

“How Did White People Even Know Not to Like Us?": Sixth-Grade Discussions of Culturally Relevant Texts

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This article examines the ways sixth-grade students drew on their culturally situated knowledge in order to discuss race(ism) during whole-class read alouds.

WHITE WOMEN make up the largest demographic of K–12 teachers in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). At the same time, public schools are increasingly made up of non-White students. In the 2018–2019 school year, non-White students accounted for 53 percent of American K–12 students (Schaeffer, 2021). Despite postracial discourses that insist race or racism is not an issue anymore (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Demby & Meraji, 2021), race and racism (race[ism]) play a role in teachers' and students' lives both inside and outside the classroom. In schools similar to the one in this study, where over 75 percent of the students were non-White, students come to their classrooms having lived experiences with racism, and yet, in many classrooms, racism is never discussed or it is relegated to the past (Bolgatz, 2005; Brown et al., 2017; Husband, 2019; Jupp et al., 2019; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Thomas, 2015).

White people who are still reluctant to talk about racism are present in the teaching force, which is about 80 percent White (Schaeffer, 2021). The dominance of race-evasiveness among White teachers is well-documented in the literature (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Jupp et al., 2019). This means, in many classrooms, there are White teachers who are unwilling or unable to *discuss* racism with students who are themselves *experiencing* racism.

This silence doesn't change the fact that students of

color experience racism in their lives, so it behooves White teachers to figure out how to foster these discussions in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to show an example of how students of color engaged in classroom conversations about race(ism) that were facilitated by a White teacher. As I will discuss further, the context is complicated. I was the instructor during the class sessions described here, but I was not the classroom teacher. I was occupying a liminal position—I was the one doing the teaching, but I was not the teacher of record.

In this article, I describe conversations that occurred during whole-class read alouds. Whole-class read alouds and accompanying class discussions have long been a vehicle for classroom race talk (Daly, 2022; Hollingworth, 2009; Price-Dennis et al., 2016; Thomas, 2015). In much of the literature, White teachers avoid engaging in conversations about race, or they attempt to facilitate the discussions, which goes poorly due to discomfort or lack of knowledge on the part of the teachers (Thomas, 2015).

For this study, I employed the analytic tools of self-study (Dinkelman, 2003) to examine the ways sixth-grade students were able to draw on their culturally situated knowledge (Brooks & Browne, 2012) in order to discuss race(ism) during whole-class read alouds facilitated by me. This research addresses a gap in the literature by exploring the resources students take up during discus-

sions about race(ism). I use critical theories of Whiteness to situate my role as teacher, as well as the ideologies I brought into the classroom. Since childhood, most of my social life has been in predominantly non-White spaces. This is not to downplay my Whiteness, but to add that it has never been invisible to me. Additionally, because of such experiences, I bring different kinds of cultural capital into the classroom compared to most White female teachers. Race operates as a binary in the United States *and* there are also liminal spaces within that binary, some of which I have occupied my entire life.

I am framing my liminal positions in the classroom—around race as well as around my position as a teacher educator, researcher, and “guest teacher”—as those that afforded me more freedom than the classroom teacher to explore curricular possibilities outside the district’s pacing guide. The questions I explore here are: In what ways do students draw on their positionalities and lived experiences in order to discuss texts about police brutality? And, more broadly, how can teachers use facilitative texts (Howard & Ticknor, 2019) as springboards for discussions about sociopolitical issues that can shift the ways students are positioned vis-à-vis the content?

Theoretical Underpinnings

CULTURALLY SITUATED READER RESPONSE

Reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1982, 1985) posits that meaning making is a transactional process between the text and the reader. Readers bring their background knowledge and lived experiences to the text and actively construct meaning, rather than the texts having a set meaning that the reader uncovers. Brooks and Browne (2012) extended reader response theory in their description of culturally situated reader response. Brooks and Browne state that “literary interpretations are influenced by readers’ ethnic backgrounds as well as the cultural milieu embedded in the stories they read” (p. 76). Brooks and Browne (2012) found that readers used four cultural positions in their responses to texts: ethnic group, community, family, and peers (p. 78). Importantly, these cultural positions are not distinct from each other; they overlap and influence each other as readers make sense of texts. Because my focus in this study is on reading facilitative texts (Howard & Ticknor, 2019) that ask students to draw on their lived experiences in discussions, culturally situated reader response made sense as an analytical tool. Culturally situated reader response names the kind of social and cultural information students were able to bring to the conversations about the texts that helped them make meaning of what they read as well as co-construct understandings with each other.

CRITICAL THEORIES OF WHITENESS

I am both the author of this article and the teacher in the study, which puts me in a liminal space of teacher and researcher, insider and outsider. I was doing the work of the teacher while I was in the classroom, but I also had time and space not afforded to full-time classroom teachers to think, plan, and reflect. My own ideologies about race(ism) and, specifically, Whiteness shape everything about this study from the choices of books I read to the sixth graders and the conversations I facilitated, to the lens I viewed the data through and the choices I have made in writing up the results. Drawing on the work of critical race theory, I believe race(ism) to be the primary organizing principle of the United States and all its institutions, including schools (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefanic, 2000; Juárez & Hayes, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Race is a by-product of racism and not the other way around, as it is commonly thought to be (Coates, 2015). Whiteness is not a neutral category—its existence is synonymous with oppression and dominance (Roediger, 1991; Zaccor & Thurman, 2021). Critical theories of race and Whiteness aim to draw back the veil that obscures the ways Whiteness operates in the United States. In my work with the sixth graders in this study, I aimed to center and discuss issues of race(ism), rather than dance around them or avoid them altogether, as many White teachers do.

Literature Review

Although there is already a vast body of literature that examines the roles of White teachers using books to talk about race, here I survey the literature that ties in the concept of critical conversations (Vetter et al., 2021) with facilitative texts (Howard & Ticknor, 2019).

FACILITATIVE TEXTS

The existing literature is clear that culturally relevant pedagogy is a powerful way of addressing the disconnect students of color often experience between school and their outside-of-school lives (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). One way to make classrooms more culturally relevant is through the selection of curricular materials, including the literature teachers make available for students to read (Bishop, 1990; Fox & Short, 2003; McNair, 2008; Osorio, 2018). Here I am looking specifically at Howard and Ticknor’s (2019) concept of facilitative texts as books that “mediate productive discussions about social justice topics” (p. 32).

Selecting facilitative texts (Howard & Ticknor, 2019) is an important first step, but it is not sufficient to choose texts that solely lend themselves to discussions about sociopolitical issues and assume there is no other work that needs to be done. As Rodriguez and Vickery (2020)

argued, "the sheer presence of so-called 'diverse' texts in a classroom does not guarantee that such books will be read and/or taught in ways that uplift marginalized groups and does not guarantee the teaching of our truths and hard histories" (p. 110). Teachers must also engage in critical conversations with students around these texts (Schieble et al., 2020).

CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Vetter et al. (2021) define critical conversations as "discussions about power and privilege that help students think critically about the world and their place in it" (p. 1). Much of the existing research on critical conversations has focused on analyzing teacher talk moves. Vetter et al. (2021) examined the teacher talk moves of a high school teacher engaging in critical conversations, Skerrett (2011) looked at two high school teachers' racial literacy practices, and Daly (2022) examined the "race talk moves" of a fourth-grade teacher. All three studies classified different types of conversational moves on the part of the teachers. Similarly, Thomas (2015) examined the discursive moves high school teachers made during literature-based discussions about race. Other studies have examined the ways elementary school children inquire about race and power during whole-class read alouds (Copenhaver, 2001; Copenhaver-Johnson et al., 2007; Tyson, 1999). The present study builds on this previous work, but focuses on the culturally situated resources that the students draw on during these critical conversations about race(ism) in the liminal space of not-quite-elementary and not-quite-secondary that is sixth grade.

Brown and her colleagues (2017) conducted a review of research on "classroom conversations on race" and stated in their conclusion that "many more studies are needed that provide detailed . . . analysis of the conversations themselves" (p. 472). The present study responds to that call by describing discussions facilitated by a White teacher during whole-class read alouds and examining the culturally situated knowledge that students drew on to participate in these discussions.

Method

This study involves the work of a class of sixth-grade students, their teacher, and myself. Because I ended up playing an active role in the instruction analyzed here, I am part of the case (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Stake, 1995). I started out as a more traditional outside observer as I built relationships with the students, and then, as more trust was established and as jointly decided by Tiffany¹ and myself, I took on a more active participant observer role (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997).

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

Although I was the person facilitating instruction in the classes discussed in this study, I was not the teacher of record in this sixth-grade class. I was doing collaborative work with one of my former teacher education students, Tiffany. Tiffany's sixth-grade classroom was made up of twenty-nine students: fifteen boys and fourteen girls. Based on the way they were identified by the school, there were eighteen Black students, eight Hispanic/Latino students, two White students, and one multiracial student. Tiffany is a Black, female teacher, who was in her first semester of teaching at the time of the data collection. According to the school district's website, at Tiffany's school, 21 percent of the students were considered at or above grade level in math and 31 percent were considered at or above grade level in reading. The school is part of a small school district in the Midwestern United States. The school district was made up of thirteen elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools. According to the school district's website, the racial demographics of the district as a whole were 44.5 percent Black, 26.6 percent Hispanic/Latino, 20.8 percent White, 6.9 percent multiracial, and 1 percent Asian.

POSITIONALITY

I am a White, middle-class, monolingual, cisgender woman—part of the same demographic that makes up the majority of K–12 teachers in the United States. Being a White teacher-researcher in a classroom of predominantly Black and Latinx students absolutely matters. My Whiteness, and the power and privilege it gives me, was always present in the room and undoubtedly influenced the things that students said as well as their general comfort levels. Yet I was not new to this type of setting. While Brown et al.'s (2017) review of research on conversations about race in preservice teacher education found that "the majority of students in these preservice teacher education classrooms appear to lack experiences among people of color, they have lived and been educated in predominantly White environments all their lives" (p. 471), this does not represent my lived experiences.

Prior to working in teacher education, I was a classroom teacher for ten years in upper elementary and middle school. I also currently teach English language arts (ELA) to eighth graders in lieu of one of my university classes. Nearly all of my time in K–12 (both as a student and a classroom teacher) has been spent in majority-Black schools, which is in stark contrast with the majority of White teachers.

Although Tiffany's sixth graders did not know me when I first started working in their classroom, Tiffany knew me. I taught several of Tiffany's courses in an

alternative certification program for college graduates who were seeking teaching credentials. This meant prior to joining Tiffany's class as a participant observer, I had known and worked with Tiffany for a year. Tiffany was hired mid-year; considering me a mentor, she invited me to visit (and participate in) her classroom. Tiffany had told her students about me, and her "vouching" for me helped me gain cultural capital with her students. In addition, every time I go into a classroom, I work intentionally to build relationships with students. This includes talking to students about my background, engaging in authentic conversations whenever I can, and expressing interest in the students as people. None of these things are magic—but I think those factors matter, and they opened avenues for more comfortable relationships between myself and the students than would have otherwise existed. I prioritize building those relationships. As anyone who has spent time in a classroom knows, kids are remarkably good at discerning which adults can be trusted.

When I first started coming to Tiffany's class, it was solely in a supportive role. I sat with groups of students and helped them with their work, passed out papers, and completed other tasks to assist Tiffany and her students. This was particularly important as a White woman entering a Black teacher's classroom. After a few weeks of attending her class, Tiffany and I discussed ways I could help her to supplement or complicate the curriculum, because she, understandably, felt like she needed to stay on track with her grade-level team and follow the district's pacing guide. Ultimately, we decided I would do a read aloud on the days I came in.

When I interviewed Tiffany and asked her what she thought the students were getting out of the read alouds she said, "They love being read to and I didn't know that until we started . . . they like having those conversations, they like being able to have those talks." Here is more from our conversation:

Karla: How do you see that read aloud time as connected or not connected to the rest of the literacy work that you all are doing in here?

Tiffany: It goes to a deeper connection for them. The literacy work that we do is not as in-depth or as meaningful as those books. . . . So, you know, reading a passage and picking out key details. You know, they can read anything and pick out key details, but having that connection, that's what's gonna stick to them. That's what they're gonna remember . . . I hear it when they're talking. They say things like, "we didn't get to read our book today."

Although I led instruction during the read-aloud time (partly to give Tiffany, who was in her first semester of teaching, a break), our text selection and instructional plan were decided collaboratively.

TEXT SELECTION

Text selection is another aspect of liminality in this study. Young adult (YA) novels are written for a seventh- to twelfth-grade audience, but many middle-grade books (targeted for third to sixth graders) are not complex enough for sixth graders, especially since our focus was on books that would lend themselves to critical conversations during whole-class read alouds. In my twenty years of experience teaching ELA to fifth through eighth graders, sixth graders are the hardest group to select texts for because of their liminal place (between elementary and high school). Tiffany and I first decided to read *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018). We thought this book would be good for this sixth-grade class because it was about a social issue (police violence). Also, I was familiar with other books Rhodes had written, so I thought it would be a good fit for a sixth-grade class. In *Ghost Boys*, the twelve-year-old main character, Jerome, is killed by a police officer at the beginning of the book. He is then present as a ghost for the rest of the book, where he sees the aftermath of his killing.

We chose the second book, *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015), because the students repeatedly asked for another book "just like" *Ghost Boys*. *All American Boys* alternates between the perspectives of a Black teenager, who is beaten up by a police officer, and one of his White teenage classmates, who has known the police officer for his entire life. *Ghost Boys* is a middle-grade book, and *All American Boys* is a YA book.

DATA COLLECTION

I visited Tiffany's classroom about once a week for four months during the spring semester of 2019 (n = 13). On the days I was there, I usually stayed for about ninety minutes during the ELA block. We would do the read aloud first for about thirty to sixty minutes each time. During the read aloud time I read and facilitated conversations. I audio-recorded those sessions and later wrote them up as field notes using my audio-recording and my memory to help me reconstruct the read aloud session. There were drawbacks to this because I had to rely on what the audio picked up and my memory. Sometimes quieter students couldn't be heard or there was lots of overlapping talk, so I could not parse out the separate contributions to the conversation. After the read-aloud portion of the class was over, I would stay for the rest of the block in the role of participant observer while Tiffany facilitated class. During that time, I audio-recorded and took notes. I also interviewed Tiffany

once, after school, for about an hour, asking questions about how she felt about the ELA curriculum and the ways it connected with our read alouds. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. For this project, however, I am only drawing from the conversations between myself and the students in the class that happened during the read aloud time.

ANALYSIS

Because my research questions were focused on the ways students conversed about the read aloud text, I identified related chunks of talk from my field notes. These chunks of talk consisted of any instance where there was conversation connected to the texts we were reading. For example, there were several instances in my field notes of students shushing each other or Tiffany explaining to the students what materials they should have out, and I did not include those in my analysis.

For any given project, a multitude of theories could be used to frame the work. I ultimately decided culturally situated reader response theory was ideal for highlighting the kinds of knowledge and experience students can bring to ELA discussions when given the opportunity. I went through several rounds of coding and analysis before choosing culturally situated reader response theory as the lens through which I wanted to analyze the data. Throughout my initial analysis, I wrote analytic memos documenting the steps I took, what themes and relationships I was noticing, and what questions I had. Once I made that decision, I used deductive coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997) and used the different cultural positions Brooks and Browne (2012) described as my codes.

Findings

In the sections that follow, I will describe the ways students engaged in discussions about culturally relevant texts, using culturally situated reader response to name the kinds of knowledge they centered in their responses. I will first describe the ways students centered their ethnic group position in discussing racism. Then, I will talk about the ways the students used their family positions to make sense of characters' actions and motivations in our classroom conversations. Brooks and Browne (2012) remind us that these positions "are not so tidy and easily categorized . . . the responses are overlapping, transient, and often revised, as is consistent with the nature of cultural practices and the fast-paced give and take of discussions" (p. 83). While I am separating these positions out for analysis in the findings, it is important to remember that the richness of the discussion lies in students having the opportunity to relate to the text in these multiple, shifting, and overlapping ways.

Choosing books that explicitly discuss race and racism and encouraging further conversation during reading allow students to share experiential knowledge, pose questions, and construct new understandings about the way racism operates in our society.

TALKING ABOUT RACISM: CENTERING AN ETHNIC GROUP POSITION

"HOW DID WHITE PEOPLE EVEN KNOW NOT TO LIKE US?"

Choosing books that explicitly discuss race and racism and encouraging further conversation during reading allow students to share experiential knowledge, pose questions, and construct new understandings about the way racism operates in our society. This allowed students to center their lived experiences of race and racism and apply that knowledge to their comprehension of text, therefore positioning themselves as experts and successful readers, as demonstrated by the students' discussion shown below. Toward the end of the novel *Ghost Boys* (Rhodes, 2018), the ghost of the main character, Jerome, travels back in time with the ghost of Emmett Till to witness the events leading up to Till's death. The account is written with a great amount of detail and suspense; while I read it aloud it was absolutely silent in the class. We got to a point in the book where Emmett's cousins reacted with shock when Emmett told them he put the money in the White cashier's hand. Here is the discussion that followed:

Karla: What do you think is the big deal about that?

Tiana: He touched her?

Karla: And why do you think that would be a big deal in 1954 in Mississippi?

Jamase: Cuz they don't like Black people.

Karla: Yeah. It's pretty crazy. Right? All those rules for how they had to live. Do you want to add something? I heard you making a comment. Does it make you upset to hear this description?

Jamase: (Shakes head no.)

Jamari: It made me upset.

Karla: It made you upset? Say more.

Jamari: Cuz. I don't know what's wrong with White

people, White people in them days. We ain't do nothing to them.

Karla: mmm hmmm

Jamari: White people had the freedom, and we didn't. White people could go to school and we couldn't. What we do to them?

Karla: Right.

Tiana: How did White people even know not to like us? Who told them?

Karla: Anybody have a thought or an answer about that?

Justin: What did we do to make them not like us?

Jamase: Our color.

Ashley: My question is, why in the first place even treat people differently? They're just people.

Justin: How can they treat us differently and say we're not human but we do everything they can do?

In this discussion excerpt, students are questioning the origins of racism. About 60 percent of the students in the class were Black, and in this conversation all the students who made contributions were Black. This is important to note because their language indicates a specific ethnic group identity through students' consistent use of "us" and "we." The "us" here is very specific, as demonstrated in Tiana asking "How did White people even know not to like us?" This sentence is clear about who Tiana means by us (Black people) and them (White people). The students are specifically responding to this retelling of what happened to Emmett Till by foregrounding their shared identity as Black people in a racist country.

Additionally, in this excerpt we can see that students were also able to pose questions and build off of each other's wonderings. Making connections between texts, students' experiences, and the world is what we want students to do in a culturally relevant classroom. Students were not trying to figure out "right" answers for assessments, but rather asking big questions about racism and power. Importantly, students were able to ask these critical questions and evoke their ethnic group positions in response to this text because the text facilitates this kind of discussion (Howard & Ticknor, 2019). *Ghost Boys* is about racism and police violence, which demonstrates the relationship between text selection and conversations about sociopolitical issues. In order for these kinds of conversations to occur, teachers have to choose the right texts *and* create space for the conversations to happen in ELA classrooms.

"WE WAS THE ONLY BLACK PEOPLE IN THERE." Although the previous conversation focused on racism in the past, students quickly transitioned to talking about their various personal experiences with racism. Students were able to draw on their wealth of expertise because the texts were culturally relevant, and our discussions consistently gave students opportunities to make these kinds of connections. A student asked if racism was still going on, and several other students readily replied, "Yes." Several students followed up with experiences they either had or had witnessed. Here is one of the stories shared:

Aliyah: One day I was at [a local fast food chain restaurant] and there was a whole bunch of White people in there. It was my dad and my sister. And we was asking to get some food and every time we would ask, they would ignore us. And we was like—my dad was like, "why are y'all doing this?" And we kept asking them, we was like "Um, excuse me, excuse me," and they kept taking people orders. And that's when it came to a part when a man was, when nobody was taking an order, and we kept asking them and finally someone was like, "How can we help you?" And my daddy said he think they racist because they like, he was like—

Karla: People were coming in after you and they were taking their order?

Aliyah: Yeah! And they were serving them. We had a BIG wait.

Karla: That's crazy. That's awful.

Aliyah: And we was the only Black people in there, that's why we thought that.

Aliyah was able to share this personal experience in class because the text chosen provided entry points for her to share her own experiences and perspectives. Aliyah's story about being ignored at the restaurant centers her ethnic position as a Black person in a racist society. Just as *Ghost Boys* connects the murder of Emmett Till to present-day police violence, Aliyah connected our discussion of racism in the past to her own experiences with racism. In this discussion, Aliyah got to be an expert. This is particularly significant because Aliyah was not able to be an expert during the official ELA lessons for which I was present. Aliyah was often pulled out of class for extra support, or, after Tiffany gave whole-class instruction, she would work with me or another adult in order to complete her assignment successfully. So, her volunteering to contribute her knowledge to this whole-class discussion shows the power that culturally relevant, facilitative texts can have

in how students are able to participate meaningfully in classroom learning.

The story Aliyah shared also demonstrates the overlapping nature of the cultural positions readers take up as they are responding to text. Because the point of her story is about an experience with racism, I decided that this is mainly illustrative of an ethnic group position, but, again, in real life these categories are not always separate. This story also is a story about her family experiencing racism, so we see her family group position centered here as well, which I will turn to next.

EVOKING A FAMILY POSITION

Other times in the discussions, students drew on their experiences in their own families to help them understand the text. Brooks and Browne (2012) describe this as evoking a family position. In both the texts we read, the main characters' roles in their family were discussed multiple times. This gave students entry points to discuss the ways they connected to the characters based on their own family positions. Here is a conversation we had one day toward the beginning of reading *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015), when we were still being introduced to the main characters:

Karla: What do y'all think about the dad so far, just based on this little bit?

Jeremy: He wants his kids to be in the Army like he was.

Justin: He's mean.

Karla: He's mean. Why do you say that?

Justin: He's not letting his kids do what THEY want to do, but forcing them to do what he wants them to do.

Karla: Okay, yes, Aidan?

Aidan: I don't know if you just said this, but he's kind of like pushing his kids to do it.

Karla: Yeah, so he's a little pushy. What do you think happens when parents push their kids to do stuff they don't want to do?

Alondra: They wouldn't want to do it even more than they already wanted to, it makes them not want to do it even more.

Karla: Do y'all agree with Alondra?

Roland: I respectfully agree.

In this conversation it is evident that students are able to use their family positions to understand the relationship between the father and his children. They understand what happens when parents try to force their kids to do

certain things (in this case, join the Army); oftentimes it makes the kids "not want to do it even more," as Alondra aptly states. In this case the students' family positions help them understand the characters' motivations, which helps connect them to the characters in the book and deepens their comprehension. The students' family positions might have developed based on their own family experiences or family dynamics they have witnessed in person, on television, or in other books, but it is clear that there is a recognition of a pattern of what happens when caregivers push kids toward a particular thing.

In another illustrative example, the students' family positions helped them analyze the characters and understand their motivations. We were discussing the family dynamics of one of the other main characters in *All American Boys*, Quinn:

Alondra: His mom is probably going through it.

Karla: Because?

Alondra: Because the dad died.

Karla: The dad died and it seems like she works a lot.

Tiana: She gotta pay all the bills!

Karla: Right, she gotta pay all the bills on her own; she's a single mom. She works twelve hours, and I think she also works overnight because it said—

Ashley: —It said they were eating dinner, by the time they were eating dinner she was already at work.

Karla: Exactly, so that means what else for Quinn?

Jamari: He gotta take care of his little brother at night.

Alondra: He has to cook.

Karla: Right, he has a lot of responsibilities.

In this exchange, the students demonstrate empathy for the position Quinn's mother is in due to his father's death. She has to work a lot to pay all the bills, and as a result Quinn has extra responsibilities at home. Alondra's comment that the mom was "probably going through it" (i.e., probably under a lot of stress) was an inferential comment based on something the mother said in the book. As I was reading through the field notes, it struck me that Alondra was able to see things from the mother's perspective, especially since Quinn, the son, was not equally able to empathize with his mother. Although Brooks and Browne (2012) don't specifically name a socioeconomic position as one of the positions readers center in responding to text, in this case, the students are drawing on understandings of families with specific socioeconomic realities in their responses, such as Quinn's mom

working nights means the oldest child is responsible for watching the younger siblings and cooking. There is no universal family experience, so all family positions would necessarily be influenced by other factors (e.g., race, place, socioeconomics). Choosing books that have diverse representations of families allow students to draw on their family positions in their discussions of the texts.

Discussion

Collectively, these findings demonstrate the kinds of conversations that can happen in classrooms when facilitative texts (Howard & Ticknor, 2019) are used and teachers encourage students to draw on their culturally situated positions (Brooks & Browne, 2012) as they discuss the texts in class. Culturally situated reader response theory helps us broaden our understanding of what tools students use to make sense of texts, and it also asks us to think explicitly about how we can intentionally select texts that lend themselves to students being able to foreground these cultural positions and deliberately facilitate opportunities for students to do so during whole-class read alouds.

The family position and the ethnic group position were the most common positions the students evoked during our reading and discussions of *Ghost Boys* and *All American Boys*. This is because we intentionally chose texts that centered sociopolitical issues and made space for discussions in class that elicited those personal connections from students, who were not accustomed to discussing texts in this way. How would the students' engagement in school literacies be impacted if these kinds of discussions were central in the classroom, rather than squeezed in alongside the district's mandated, skills-focused curriculum?

The students were able to center their family and ethnic group positions in responding to the text because the texts chosen facilitated those kinds of connections and because we created space for students to center their own experiences in response to the readings. Creating space for students to read and engage in meaningful discussion about texts and topics that students have expertise in is important in its own right, not just for how it might translate into test scores.

As a contrast to these conversations, another day I was present for their regular ELA lesson and they had to read a passage about cowboys and ranch owners and answer questions related to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the different characters in the passage. This was the lesson that Tiffany was *required* to teach that day. I worked with a small group of students on that assignment, including Aliyah (who made rich connections during our reading of *Ghost Boys*, including the connection about the time her family was ignored at the restaurant). Unlike our time reading *Ghost Boys* and *All*

American Boys together, with this passage I had to build a lot of background knowledge about cowboys and ranch owners in order for them to understand anything about the characters. The assignment was merely an exercise with the goal of getting students ready for the test; there was no room for students to be experts or to bring in their experiences. This is in stark contrast to the ways they engaged with the texts that we read aloud together. If teachers had more agency in curricular decisions and students were consistently given opportunities to engage in discussions of culturally relevant texts, how might it impact the school identities of students like Aliyah? Reflecting on her own schooling experiences, Johnson (Winn & Johnson, 2011) similarly wondered "if the teacher had provided literature that I connected with, maybe I would have finished a novel, participated more, or even earned better grades" (p. 2).

This is not to say that there were not also missed opportunities during the time I was collecting data/facilitating conversations about the books. I could have been more intentional about my own conversational moves as a way to facilitate productive conversation (Schieble et al., 2020). We could have also spent more time talking explicitly with students about what it means to engage in discussion in class (e.g., using accountable talk to build on each other's comments) and created opportunities for small-group discussions so more student voices could have been shared. Most of the whole-class discussion followed a traditional teacher-centered sequence (Cazden, 2001) with me (as the facilitator) maintaining a central and often very leading role in the discussions. While I worked with the class, Tiffany had time to focus on preparing other lessons—a welcome respite for a brand-new teacher.

The texts we read together were both about Black main characters experiencing police violence, which allowed many Black students in the room to connect with the text based on their ethnic group position (Brooks & Browne, 2012). It would have been interesting to see how the classroom discussions might have been different if the texts read created opportunities for Latinx students to center their ethnic group positions or their family positions in response. If I could have spent more time in the classroom, we could have chosen a broader range of texts, including texts with Latinx protagonists. Similarly, as discussed in the findings, since family positions are always influenced by other social positions, with more time, we could have discussed texts that represented a broader range of families, allowing different students to center their family positions in different ways. This work, like all work, is limited in scope.

It is also important that educators do not essentialize Black students and assume that the only way for Black students to connect to books is by choosing books that

focus on trauma. I would not have chosen a second book that was about police brutality if the students had not been so adamant that our next book be "just like" *Ghost Boys*. Barnes (2018) discussed the need for books like his *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut*: "This book is about them [Black children] being aware of the endless, incredible possibilities in their lives, especially when they define who they are and how brilliant they can be" (p. 136). The conversations the students had around the two books for this study are a way to foster students' engagement with facilitative texts (Howard & Ticknor, 2019), not *the* way.

Why do White teachers shy away from engaging with texts in sociopolitical ways in their classrooms—whether those classrooms are predominantly White or predominantly students of color? It might be fear of backlash, discomfort with talking about race(ism), or lack of knowledge. I acknowledge that my circumstances here were unique—I was protected from backlash because I did not work for the school district, I was not uncomfortable talking about race(ism), and I have much more experience talking about race(ism) than most White people. Even still, the imperative is on us—the teachers, the professionals—to push past those hesitations and fears. White educators cannot, however, assume our Whiteness does not play a role in these conversations. Having critical conversations means that we are discussing the ways power and privilege operate in the world (Vetter et al., 2021), and we cannot pretend that power and privilege are not operating in our classrooms and schools. White teachers need to learn about their own Whiteness and understand the ways their racial identity plays a role in teaching and learning (Matias & Mackey, 2016; Sealy-Ruiz, 2017; Zaccor & Thurman, 2021).

How can we provide cover—with our degrees and our presumed expertise—for teachers to branch out and experiment with practices that engage more students in more meaningful literacies?

Conclusion

This article focused on the experiences the students, Tiffany, and I had with reading and discussing two novels, both of which centered around questions of identity and incidents of police brutality. I argue that in this classroom, these texts, and the whole-class discussions that accompa-

nied the reading of them, created space for the students to bring information about their worlds to the metaphorical table. This was a shift from a banking instructional model to one where knowledge was co-constructed and could include students' own expertise about their lives and the world around them. The data support the argument that ELA teaching should center on critical literacy and critical conversations of meaningful, facilitative texts in order to create classrooms where students are engaged in reading and meaningful discussions.

Tiffany clearly felt the difference between how the students took to the read alouds compared to their other ELA work. However, she felt like because she was teaching at a school that was labeled as "failing," she did not have the freedom to deviate from the curricular materials and pacing guide determined by the district. She was a brand-new teacher trying to navigate the curricular mandates and collaborate with her team. Many teachers understandably feel like their hands are tied when it comes to making changes to the mandated curricula. She gave me some latitude on the days I read with the students, latitude she was not comfortable taking herself. I was in a privileged position as a visitor in her classroom who was not being held accountable for her students' test scores. As researchers working with teachers in classrooms, this privilege is important to keep in mind. How can researchers help teachers create opportunities for more authentic literacy engagement in "the cracks of the official curriculum" (Dyson, 1985)? How can we provide cover—with our degrees and our presumed expertise—for teachers to branch out and experiment with practices that engage more students in more meaningful literacies?

Students need opportunities to draw on their worlds and apply that knowledge when analyzing texts. Teachers can do this by choosing facilitative texts—texts that explore sociopolitical issues that students have expertise in. Culturally situated reader response gives us a way to analyze the kinds of knowledge students are able to bring to the table—in this case students centered their ethnic and family positions in their discussions of the texts. The texts teachers choose and the kinds of conversations they facilitate can create meaningful literacy engagements for students, even if it has to happen in the cracks. ▣

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