

Everything Black Is NOT Bad!

Families and Teachers Engaging in Critical Discussions around Race

Eliza G. Braden, Valente' Gibson, and RoKami Taylor-Gillette

Christina: Conversations we have have a lot to do with peer pressure, things of that nature, just maturity And even some things that have happened in the media, like with [police] brutality, we've had small talks but not anything in depth. Just enough to bring some awareness.

Angela: We do kind of talk about . . . racism The last movie that we watched was the *BlacKkKlansman* At the end when they ended up killing the White lady [Charlottesville, 2018] . . . we kind of talk about that because you see it a lot you know, and they're exposed to it because they are always on social media.

Christina and Angela are mothers of fifth graders. They participated in a six-week critical literacy workshop designed by the authors of this article. Five Black families and their fifth-grade children met with authors Valente' Gibson and Eliza Braden weekly to read and discuss social justice-oriented children's literature for the purpose of creating spaces for intergenerational talk about race and racism. In this piece, we share insights from one particular evening session to communicate the impact of creating spaces for race talk among children, their families, and their teachers. We use critical race theory (CRT) to examine how the conversations were supported by critical multicultural literature and social justice-oriented texts. The questions guiding the work were: 1. How can a family workshop using social justice-oriented children's books create a space for families, students, and teachers to talk about race and racism? 2. What narratives and counternarratives emerge from those discussions? and 3. What elements of the workshop are supportive of race talk?

Why Is This Important?

Prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, many schools educating Black children viewed the local community of students of color as an asset (Milner, 2019). Although the schools of Black children were often lacking in equal and adequate materials due to low funding and support, the teachers in these schools held high expectations of students, focused on the brilliance of Black students and their families, and offered children opportunities to participate in civic-minded education (Siddle Walker, 1996). According to Milner (2019), "These teachers not only saw their connections with students' families and communities as essential for building relationships with students, but they also anchored and scaffolded what they learned from these relationships to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom" (p. 90).

This is not the norm in public education today. In fact, much of educational literature points out that contemporary schools are the antithesis of many prede-segregation Black schools at which children's heritage, community, and families were valued. In a time when racism continues to dominate most institutions in our society, schools must value the issues faced by children as well as the heritage and wisdom of Black communities. As educators committed to justice, we must ask how we can engage in intergenerational anti-racist conversations to address issues of individual and systemic racism and the silencing of those victimized by it.

The family workshop component of this study was influenced by Eliza's prior research that looked at the way critical multicultural children's literature supported

third graders and their families in discussing immigration and personal stories of separation and deportation (Allen, 2013). This prompted Eliza’s interest in how an organized workshop might provide space for families to engage in similar discussions around race and racism.

This interest grew as Eliza watched Valente’ engage his fifth graders in discussion and research about Black brilliance and racist practices, politics, and policies. Eliza thought about the many young men who were never offered the space to talk back to the society that viewed their Black bodies as lesser. She wondered if and how family discussions might shape students’ connections to historical and contemporary issues: What were parents’ thoughts on such social justice-oriented conversations and topics in and beyond elementary classrooms?

Eliza and Valente’ discussed these questions and decided to create a space where they could learn more about how families understand and talk about race and racism as their children grow up observing the unjust practices to which Black and Brown people are subject. With the increasing number of instances of police brutality on Black and Brown bodies—including such cases as Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Stephon Clark—we felt a need to create opportunities to experience the recognition and intergenerational discussion of racial profiling, brutality, and degradation. In this way, this work also represents a wider commitment to honoring the work of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement (#BLM).

Theoretical Frames

This study drew extensively on frames that honor the cultural, historical, and linguistic knowledge of children of color. Because Black families bring a host of assets to schools and communities, we sought to understand the way they read “the word and world” (Freire, 1970) through frames that honor them. The rich perspectives of CRT (Bell, 1993) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Paris, 2012, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2014) contribute to a deeper understanding of Black families’ ways of knowing when they engage in what Jamila Lyiscott coined “black textual expressions” (2017, p. 48).

Three related theoretical frames inform these ways of knowing, each contributing to an understanding of how young families understand hegemony in society. Undergird-

ing our understanding of both culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and CSP is CRT. CRT helps us understand how race works in schools, classrooms, and curricula (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In general, CRT serves as a conceptual tool for understanding how race and racism work. The tenets of CRT include: (1) the notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) the idea of an interest convergence; (3) the social construction of race; (4) the idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling; and (5) the notion that Whites have actually been beneficiaries of civil rights legislation. We used CRT in this study to understand how Black parents alongside their children frame what it means to be Black in America when provided opportunities and support for race-based dialogue.

CSP is a rethinking of Gloria Ladson-Billings’ conception of CRP. Ladson-Billings (1994) posits that academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness are the pillars of CRP. For her, to be a culturally relevant teacher is to be knowledgeable of the children in one’s classroom and to intentionally rely on CRP’s tenets. Over time, Ladson-Billings (2014) has come to criticize teachers who fail to take up the tenet of sociopolitical consciousness in particular. Indeed, such frames call for practitioners to engage students in understanding the sociopolitical realities of individuals. Paris and Alim (2014) have argued that CSP considers cultural practices and understandings central to communities of color. CSP builds on the critical and crucial work offered by CRP, lovingly critiquing the theory and pedagogy in response to the ever-evolving identities of youth and of demographic and social change. More specifically, culturally sustaining teachers hold the five key understandings listed in the table below (Paris, 2016).

As educators committed to justice, we must ask how we can engage in intergenerational anti-racist conversations to address issues of individual and systemic racism and the silencing of those victimized by it.

1. An understanding of the systemic nature of racialized and intersectional inequalities and their own relative privileged or marginalized position within those systems
2. An understanding that education participates in and often perpetuates such inequalities, though it can also disrupt them
3. An understanding of how deficit approaches have historically and continue to perpetuate racialized inequalities and an understanding of asset approaches and how to curricularize them
4. An understanding that critical asset approaches do improve academic achievement, but that current measures of achievement are narrow and assimilative and so not the sole goal
5. An understanding that humanizing relationships of dignity and care are fundamental to student and teacher learning (Paris, 2016, p. 8)

Table 1. Key Understandings of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP)

Methods

CRT is not only the foundation for the content of this study but also for its methodology. Using qualitative methods, we embraced the examination of race and racism and the value of the counter-story as essential to understanding the impact of intergenerational critical literacy workshops. Building on our theoretical approach of using CRT (Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), we focused on tenet four of CRT, counter-storytelling, to hear and foreground the insights of the families involved. Ladson-Billings (1998) described counter-storytelling as key to CRT because it “add[s] necessary contextual contours to the seeming objectivity of positivist perspectives” (p. 11). By employing a CRT approach, specifically counternarratives, the stories of people of color are used to challenge the existing dominant narrative, especially the propensity within education to rely on deficit theorizing (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Amplifying the marginalized voices of “Othered” and racialized students (e.g., Black students and their parents), counternarrative intends to undermine the dominant narrative and our broader understanding of social reality (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The Researchers

Valente’, a Black male, was in his second full year of teaching at the time of this study. From a coastal town in the southeastern United States, Valente’ attended the state’s flagship university, a predominately White institution (PWI) where

Eliza, a Black female, was a professor. Eliza and Valente’ met in Eliza’s literacy methods course. During Valente’s first year of teaching, Eliza noticed the culturally sustaining pedagogical moves he consistently made with his students as an intern and a classroom teacher. Valente’ and Eliza applied to and became members of the National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) Professional Dyads and Culturally Responsive Teaching (PDCRT) project that pairs teachers and teacher educators in dyads to work together to envision and implement culturally relevant practices. RoKami, a Black doctoral student, served as Eliza’s research assistant.

Context and Participants

This study took place at Hyland Park Elementary in the southeast region of the United States. Valente’ taught at this school at the time of the study. Many of his students lived in a diverse neighborhood near the school. The local community and businesses exhibited the diversity of the surroundings. Barbershops, restaurants, and churches reflected Korean, Nigerian, and Spanish speaking communities along with people of other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Over 700 students attended Hyland Park Elementary in the 2019–2020 school year: 74% were Black, 14% Latinx, 3% White, 3% Asian, 5% biracial, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander. All students qualified for free lunch.

Valente’ had 27 students in his fifth grade class, 26 of whom identified as Black and one who identified as Latinx. All families were invited to attend the critical literacy

workshop that was the focus of this study; five mothers agreed to participate, with the number one reason for not participating being a conflict in work schedules. Participants included five fifth grade students—two males and three females, all Black—and their mothers, also Black, Valente’ (their teacher), Eliza (the co-investigator in this study and a university professor), and RoKami.

The participants met onsite at the school one evening a week for six weeks. We provided refreshments, and Valente’ facilitated the discussions around the children’s books, which were selected by Eliza and Valente’ because of their connections to Black culture, the #BlackLivesMatter Movement, and police brutality affecting families, or for providing intergenerational narratives or oral histories of characters’ experiences. Having engaged with topics around social justice in their classroom, the students were already accustomed to questioning and examining literature, policies, and practices. Valente’, only in his second year of teaching, made it a point to engage his fifth graders in critical inquiries around sociopolitical issues that impacted them and their communities. He used his own personal experiences with race and racism as touchstone stories in the classroom, such as being stopped abruptly by the police when riding around his hometown with his friends, matriculating as the only Black male preservice teacher in a cohort consisting predominately of White females, and learning to appreciate his use of Black English as a way of helping kids connect with broader societal issues.

Data Collection and Analysis

Throughout the course of the project, researchers documented participation in the family critical literacy group through field notes and research memos as well as audio and video recordings. Data analysis was guided by grounded theory methods using open coding, *in vivo* coding, and axial coding. Initially, we read each line, sentence, and paragraph across each data source for a given session to understand how families talked about race through using social justice-oriented children’s books. Open coding was framed by the research questions. After establishing connections across the codes, we then began the process of determining themes for the study. Memos at each stage allowed us to derive the properties of themes (for example, the different ways parents were having “The Talk” with their children) (see research questions #1 and #3). Last, as we determined the themes, we paid particular attention to the way participants offered

counternarratives—narratives that counter the dominant societal narratives that convey deficit views of Black people—as they emerged during families’ discussions. Paying close attention to participants’ discussions around race, racism, and police brutality revealed the counternarratives used. For the purposes of this paper, we discuss data coded from only one intergenerational family discussion, the analysis of which led to the following themes: parents were having The Talk with their children, talk around well-selected children’s books prompted discussions of African heritage and Black Beauty, and the role of the Black male elder was critical to encouraging race talk.

Findings

The findings described in this article emerged from a particular Monday evening when we read the picture book, *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?* by Sandy Lynne Holman (1998). The book is about a young Black child, Montsho, who questions why the color black is often presented in a negative light (e.g., black eye, black sheep, black being worn to funerals, etc.) and wonders if everything black is actually bad. His grandfather, Rufus, explains his African history and reinforces how black is, in fact, beautiful. Rufus encourages Montsho to never look down on his race or his skin color. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to focus on families’ discussions of *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?* and describe the book’s relationship to critical familial discussions about race outside of school.

Three themes or insights that emerged from our analysis of the families’ discussions of *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?* include: (a) opportunities to talk about race let us know that these parents were having The Talk with their children about police brutality; (b) talk around a well-selected children’s book prompted discussions of African Heritage and Black beauty, which in turn prompted talk about colorism and hair in the classroom; and (c) the construct of a Black male teacher as elder played an important role in creating a space for race talk in the workshop and the classroom. In the next sections, we describe these insights that are supported by data.

Parents Were Having The Talk with Their Children

During our generative discussions of racism prompted by reading children’s literature, the mothers revealed the unique ways they navigated what is often referred to as “The Talk”

with their children—a troubling reality in many Black households, it is the discussion parents have with their children about police and the racial profiling of Black people. From conversations in our workshop, it was evident that The Talk was indeed occurring at home between parents and children. This particular evening, prompted by the book *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?* family members referred back to a previous week’s discussion about the film *Rest in Power: The Trayvon Martin Story* (Furst & Nason, 2018). Valente’ opened the session by sharing his own memories of his father having discussions around race with him at a young age. This led fifth grader Rashad’s mother, Felicia, to discuss how she talked about issues of race with her son, prompted by social media videos.

Jasmin’s mom, Angela, explained that she mainly talks to her son about racial profiling, but her daughters are also there, so she talks to all of them at times. However, it was evident that she felt The Talk was needed for her son more than her daughters:

I have a 16-year-old boy, so I try to talk to him as far as that is concerned but then my girls are there too. So, we kind of talk about that because you see it a lot you know, and they’re exposed to it because they are always on social media. If they have questions, I try to touch on them and try to say basically say, you know, it [racism] is alive and well.

Both mothers revealed that social media served as a tool for beginning conversations with their children. Parents shared how social media was not just important for them in helping their children notice what racism looked like, but also in cultivating the ability to name it for themselves.

Several other mothers shared the emotional responses that emerged in reaction to viewing these horrific acts of violence against Black bodies. Emotions ranged from anger and fear to avoidance. As parents shared their responses, Valente’ talked about reading *Brown Boy* (Glenn, 2017), another text central to the #BLM unit, with his class following the family book club:

A mom is talking to her son about different things that are going on in the world. So, explain to him [that] when you come home, come back home safely; when you encounter even a police officer and different dangerous situations make sure [to be] respectful [to] make sure you can come home.

Building on Valente’s description of classroom reading, Angela verbalized the stream of emotions she felt as she discussed incidents of police brutality with her children:

If they have questions, I try to touch on them and try to say, basically, you know, it [racism] is alive and well. Although people don’t acknowledge it as much. You just have to be mindful of it and it’s ok not to like someone, but you know . . . The hate, you know. We can talk; sometimes it gets a little tense, and I’m like, ugh, I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Yeah, we’re done.

Angela revealed the raw emotions she felt being forced to discuss with her children the prevalent acts of hate against young Black males and her struggle to educate her child on the dangers of responding in a “safe” way to police while managing to get through those difficult conversations without tears.

A few parents expressed their avoidance of the subject. When asked, “Do you engage in conversations around social justice with your child?” Mia’s mom, Monica, stated, “No, we don’t discuss it.” Angela then added, “When they were really small, like 5 and 3 years old, to have the conversation . . . I just left it alone and never revisited it.” Lastly, Jeremiah’s mom, Linda, stated, “Growing up we didn’t talk about it and we didn’t discuss it.” Each of these parents seemed to have different reasons to avoid talking about social justice with their child. Although each parent shared in a survey following the workshop that their central purpose in participating was to engage with their child around books and to equip themselves with the language and tools needed to talk about social justice-oriented concepts, they shared that they had often avoided engaging in these same discussions at home and appreciated the opportunity to enter into them through our workshops: “I really appreciated the invite for me and my son Jeremiah. This was a great way to help me introduce this topic to him,” Angela shared. “Like I said earlier, it is something that should be discussed in addition to their everyday schoolwork because it’s part of life. The same way they need math, reading, science, and social studies, this needs to be a part of what they learn as well.” Thus, families recognized that social justice-oriented discussions, especially those focused on race, are a necessary part of any elementary curriculum.

***Talk around a Well-Selected Children's Book
Prompted Discussions of African Heritage and
Black Beauty***

Another common theme presented over the course of this discussion was the intersection of heritage and race and the importance of recognizing Blackness as beautiful. As the group engaged in deep discussions around *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?* parents began to highlight the many negative connotations associated with being Black. Eliza asked, "Have you ever thought to talk with your children about the beauty of being Black?" Asking further, "And what it means to have Black or Brown skin?" Such questions came when discussing how the book's main character, Montsho, asked his grandfather, "Is everything black bad? I'm black. So, does that make me bad too?" While Valente's students did not recognize any of the negative references to Blackness described in the book—black widow spiders, black witches, black eyes, and so forth—the mothers in the group did. They described how negative connotations of blackness affected the way they viewed themselves.

This led to a conversation about the color black and its connection to skin color, or colorism. We noticed that Felicia, Rashad's mother, wanted to have the conversation about the portrayal of dark colors as negative, but she did not want to harm the feelings of others in the group who were darker skinned. She opened with, "I'm not trying to offend anyone . . ." In response, Christina, Stephanie's mother, who often disclosed that she grew up around her father's family, who is White, stated that she does not talk about race with her children because she thinks that race is a "small thing" compared to larger issues that affect us as human beings.

When asked about heritage, the mothers began to share stories about why African heritage is important to them. The conversation evolved into a dialogue about how Africa is viewed by society. In the media, Africa is often portrayed as a continent made up of only poor and starving people—starving children, in particular. In reality, although it is not always publicized or acknowledged, Africa is the largest continent, one rich in history and resources. In the text, Montsho's grandfather responds to his grandson's curiosity about the negative connotations of Blackness by describing all the richness that has emerged from Africa.

Etienne, Yandi's Mom, who is Senegalese, was very passionate about our conversation on Africa. She proclaimed, "When the parents teach the kids [that] they come from

Africa, it is beautiful. They need to teach the kids where they come from. It is very rich. They have everything—oil, gold, diamonds. It's very rich." Because Etienne, who is multilingual, was often hesitant to respond verbally due to her English proficiency, she often retreated from discussions and asked her daughters to share instead. However, when a few of the mothers suggested that they had not talked about their African ancestry, Etienne immediately emerged with this response as to why children should know about the beauty of the continent and their ancestry.

As Etienne spoke, her daughter Yandi chimed in to express her confidence in her skin color. What started as a means to capture parents' understanding on heritage ultimately led to students expressing their own viewpoints. Some students began to quote their parents' ideas and teachings on heritage and loving oneself. For example, Yandi stated, "My mom tells me, like, even if you are really dark or really like any color, you are always beautiful." This conversation about loving oneself led Valente' to promote social justice-oriented conversations around colorism in his classroom following the parent meeting.

As mentioned, a few parents mentioned they did not talk about race with their children. As with social justice issues, they wanted to protect their child's innocence. One parent, Mia's mother, identified as being Black because that is what people see when they look at her, but she stated, "[I]n reality my mother is half Hispanic." Throughout the meeting she often referred back to this statement, while also admitting that she was not going to check "Other" when the time came for a test or when demographic information was otherwise requested. She noted that she is mixed-raced, with different races on the inside, but feels like the world will only look at her as Black. Although she does not deny her Blackness, she said that she does not boast about it either.

The parent meeting prompted Valente' to extend the critical conversation into his classroom, so he gave students a platform to discuss colorism that same week. An opening for the discussion came after an incident occurred inside the girl's restroom.

Paris: Valente', you need to get that girl, Mia, because she is being rude to Yandi.

Valente': What do you mean? What happened?

Yandi: She was talking about my hair and skin in the restroom.

Valente’: Okay . . . Give me a little more details.

Paris: Let me give you the tea [the information]. Well, she said that Yandi hair is ugly because she doesn’t have the “mixed” people hair like her. I told her, “No, you’re just mad because you don’t have rich, beautiful, black hair like Yandi.”

This back and forth dialogue was a great way to connect the classroom to critical conversation that had begun in the family workshop. Encouraged by the mothers’ dialogue, Valente’ supported students’ engagement in a classroom conversation about hair and skin color.

The Role of the Black Male Elder Was Critical to Encouraging Race Talk

According to Milner (2019), “Black teachers of the pre-*Brown* era were professionals who were assets to the school system. Even today, much can be learned from the success they had with their students” (p.89). King and Swartz (2016)

Valente’ visibly demonstrated his conviction that families and students have ideas that can offer understandings of what is occurring in the world around race and that they should be able to express those ideas freely.

write about teachers whose goal is “not [to] attempt to have power over them [children], but to share the power of knowledge with them” (p. 33), engaging in the emancipatory pedagogy of *eldering*. In our reading of *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?* it was evident that Valente’s ability to offer critical questions to families was important in creating a comfortable space for participants to share their views and feelings about race and racism. Valente’s role was also evident as we discussed the intersections of race and African heritage. We saw this in the book as well when Montsho questions how Black is perceived and positioned. Montsho’s grandfather notices his sadness over this and offers a counternarrative of Blackness and the richness of his African ancestry. Such expertise in helping students understand the nuances of what they see, feel, and experience as they witness their identity being attacked serves as an example of *eldering*.

Valente’: We barely touched on it. In conjunction with other topics.

Christina: Me for myself, racism and everything like that . . . I didn’t realize until I got to college that I realized I was living in a racist town. I feel like my parents protected me from a lot. If I came home and said “this” happened, they would say I will handle it. Not that they’re doing this because you’re Black. Even when I was in college and I got into an incident when the officer ran up to me and he had his gun and everything else, everybody in the parking lot was frozen because they thought the next thing was going to be something else. I went home and I told my dad. He went to a whole ‘nother level because he thought about the time when they thought he was an inmate that escaped, and they pulled him out in front of my mom. He thought back to this incident and said, “I’m not letting this happen to my child.”

In this exchange, Valente’ used the discussion around the intersections of race and heritage to co-construct with families the possibilities of what may happen when we try to remain safe in our talks around race. That is, he provided a counternarrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The ways in which Valente’ used his own experiences as a “text” in the workshops and in his classroom engaged students and families in making sense of the world. He used a host of Black textual expressions (Lyiscott, 2017), such as culturally relevant Socratic Seminars, hip-hop pedagogy, and contrastive analysis. On any given day, one might hear Valente’ seamlessly integrating historical and contemporary issues, including engagements and lectures around Black Codes and #BlackLivesMatter. He was not afraid to touch on the difficult histories and topics so many teachers regularly shy away from. With the mothers in the literacy workshop and students in his classroom, Valente’ was able to support and encourage this kind of talk. Key to his success was that Valente’ visibly demonstrated his conviction that families and students have ideas that can offer understandings of what is occurring in the world around race and that they should be able to express those ideas freely.

Discussion

The critical literacy workshop offered families a space to overturn deficit views of Black families in schools. In addition, counternarratives offered by the parents demonstrated

the importance of creating spaces and support for critical race discussions. Their narratives provided important insights for their children about realities in terms of racial acts of violence and parents' ways of dealing or not dealing with issues. In using CRT, CRP, and CSP, we came to understand Black families' experiential knowledge and perspectives as they engaged with a social justice-oriented text focused on race, racism, and police brutality. In this section, we provide a discussion around how the study's findings addressed our research questions and later suggest implications that could support teachers as they continue to redefine how to engage Black families in schools.

Our first research question asks: How can a family workshop using social justice-oriented children's books create a space for families, students, and teachers to talk about race and racism? Our findings indicate that critical literacy workshops provided families and children a space to share their reactions to emotionally laden topics, especially in terms of having The Talk. Parents such as Angela revealed, "I try to touch on them and try to say, basically, you know, it [racism] is alive and well." However, the difficulty of engaging in The Talk often led parents to feelings of anger, avoidance, and fear. Although social media and digital media appear to serve as the nexus through which parents helped their children make meaning of local and national incidents, the angst around delivering The Talk to their young children did not seem to ease up. Thus, the workshop became a safe space for parents to delve deeper into possible barriers and internalized oppressive beliefs and experiences (e.g., race is a small thing). This finding aligns with the goal of CSP to understand the new realities of youth and minority families today and the shifting social changes (Paris & Alim, 2014). In addition to acting as a safe place, the critical literacy workshop appeared to honor and affirm the stories of reticent parents who might not feel welcomed into classrooms or who could be perceived as uninterested in their child's schooling. Our paper demonstrates a need to reframe the discussion around family engagement.

Families responded to a number of critical issues offered by the social justice-oriented text *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?* and the critical questions it posed. Through critical discussions we were able to answer our second research question: What narratives and counternarratives emerge from discussions?

One counternarrative that emerged through the data was of participants' desire to support their child and

engage in their schooling. Throughout our study, families read critical multicultural literature or social justice-oriented texts and engaged in critical conversations on a weekly basis. They were open to sharing their multiple perspectives on Blackness. These findings corroborate work by Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) that Black families are highly engaged; however, school leaders fail to make Black students' achievement a priority by not aligning the resources and programs that families use with schooling. For example, Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) found that families often seek out programs and organizations for their children that are geared specifically to Black students and families (e.g., Black churches, fraternities, sororities, community organizations). We believe that families were highly encouraged to attend our workshop because of the priority it placed on topics that mattered to Black families. Additionally, the stories that were illuminated by families' race and heritage became a way for them to make connections across the text and challenged the ideologies present in society around Blackness, which allowed Valente', the classroom teacher, the opportunity to take up these ideas in his teaching.

Finally, as families engaged in race talk, we found certain elements to be supportive of this. Therefore, we were able to answer the final research question: What elements of the workshop are supportive of race talk? Although we had a presupposition that the social justice-oriented text would aid families in talking about their experiences as they critically read literature, we found that families shared a number of other elements that were critical to their talk at home and during the work. Additionally, the use of social justice-oriented texts addressing critical questions that nurture and value families' experiences served to foster race talk. Similar to Wissman's (2018) study of one fifth grade teacher's efforts to teach global literature at an affluent and culturally homogenous school, we found it necessary to avoid setting up a binary between transacting with a text and critically reading it but understood that a significant relationship existed between the two. However, our study adds to the extant literature by affirming the voices of families that are often marginalized in schools.

Lastly, a crucial element to this work became the presence of Valente', a Black male educator, who often used his own experiences around race and racism during the critical family workshop. As Valente' shared his unfortunate run-ins with individuals and the police as a Black male at a PWI in a small, rural town in the South, he ultimately

revealed the permanence of racism (Bell, 1993) and how The Talk is a necessary component to educating Black children that should not be absent from homes or schools.

Implications

From this critical family literacy workshop with families of fifth grade students, we highlight three implications that could support teachers as they continue to redefine how to engage Black families in schools.

Integrate Family Discussions around Social Justice

Educators should center Black racial pride in their classrooms, and that children's books and a knowledgeable facilitator (in this case, Valente') can serve as important support systems in that process.

First, our findings echo other arguments by CRT scholars who emphasize the need to integrate the critically conscious and social justice-oriented topics into elementary school classrooms alongside families using CRP (Johnson, 2016). This workshop led both parents and students to make meaning of race and racism through community-oriented discussions in which meanings in the social justice-oriented texts were examined and negotiated through their own experiences. Whether or not parents dealt personally and consistently with overt racial acts themselves, racist acts inevitably became centered in their discussions at home when events occurred nationally, regionally, or even locally. This study supports and extends the scholarship around CRT, CSP, and CRP by showcasing how families used 21st-century tools, such as social media, to navigate race-related discussions.

Carefully Select Children's Books to Encourage and Support Race Talk

Second, our findings suggest that educators should center Black racial pride in their classrooms, and that children's books and a knowledgeable facilitator (in this case, Valente') can serve as important support systems in that process. Research indicates that racial centrality or race

being important to one's self concept has shown to relate to psychological functioning and educational achievement (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012). In fact, having a strong, positive connection to one's racial group or heritage acts as a psychological buffer against the effects of racial discrimination. Therefore, as parents and schools both serve as agents of socialization for children, we argue that families and children need opportunities to develop positive self-concepts around their race and that children's books can play an important role in that process.

In our study, we found that when we used children's books selected in support of issues that are the focus of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and provided guidance by a knowledgeable teacher—Valente'—few parents avoided conversations around race or failed to discuss their African heritage. We suspect that the reluctance of some participants to discuss race might be attributed to not only the lack of safe spaces and support systems afforded by the books and the teacher but also internalized racism. Just like there is a system in place that reinforces power for White people, there is a system in place that undermines power for Black people. The narratives shared by these parents demonstrated the permanence of racism (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and how the system can trap people in an oppositional stance. In fact, it is not surprising to see how some parents had, in fact, adopted a colorblind mentality. Our findings point to the important role that preK–12 spaces can play in promoting the racial pride of young children through family discussions. We offer that books such as *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?*—and a host of other critical multicultural literature steeped in the beauty and brilliance of Blackness as well as in issues of racism—serve as both cultural and critical tools for navigating race-based discussions. As Baines, Tisdale, and Long (2018) noted, children should not have to rely on spaces outside of school to develop a sense of self-worth and to learn about Black culture, excellence, genius.

Expand Notions of Family Engagement

Last, we argue that schools need to expand on their notions of family engagement by centering critical family literacy workshops in their teaching responsibilities (Johnson, 2016). Although a prominent notion in schools is that families fail to engage, we found that parents' primary reasons for attending our workshops were to spend time with their children, to support them in further developing literacy

skills, and to learn additional language and tools needed to discuss social justice-oriented topics. Two of the mothers were busy entrepreneurs; however, they made it a point to adjust their schedules to attend the family literacy workshop. The workshops also became spaces for showcasing the family and community knowledge and wisdom that Valente's students brought to school every day. This way of looking at family participation and involvement also informed classroom curriculum: While we suspected that children spoke about racial acts with their families at home, we were unsure about how parents chose to engage and what topics they discussed. Consequently, through a critical race view of family involvement—valuing the family, focusing on race and racism, and creating spaces and support for sharing narratives—we learned in ways that informed Valente's curriculum in the classroom.

Conclusion

This critical literacy workshop was designed to offer a counterspace for students and families to engage in discussions about race and racism. In the end, our experiences demonstrated ways that race talk can be affirmed in schools with families. In educational spaces, teachers are continuing to fight back against subtractive practices in which standardized testing and evaluation measures are more important than children's cultural and historical knowledge or more important than addressing ongoing issues of racial inequity and brutality. Our study highlights one way that schools might engage families and students around these issues.

At the end of the discussion about *Grandpa, Is Everything Black Bad?* several of the mothers asked if the school would offer more opportunities to talk about “books like this.” The phrase “books like this” points toward parents' efforts to seek texts that discuss Blackness and culturally relevant curricula centered in educational spaces. Families appreciated the opportunity to analyze, critique, and offer their perspectives on literature in that they were able to represent their own histories, cultural knowledge, and experiences with racism. They also appreciated the opportunity to present powerful counternarratives to pervasive racist, Eurocentric messages. For example, when Ettiene offered a counternarrative of Africa that went against the image of a struggling and needy continent, she served as a central figure in the decolonization of the curriculum that often centers Whiteness. Hearing firsthand about the riches the continent provides is vital to altering the dominant view.

Through this work, we hope that families and teachers see how acts of violence and rage against Black bodies are not individualistic in nature but are systemic. This is particularly clear when family members expressed that they had not encountered educational institutions that created spaces like our workshops or Valente's classroom. Our work showcases how the engagement of families from a critical race perspective can result in broadened conversations and deepened insights for all of us as we create spaces steeped in criticality to engage children and their families in meaningful race talk. ●

References

- Allen, E. (2013). *Up close and personal: Latino/a immigrant children making sense of immigration and developing agency through critical multicultural literature and online discussions in a third grade classroom* (Doctoral dissertation). http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/msit_diss/129
- Baines, J., Tisdale, C., & Long, S. (2018). *“We've been doing it your way long enough”: Choosing the culturally relevant classroom*. Teachers College Press.
- Bell, D. (1993) *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Furst, J., & Nason, J. W. (Directors). (2018). *Rest in power: The Trayvon Martin story* [Motion picture]. <https://www.paramountnetwork.com/shows/rest-in-power-the-trayvon-martin-story>
- Johnson, L. L. (2016). Using critical race theory to explore race-based conversations through a critical family book club. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 65(1), 300–315.
- King, J., & Swartz, E. (2016). *The Afrocentric praxis of teaching for freedom: Connecting culture to learning*. Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies*

- in *Education*, 11(1), 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095183998236863>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: A.k.a. the remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74–84.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Towards a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47–68.
- Latunde, Y., & Clark-Louque, A. (2016). Untapped resources: Black parent engagement that contributes to learning. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 85(1), 72–81.
- Lyiscott, J. (2017). Racial identity and liberation literacies in the classroom. *English Journal*, 106(4), 47–53.
- Milner, R. (2019). Confronting inequity: Lessons from pre-Brown teachers. *Educational Leadership*, 76(7), 89–90.
- Neblett, E. W., Jr., Rivas-Drake, D., & Umaña-Taylor, A. J. (2012). The promise of racial and ethnic protective factors in promoting ethnic minority youth development. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6, 295–303.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97.
- Paris, D. (2016). On educating culturally sustaining teachers. Teaching Works. http://www.teachingworks.org/images/files/TeachingWorks_Paris.pdf
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85–100.
- Siddle Walker, V. (1996). *Their highest potential: An African American school community in the segregated south*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44.
- Wissman, K. K. (2018). Teaching global literature to “disturb the waters”: A case study. *English Education*, 51(1), 17–48.

Children’s Literature

- Glenn, D. (2017). *Brown boy*. Palmetto Publishing Group.
- Holman, S. L. (1998). *Grandpa, is everything Black bad?* The Culture Coop.

Eliza G. Braden is an assistant professor of elementary education in the Department of Instruction and Teacher Education at the University of South Carolina. Her research interests include critical language and literacy practices of culturally and linguistically diverse young children, social justice education, and children’s literature. Braden’s recent publications include “Representation of Latinx Immigrants and Immigration in Children’s Literature: A Critical Content Analysis” with *Journal of Children’s Literature* and “Do You Have Papers?: Latinx Third Graders Analyze Immigration Policy through Critical Multicultural Literature” in *Children’s Literature in Education*.

Valente’ Gibson is a fifth-grade teacher at Jackson Creek Elementary in Columbia, South Carolina. He holds the position of treasurer with the NCTE Early Childhood Education Assembly and is a former participant in the Professional Dyads and Culturally Relevant Teaching (PDCRT) project. Gibson also serves as model teacher for the Center for the Education and Equity of African American Students (CEEAAAS) at the University of South Carolina, where he helps design culturally relevant learning modules for the teaching of African American students.

RoKami Taylor-Gillette is a reading interventionist with two decades of experience as a public school educator. Taylor-Gillette specializes in early childhood education literacy with a focus on culturally sustaining pedagogies. She has earned a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and an education specialist degree and is currently a PhD candidate in Teaching and Learning at University of South Carolina.