explore some of the responses of African American and white children in four multiethnic classrooms (K-3) as the children responded to African American books. To do this, I will share examples from classrooms in which children have been invited to talk about books with race-related themes and/or African American characters. Although I have studied children’s responses to multicultural literature in general (i.e., literature collections that represent the experiences and themes of many ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups), my current inquiry is focused on the children’s responses to African American literature. In my studies, the African American and white students have exhibited strikingly different responses to race-related literature, so I have singled out from my larger data sample representative transcripts from occasions during which children read books with strong race themes. In a larger study (Copenhaver, 1998), I found that African American literature fostered more frequent and higher levels of response from African American children than literature with non-African American protagonists and themes. In direct contrast, I discovered that white students fell comparably silent about race-related literature, and I have only recently begun to wonder if their silence is connected to the silence I experienced as a child and the silence among the adults Shipler (1997)

documents.

I would argue that the inclusion of African American literature has the potential to prompt all students to examine alternate points of view and be offered opportunities for deep aesthetic response (Macphee, 1997). As demonstrated by the comments of the African American students I have studied, African American children have much to say about race-related literature and engage deeply with African American books when they are shared. More importantly, however, exposure to culturally unfamiliar material, a useful experience for any child, holds the potential to encourage cultural and racial harmony among all children in multiethnic environments. The books also offer children a prompt to begin discussing the unspoken. However, I find white students do not engage in this dialogue with the enthusiasm or confidence of African American children.

Although I focus most of my attention on the responses of African American child participants, it should be noted that the responses of white child participants are equally rich and interesting. However, in the interest of giving each group of responses the time and attention needed for discussion, I have chosen to limit my attention to classroom episodes from my data in which my case study participants (all African American) have a strong presence. In my discussions, I use the term "African American" because this is the term of preference among most of the parents I have interviewed. I use the term "white" because I have never heard children or parents labeling one another "European American." I realize that both terms are ridden with difficulty.

### METHOD

The data analyzed for this article are drawn from two studies of how African American children responded to books in racially integrated elementary classroom settings. During the last three years, I have worked with five classroom teachers in two very different kinds of environments—one suburban school and one inner-city school—to learn more about the possible relationships between a child's ethnic identity and his[her] responses to literature. My interest grows out of reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995) and critical theory. Since neither "ethnic identity" nor "response" can be easily measured, I have used qualitative research methodology to explore the nature of children's responses and to describe the interpretive communities that developed during shared literacy events.

Therefore, I became (in the first study) and remain (in my current study) a participant-observer in the classrooms—interacting with children, collecting via fieldnotes their comments and questions, recording with audio equipment the dialogue created during whole-class and small-group read alouds, and analyzing these data for patterns in the types of responses that become evident. I selected qualitative research methodology because "qualitative methods can give the intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.19). Other literacy researchers have used such naturalistic methods to study children's responses to literature in elementary classrooms (e.g., Cox, 1997; Gallas, 1997; Hickman, 1981; Lewis, 1997; Sipe, 1997).

However, such research is problematic for a number of reasons. First, responses are only evident once they become *observable*, so the responses I am able to collect and analyze are only children's *mediated* responses. A second, and extremely significant, challenge is that the racial or ethnic self-identifications of children are socially constructed and are often limited by the boundaries imposed on them by society regarding skin color, insider-outsiderness, and language. A third difficulty of my research has been to honor what I am learning about the responses of white students while maintaining my focus on my case study participants—all of whom self-identify as African American or black.

My analysis procedures included coding children's responses by mode (Hickman, 1992) and the level of response. I used traditional qualitative research coding procedures (Spradley, 1980; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to assist me in evaluating (and sometimes revising or discarding) emergent patterns of response. I have considered, for instance, how aesthetic or efferent responses appeared to be, the ways in which children's responses are shaped by both culture and the classroom interpretive community, and how often the case study participants have stepped into stories. During the last year, I have decided to look specifically at the data in which the children read (or were read) African American literature.

In this article, I explore one strong finding from my first study that I unfortunately see again in my second, ongoing study; African American and white children's responses to African American literature suggest differing levels of racial understanding and aesthetic involvement with stories. I do not possess the answers to the challenge I present—namely, how to create racially harmoni-

ous environments for children in which race-related talk is not taboo—but I would like to raise the awareness of other teachers and researchers interested in fostering a democratic, multicultural society. Only by looking closely, asking many questions, and working together will teachers and researchers find ways to foster the voices of all our children.

### GLIMPSES INTO A CLASSROOM WHERE THE SILENCE IS BROKEN

Dylan's teacher is an experienced, African American female. Her classroom bookshelves are lined with more African American literature than I have ever observed in a classroom. A photo of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. hangs on the wall, and she includes posters of African American role models above a row of lockers. In her class, there is little silence about race; she talks about it with a level of comfort I have yet to observe with any white teacher. Dylan, an African American third grader in her class, reads voraciously and often welcomes the opportunity to share his readings with me.

During students' free choice reading time, I go sit with Dylan. He is reading alone. I don't catch the title of his book. I ask if he's interested in reading with me. "Sure," he responds.

"Do you like that book?" I ask, nodding toward the book he is holding. Dylan shakes his head, "no" and hurries to put it away. He grabs two copies of a biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—one for me and one for him. **THIS** book, he likes. A big smile creeps across his face. As he reads aloud to me, he periodically stops to point out the illustrations. He mentions that his classroom teacher had been to the March on Washington in 1963, and when the bus boycotts are mentioned, he reaches to a nearby bookcase and points to a copy of the autobiography of Rosa Parks (Parks with Haskins, 1992). His familiarity with the themes of the story, the civil rights movement and justice issues, clearly seeps through the intertextual connections he makes. On a page with an illustration of the police with big sticks and dogs harassing the peaceful, non-violent demonstrators, Dylan comments to me that the people on the page "were not doing anything but the police still beat them up." He then spontaneously shares with me that when he and his uncle once rode their bikes on a local street, an old white woman came out and called them "niggers." After our conversation (somehow I have no record in my fieldnotes of how I could possibly have responded to him, yet I know we

spoke at some length about the episode and the rest of the book) he hurries to choose another text. He immediately picks a different, easier-to-read Rosa Parks biography for us to read together (Brandt, 1993).

Shipler (1997) explains that he rarely meets an African American man who has not encountered trouble with police. Most have also experienced the "n-word." These kinds of background knowledge influence the sorts of books children select for reading and how they talk about those books with their peers. Dylan's selection of books about the civil rights movement and African American heroes seems consistent with his commitments and interests. Furthermore, reading these books offers him the opportunity to clarify his past experiences, construct new historical understandings, and connect with his teacher. The children from my opening vignette could not engage in this quality of response to literature since they were unsure of even the existence of any African American literature.

Later this year I sat in on Dylan's teacher reading-aloud **Nappy Hair** (Herron, 1997). Her class was evenly divided, with approximately half African American and half white students. While most of the African American students participated enthusiastically in the call and response in the story, I noticed only one or two of the white children engaged in similar movement, smiled, or made eye contact with peers. Furthermore, I noticed the volume of the call and response got louder and louder during the story, so much so that their teacher warned them to hold their voices down a little. The narrative style Herron uses to tell the story is consistent with traditional African American storytelling patterns (Hale-Benson, 1982), and the African American children in this class needed no prodding to engage in the oral responses. Many of the children clearly enjoyed the reading-momentarily forgetting about me, my audiorecorder, and my notetaking. Following the interactive storytelling, the teacher invited the children to share their thoughts. (I use the abbreviations AF for African American Female, AM for African American Male, WM for white Male, and WF for white female.)

[The teacher has read aloud **Nappy Hair** (Herron, 1997) and invites the children to respond immediately after the reading.]

Teacher (AF): Okay, tell me what you liked about this book, or didn't like about this

book. Maybe you didn't like it.  
 Simba?  
 Simba (AM): I liked it.  
 Teacher: But you have to tell me why. You can't just say I liked it. Why did you like it?  
 Simba: Because, when I had my long hair, every time I'd try to comb my hair, I'd have to get another comb 'cause the first comb I used would break.  
 Teacher: It would snap, wouldn't it? You have to know how to comb nappy hair. It will hurt too, won't it? So yes, I agree with you, you have to know how to comb it. Damon?  
 [Latresa is waving her hand all around]  
 Damon (AM): I like it 'cause [it's] like when I got to hurry up and comb my hair so I won't miss the bus.  
 Teacher: Oh, it's about combing hair. So you could really identify with it, like Simba said. He can understand this book. Uh, Anna, what did you think about this book?  
 Anna (WF): It was good.  
 Teacher: You liked it? What did you like about it?  
 [pause, pause]  
 Teacher: I'll come back to you, okay, and you can tell me what you liked. Latresa?  
 Latresa (AF): I liked it because every morning when my mommy have time to comb my hair, she has to do 3 or 2 braids cause she have to go to work at seven o'clock. My mommy did this yesterday.  
 [She holds up a twist.]  
 Teacher: Skip?  
 Skip (AM): Her hair nappy like my cousin's.  
 Teacher: Now you can tell your cousin it's okay to have nappy hair. It's okay, it's okay to have nappy hair. It gets tangled up like that and it's hard to comb, too, and you have to be careful or you'll pull your hair out, won't you? Have you ever gotten those like big balls in your hair? Your hair balls up, and the only way to get it out is to pull the hair out almost. Cheryl? What did you think?  
 Cheryl (WF): I like it because it talked about hair.

Teacher: You liked it because you like hair? Okay. Uh-tell me a part of this that you did not like. Oh, Anna, before we do that, I was going to come back to you sweetheart. What is it about this book that you like?  
 Anna: I dunno.  
 Teacher: What did you like? Just tell me one thing about this book that you liked.  
 Anna: Pictures.  
 Teacher: You liked the pictures? Why?  
 Anna: 'Cause they was colorful.

Some African American children had little trouble responding to the story aesthetically by moving to the rhythms of the words, adding facial or hand gestures to accentuate the responses (e.g., "Brother, you ought to be *ashamed*," and "*What you say!?*"). It was as if they were *in* the story during the reading, and they easily made personal connections to the hair content during the follow up discussion. In fact, the children and teacher discussed the different terms families used for straightening combs, and the teacher demonstrated how a permanent had relaxed the curl in her own "nappy" hair. When asked to find a favorite part or make a connection, they did so easily. However, the white children were prompted multiple times to find a part that they did or did not like, and the girls in this excerpt found it difficult to specify a specific part of the story, even a theme in the story as a favorite part. Very few white children volunteered to answer the teacher's questions; I suspect she was calling on them to be sure she was providing equitable speaking turns.

I have yet to meet a white teacher brave enough to read **Nappy Hair** to his[her] class. During a post-reading discussion with the teacher in this example, she acknowledged the risk involved in reading this book aloud. She joked, "Oh, I'll probably get fired for this." Her passion for opening opportunities for African American children to see themselves in books, however, fosters her risk-taking. In a later interview she comments, "I'm very much into African American literature because there wasn't much available when I was growing up. So I share that with my students and with my [own] children." Although I tell her frequently what a contribution she makes to the identity development of her African American students, I wonder if she realizes what a difference her willingness to talk about race makes. I also wonder how the white children in this class can be helped

to overcome their discomfort with race-related themes. Do they feel uncomfortable talking about race? Do they lack the background information to help them understand? Do they find it difficult to step into stories (Langer, 1990) with African American themes, even in an environment supportive of their talk? Despite the awkwardness of the white students' responses to **Nappy Hair**, however, the children in Dylan's class frequently and spontaneously engaged in cross-race friendships and peer play.

### CONSEQUENCES OF SILENCE

I observed a rather different pattern in another school where I spent a year researching. The white classroom teacher, committed to issues of equity and justice in her teaching, often read-aloud to her students and owned a rich collection of multicultural literature. Although the kindergarten through second grade classroom was multiethnic, and the teacher made a conscious effort to create heterogeneous groups during cooperative experiences, I still observed white girls exhibit racist attitudes toward African American girls. Since most of these behaviors occurred in the unofficial social worlds of the classroom (Dyson, 1993), the teacher was not completely conscious of them. The white girls' behaviors included developing a club only for the girls who were in Brownies together (all white), exclusive play-writing groups during writing time, and unwritten rules about who could sit near them at lunch tables. Precious, an African American first grader, repeatedly tried to join the exclusive peer group by claiming she would soon be enrolling in Brownies, trying to sit with the white girls at lunch time, and writing stories in her journal modeled after theirs. Despite her many attempts, which I have chronicled elsewhere (Copenhaver, 1998; Copenhaver, 1999), the white girls' group still did not accept her or any other African American girl into their elite circle.

What I found curious, however, were the ways in which the white girls responded to stories with explicit race themes. Since the children did not often talk about race explicitly, the white girls' racist behaviors went unchallenged—instead labeled as “friendship groups” or attributed to neighborhood play patterns. When asked why the two groups didn't play together, the white girls commented, “I don't know,” and “because we have a club.” But when I asked Precious why she and her African American friends didn't play with specific white girls, Precious remarked, “I do, but they be tellin’

me to go away.” I confirmed her impressions many times during playground observations or “explore” (free-choice) time in the classroom. However, even when engaged in stories where racism emerges as a strong theme, the white children did not identify their behaviors as similar to those of the discriminatory characters in the stories.

For instance, the white girls' group shifted a discussion of **The Story of Ruby Bridges** (Coles, 1995) into a discussion of the underground railroad—a way of displacing the overt discriminatory behaviors into a well-removed time period the class had once studied. Slavery was the only example of racial discrimination of which the white girls were conscious, and they considered racism a challenge of ancient times. As Tatum (1997) notes, slavery “is one of the few ways that the black experience is included” in the school curriculum (p.41). One girl—the girl with the all white “club”—claimed that their school principal would never stand for discriminatory behaviors like those in the book since “Black people are people, too.” Another white girl asked, “Why would they do that?” about the vicious crowd outside Ruby's school. However, this same girl (who later in the conversation was required to answer her own question and speculated it was because the whites thought that “black people weren't safe”) forbade Precious to sit by her in a vacant seat at the lunch table. In contrast, the African American children in the classroom supplemented the readings with outside information grounded in their prior experiences. For instance, when viewing the page where the white crowd torments Ruby, Travis, an African American, remarked, “They be tellin’ her ‘Go back to Africa’ and stuff like that” even though those particular torments did not appear in the text. Precious even engaged in transparent response (Sipe, 1998) as she began describing Ruby's commitment to attending school, expressing, “I wouldn't want to be dumb.”

On another occasion when the teacher in Precious' class read aloud **Happy Birthday, Martin Luther King I**, (Morzollo, 1993), nearly all of the African American children were familiar with the famous “I Have a Dream” speech and were aware of Dr. King's assassination at the Lorraine Motel. Billy, a first grader, burst into a preacher-like response when he jumped up after the teacher commented, “His dream was that people everywhere would learn to live together without being mean to one another.” Billy interrupted and stood for emphasis. “I heard somebody say, ‘One day, I

had a *dream!*” adding the “one day” content that he recalled from such lines as “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed” (King, 1963) even though those words were not present in the text. White children sat quietly and seemed appalled with looks of surprise on their faces as the teacher discussed separate water fountains and restrooms. Later, I noticed that only African American children selected King as their topic in their self-selected writing, and the percentage of African American oral responses to the story had risen substantially relative to their percentages of contributions to non-African American stories.

Tatum (1997) and Holmes (1995) argue that even young children are in the process of developing strong understandings about race while simultaneously engaging in their own racial identity development. I would suggest that finding ways to foster explicit talk about race could counter events such as the one I experienced a few weeks ago while I sat at a reading center with a small group of kindergartners who asked me to read aloud **Grandpa’s Face** (Greenfield, 1988). As I read along in the story, I paused at the end of each page and invited children to say anything they liked into a hand held tape recorder. Soon after introducing Tamika (the main character) and her Grandpa, April (AF) commented, “I want to say that Tamika liked the way her Paw Paw face look.” As she commented on the grandfather, April superimposed her own grandfather’s title (Paw Paw) and many times stepped into the story, speaking for Tamika. Her classmate, Caitlyn (WF), responded in a way I had not expected.

Jeane: [reading along] ... Tamika knew she was safe then. Safe enough to hug Grandpa and kiss the sturdy brown of his face-

Caitlyn: [She interrupts] YUCK! [but I read on as if I haven’t heard her.]

Jeane: Grandpa hugged her back. “Let’s go home now,” he said.

[After I’m through reading this page, I decide to ask Caitlyn about her response.]

Jeane: Caitlyn, why did you say ‘yuck’? What was the part that made you think about ‘yuck’?

Caitlyn: ‘Kiss his brown face.’ [trying to quote the text]

Could responses like these be prevented with more open talk about race?

### TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Although the examples in this article are pulled from only four classrooms, the disturbing patterns in these episodes are representative of over 80 read-aloud observations I have conducted recently. If young African American children are prepared to discuss issues of race, why are white children so unprepared to discuss them? Shipler (1997) explains of the adults he interviewed, “The black person cannot go very long without thinking about race. ... By contrast, most whites rarely have to give race much thought. They do not begin childhood with advice from parents about how to cope with racial bias ... [or] search for themselves in history books or literature courses” (p.10). If racial socialization begins so young, as many researchers have concluded it does, we should naturally expect children to have different levels of preparation for engaging in candid race talk.

Although African American literature has the potential to foster the conversations that could help children create understanding, supportive, harmonious cross-cultural communities, children’s responses in my studies suggest that teachers carry a considerable burden as they encourage students to talk about these books. Despite their good intentions, teachers may find it challenging to create bonds of understanding. As Rosenblatt (1938/1995) explains, “The reader’s fund of relevant memories makes possible any reading at all. Without linkage to the past experiences and present interests of the reader, the work will not come alive for him, or, rather, he will not be prepared to bring it to life” (p.77).

Therefore, it is not surprising, perhaps, that many of the white children in these examples distance themselves from the issues. While some renegotiate the topics, turning them into race issues they feel comfortable discussing such as slavery, others avoid responding at all unless prompted by the teacher. It is possible that some white children are coping with feelings borne out of misunderstanding, unfamiliarity, and discomfort, and many clearly lack the background experiences to help them participate fully in race-related conversations. Although white children like Caitlyn play daily with other African American children at school, her feelings about “brown skin” probably grow from her ignorance of why skin is brown or from a fear of the unfamiliar. Tatum (1997) provides an example of how her African American son was asked if his skin turned brown from drinking too much choco-

late milk; children often hypothesize reasons for difference. If Caitlyn believes brown skin is dirty, a confession I have heard from white teachers describing their childhood generalizations about skin colors (Copenhaver, 1996), then it is possible that her negative attitude will not be changed simply by hearing these books read aloud. And for the children introduced in the opening vignette, hearing a comment like Caitlyn's response with no follow-up conversations to help invite understanding, having African American literature in the classroom could be as harmful as that literature's absence. The children in the vignettes presented here are not necessarily adopting the stance of "stepping back and rethinking what one knows" (Langer, 1990, p.238), one of the stances in reading literary texts for understanding.

A related question is why I see so few teachers reading African American literature, even in classes where African American students make up half or more of the student population. Perhaps one reason I see a lack of books is that teachers fear the very kind of comment made by Caitlyn. When children talk about race-when they are *truly* invited to share their understandings, wonderings, and observations-there is indeed a risk that children will speak what is often unspoken. In interviews, even the teachers who introduce these books comment that they, too, worry about how others will perceive them and about how what they say will be interpreted by children as they go home to share with their parents. The African American children in my studies have responded enthusiastically to high-quality African American literature, however. If one considers the discomfort of white children reading African American literature, might it be important to realize what children like those in my opening vignette cope with as their steady diet of all-white literature?

The silence that surrounds race discussions should be broken. Twenty years after my childhood, the white children I observe still are as afraid to talk about race as I was in elementary school. For students like Precious, it is imperative that children be invited to critically read books with race themes and connect what they are learning to contemporary society. Unless children are challenged to break their implicitly racist behaviors and to identify examples of subtle racism, unless they are challenged to rethink what they know, then there is little chance children like Precious truly have choice over their peer groups. And unless teachers and children have these critical discussions, the si-

lence will not be broken, and children like Caitlyn may waste years misunderstanding their classmates. Finally, all children have a right to see characters like themselves in books. Such a philosophy is a tenet of a strong multicultural classroom approach to literacy. Our silence disables all our children. When teachers provide the books and the conversations, we open the door to dialogue that can allow all our students to grow in their understandings of one another. And when we can do that, we contribute to perspective-taking, ethnic validation, and, we hope, a harmonious future society.

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