Second Reaction: Racism, Racial Bias, and Racial Injustice: A Discussion


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*Something Happened in Our Town* is written for children ages four to eight years old, but it is also appropriate as a means to discuss racial injustice, bias, and racism with older children/youth. Unfortunately, current events and news include stories and reports of white people in positions of power and authority (e.g. police officers, legislative candidates, legislators, and other government leaders) either hurting, threatening, or killing people of color as well as claiming to joke about racist acts (Haag). These messages have gone viral, spreading fear and hate. I think this book can help flip the narrative to bring awareness and understanding, which may help spread empathy and compassion for others.
Background

This story shows how two children try to understand the police shooting a black man in their neighborhood. The authors introduce racism and racial injustice through a discussion from the perspective of two families, one white and one black. The white and black characters react to the trauma of a police shooting in poignant ways. Later, the children demonstrate inclusivity and stand up for a new student from a different country. Together, the children are illustrated as forming a new friendship as they run off to play soccer.

I read this book with my teenage daughters, Olivia, age 13, and Samantha, age 15. Before reading with my daughters, I explained that the book is meant for a younger audience. I also shared the overview of the book and then asked them to think about their initial reactions as we read the book together.

Our Conversation

First, I prepared to discuss this book with my girls by reading it to myself and studying the notes. Then we sat at the kitchen table and read the book together. After reading, I asked, “What messages did this book convey to you?”

Olivia responded first: “Let me look at the pictures.” She pulled the book to her and looked closely. “Oh, I thought this was interesting when the white girl character asked why the police officer shot the black man and the parents tried to make it sound like a mistake or acted like it was accident. But the older sister says, ‘No. It wasn’t a mistake.’”

“What is this interesting to you?” I asked.

“The parents were trying to hide the truth,” she explained.

“They were trying to avoid calling the cop a racist,” Samantha joined. This led to a discussion about racism and racial bias.

“Isn’t racial bias and racism the same thing?” Olivia inquired.

“What is racism?” I asked.

Samantha answered, “Fearing another race for no reason other than more melanin, fearing them for being black.”

“Racism is thinking that someone isn’t good enough for you and is more dangerous than whites. White supremacy is racism,” Olivia added.

Samantha gave an example of how laws have segregated black people from living where white people live, leading to an “uneven distribution of power and money.” “This happened because of the deep-rooted racism in our American society,” she explained.

This statement reflects the discussions Samantha has engaged in with her family, friends, and teachers over the years. Both teenagers have engaged in critical discussions about racism and this book was not an introduction to the topic, but rather a prompt to continue the discussion. Samantha traced her examples back to the book, “Segregation is like the birthday
party (e.g. in the book, the white mother describes an example of a child not being invited to a party) and the deep-rooted racism is the white police officer shooting a black man. I don’t think a five-year-old should read this, but I know the authors used this example because it illustrates that some people are perceived in the media as good (the white police officer) but they may not be good because of their hidden prejudices and the racial injustice threaded through our institutions.”

Olivia added, “The authors want to help make kids not racists. But I still think racial bias and racism are the same.” Samantha retorted, “No. Racial bias is when you are not aware of your bias because it’s always in the back of your head. You’re not thinking of it because it’s just the way you were brought up.”

This is not the first time we engaged in a conversation about racial injustice. It is important to our family to raise awareness about racial bias and reviewing this book gave both teenagers a reason to reflect on and further explore an everyday occurrence like racism in our society. Our discussion continued as we unpacked their questions related to bias and racism—specifically discussing the role of the media and how it contributes to racial bias. They concluded that the authors’ purpose is to “break the fear cycle” and to “teach kids not to be afraid, which means to put black people and people of color in a better light and challenge and question how white people treat black people on a daily basis.”

Together, we agreed that the intended audience for this book need adults who will scaffold conversations about racial injustice. Both of the girls thought very young children may have difficulty understanding the differences between racism and racial bias (and how one influences the other). However, parents and teachers can use the resources in this book to begin preparing for conversations related to racial injustices. More books and examples are needed to help unpack this topic. And it is important to consider children’s prior knowledge—Are they aware of police brutality? Have they realized police shootings are being scrutinized and analyzed? And how does this topic relate to better understanding their everyday experiences? Parents and teachers should keep in mind the purpose of their lessons and ask whether this book builds upon prior lessons and conversations. In our case, it did continue previous discussions.

**Conclusion**

This book was written in a manner that illustrates how two families explain racism and racial injustice from different perspectives. Additionally, this book enabled parents and children to converse about very sensitive and complex topics. The notes at the end of the book aim to scaffold the connection between racism, racial bias, and racial injustice. In addition, the notes bring awareness to different racial perspectives. *Something Happened in Our Town* is a powerful read that may cultivate empathy and compassion for people of color while addressing the racial injustices perpetuated by racial bias and racism.
Works Cited


About the Author

Kate Shively is an assistant professor of elementary education at Ball State University in Indiana. She taught first through fifth grades prior to her career in higher education. Currently, she teaches a course, Education in a Democratic Society, designed for first-year pre-service teachers enrolled in the Early Childhood and Elementary Education teacher preparation program.