“All this enters the child’s consciousness much sooner than we as adults would like to think it does. As adults, we are easily fooled because we are so anxious to be fooled. But children are very different. Children, not yet aware that it is dangerous to look too deeply at anything, look at everything, look at each other, and draw their own conclusions” (Baldwin 679).

My colleague, Dr. Dorshell Stewart, frequently tells our pre-service teacher candidates: “Don’t let your library do your teaching.” By this, she means that teachers need to engage directly in difficult conversations with students about difference, equality, and justice rather than thinking they are doing enough by simply placing a book in their library where children can potentially read it alone. As Gloria Ladson-Billings has argued, teachers have a responsibility to develop students’ critical consciousness, and that requires us to help children process the world around them and empower them—both individually and collectively—to work to make it better (159-165).
Something Happened in Our Town is a book designed as a teaching tool to realize those aims. It is a book that requires a knowledgeable person who can contextualize it, unpack it, and address the many questions the text—and the real-life scenarios it mirrors—prompts. And, with the many helpful resources provided in the appendix of the book, as well as the availability of many quality resources online, there is no excuse for one to claim that they are not prepared enough to begin an important conversation about race, white privilege, racial bias, and institutional racism.

My suggestion to educators is to do your homework first. As the authors note, there is often an impulse on the part of adults to protect children from injustices in our world. But as Baldwin, Freire, Dewey, and so many others remind us, children see and experience them. This right (because let’s be honest, it is often seen as a right) to protection is not a right afforded to all children: “Often, when somebody thinks kids of a certain age are not old enough to talk about an issue, whether related to race or sexual orientation or any other identity, they are thinking primarily of kids from privileged identities. As a general rule, we might say that if students are old enough to express or experience bias or injustice, they are old enough to talk about that bias or injustice” (Gorski and Pothini 152). Thus, as educators, we have a responsibility to engage in difficult discussions with children.

Children experience and express bias very early in their development, as the work of Beverly Tatum and many others has shown. Tatum’s conversations with her young son about skin color and bias demonstrate that children can understand complex ideas about melanin, bias, slavery, and institutional racism. In this tradition, Something Happened in Our Town honors children’s capacity to wrestle with complexity and recognizes the importance of empowering children to act against any instances of injustice they witness. I do believe that this book has the potential to generate powerful conversation with children, particularly white children, who are too frequently left ill-equipped to understand themselves as racialized beings and the ways systems of race shape everyday life.

That being said, in some ways it seems as though this book approaches the precipice and then walks back. The story begins with questions about police shooting an unarmed black man and ends with the two main characters, Josh and Emma, inviting a new student, Omad, who is from another country, to be their friend when their classmates leave him out of their soccer game. This action is meant to show children interrupting the pattern of racial injustice at their school. While it is important that we teach children about problems and then show them that they have the power to act, in this instance, does the action measure up to the problem? The book begins with an instance of police brutality and the solution, it seems, is to make new friends. I worry that, without careful discussion, this reinforces racism as an individual problem with individual-level solutions; that by being nice to people, we can change systemic racism. Here is an important place in the book where educators should heed my colleague’s earlier advice and not let the book do the teaching. Be sure to complicate Omad’s treatment by his peers. Ask, “Why do his classmates treat him unkindly? How might this be related to color of his skin? The language he speaks?”
In the current political climate where immigrants and refugees are demonized, the story of Omad is a great place to complicate the narrative and help children build empathy and challenge the dangerous narratives circulating in society. It is also important, however, to explicitly link the ways the children treat Omad back to race. I think that the ending ultimately undercuts the power of children to make collective change on a larger scale and weakens the potential to engage in deeper conversation and action around police brutality and racism, unless educators take this opportunity to help make those connections as well. Ask: “What more can Emma and Josh do? What can you do at school? At home? Elsewhere?” Thinking through these questions, continuing the dialogue, and providing examples of collective change for social justice is crucial. This book shows children upending a pattern and effecting change, yet, we need children to know that they are capable of so much more.

Works Cited

About the Author
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