



Ending the Silence

After attending training sessions designed to raise educators' awareness of racism, Ms. Marriott was inspired to tackle the issue head-on with her young students. She didn't know how she would do it or what the effects would be, but she knew that she could not remain silent.

BY DONNA M. MARRIOTT

RACISM IS the problem; doing something about it is our responsibility. I learned this from my mentor and friend Glenn Singleton — an antiracist leader. Glenn works with educators across the country to raise awareness of the pervasiveness and destructiveness of racism in our schools, homes, and communities. His choice of audience is purposeful and potent, for classroom teachers are the only real agents of school reform. It is teachers who translate policy into action; who integrate the complex components of standards, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment into comprehensible and pragmatic instruction; and who balance an ever-changing array of political, economic, social, and educational factors while trying to meet the individual needs of children. Skillful teachers with the will to hear Glenn's message of inclusiveness are strategically positioned to act on their learning.

At the end of one of his training sessions, Glenn posed a difficult question: "Now that you know, what are you going to do?" And, indeed,

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those who choose to "do something" about racism follow a difficult path with few guideposts and even fewer guides.

Where to begin? My first step was to listen carefully to the students in my classroom — to hear what was

said and what was not said. A little girl who wrote, "I don't like being black," provoked me to consider the ways in which I might have contributed to her feelings of devaluation. A little boy who described a mean-spirited playground incident forced me to realize that racism was a reality — for *my* students at *my* school. Most fearsome, however, was the silence. My teaching was silent on issues of race, and it was a silence that must have spoken loudly to my students.

"Doing something" became clearer to me. I would work to end the silence — mine and theirs. Presuming a link between the low school performance of children of color and the absence of a societal will to talk honestly and comfortably about race and racism, I embarked on a course of action research in which classroom conversations about race could be practiced, reflected upon, and valued.

At the beginning, I had many more questions than answers. Could I, a

white woman in the process of discovering my own complicity in a racist world, do this work? Did I know enough? Could I talk about racism with my African American students? Would I have any credibility? Where would parents come down on the issue? What material could I use? Who would support me? How would I recover from the mistakes I was bound to make? How would I justify this work in an educational and political environment focused intensely on test results? In spite of the number and complexity of the questions that confronted me, Glenn's question was always present to remind me of my responsibility. Perhaps I didn't know exactly what to do, but doing nothing was not an option.

I could tell many stories about the year of learning that followed my resolution to do something. I could tell about my own heightened awareness of race and the impact of this process of discovery on my family, my friends, and my colleagues. I could tell about the curriculum I stumbled on — what worked, what didn't, why, and why not. I could tell about the support that I sought and about who chose to share in my learning and who chose to turn away.

But the most important stories are those about the children who engaged in this work with me — thoughtful stories, heartwarming stories, inspiring stories, frightening stories, and sad stories. The story I have chosen to share was shaped through the words and actions of two boys — Cory and Damon (both pseudonyms). Their story documents the growth of racial awareness in the hearts, minds, spirits, and language of these young children.

Cory was a first-grader — middle class, two working parents, home in the suburbs, two cars, two computers, three TVs. He learned to read “on

time.” Math was a snap for him. He wrote stories about dinosaurs, race cars, and snakes. He was bright, energetic, friendly, and competitive. Cory was made for school, and school was made for Cory. Cory is white.

Damon was a second-grader. He and his three brothers lived with a loving grandmother who worked nights to support her second family. At the end of kindergarten, Damon's teacher added this note to his permanent record: “Damon had a difficult year academically and socially. He should be tested for special education services.” Damon came to my multi-age class as a first-grader and was still struggling to learn the alphabet halfway through the year. While he was shy and passive in class, Damon was nothing less than riotous on the playground. Damon was befuddled by school, and school was befuddled by Damon. Damon is black.

DESIGNING A COURSE OF ACTION

My “plan” emerged serendipitously as I watched my students perform a simple school ritual — the morning recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. The final line of this mighty oath, “with liberty and justice for all,” became the focal point of a yearlong study that would provide my young students with opportunities to engage in sustained conversations about liberty and justice. This put them on a path toward racial awareness, understanding, and thoughtful action. Together, we explored the nature of justice, simple and complex. We learned to talk about it. We learned to look for it. We learned to recognize its absence. We learned that justice isn't automatic; it is a personal and collective responsibility.

The curriculum emerged slowly. There were some hits, and there were some mighty misses. I decided to focus

our learning on the area of children's literature and to ground our work on justice in something more tangible, more concrete — the theme of heroism. My intent was to help these children realize that heroes don't have to wear capes or leap tall buildings in a single bound. I wanted them to realize that heroes are ordinary people with extraordinary commitment to their ideals. I wanted them to imagine that they could become heroes by taking responsibility to seek, recognize, practice, and value liberty and justice *for all*.

We began our inquiry within the first days of the new school year. To my surprise, the work was easier than I had imagined it would be. Young children have a keen awareness of and an acute need for fairness. Many of their real-life issues center on justice: “She cut me in line.” “He was the line leader yesterday.” “She had more turns than me.” Discussions of justice became part and parcel of our life together as learners. Cory began to use “justice” with accuracy, ease, and frequency. He formed a “justice patrol” with his playground pals to make sure that the rules for dodge ball were being followed and that everyone got a fair turn. However, Damon remained on the outside of the learning. Sometimes, he was on the outside looking in; more often, he was on the outside looking out. He had not yet found personal meaning in the idea of liberty and justice for all.

In spite of our growing ability to understand and talk about justice, I continued to be uncomfortable about moving the conversation directly toward race. To be honest, I was more than uncomfortable — I was stuck. I needed a partner, a mentor, a friend to help me focus my thinking, clarify my goals, study my children, and help me “try on” a more challenging curriculum. I sought help from Glenn,

who not only accepted the challenge but relished it. He continued to work with us periodically throughout the year and always lifted our conversations and deepened our awareness.

RACIALIZING JUSTICE

Having an African American man in our classroom affected Damon in ways that I had not anticipated. Damon was astute and engaged when Glenn spoke: he listened, he made eye contact, he volunteered answers, he posed questions, and he sat up on his knees right in the middle of the front row. I began to see the person hidden inside, the person Damon had learned to leave at the school door each morning. Cory, too, was interested in Glenn, though, I think, for quite a different set of reasons. I wondered if Cory had ever interacted with an African American man up close and personal before. Cory was interested in Glenn's personal life. Where did he live? Did he ever have a hamster for a pet? Did he have any children? Interestingly, whereas Damon would refer to Glenn as his "buddy," Cory talked about Glenn as a "hero."

Our foray into racializing justice began with a study of *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, by Robert Coles. Glenn gently but clearly explained that, when Ruby was a little girl, there were some schools that didn't allow children with dark skin to attend. He went on to explain that Ruby was a hero because she helped people learn that every child had the right to go to school. The children were spellbound by the story of a little girl *their age* who faced a grave injustice with bravery and whose act of quiet heroism touched their very lives today.

To assess their learning and our teaching, we asked the children to draw and label a picture of their thinking, their reactions, their wonderings. Cory

drew a frightening, robot-like figure with raised clenched fists. Smiling next to this daunting character was a small child — a child with brown skin like Ruby, but with short blond hair like Cory. The caption read: "It is not fair!!!!!"

Damon sat quietly on the edge of the group during Glenn's telling of the story, though his eyes never left Glenn. While he seemed engaged in the lesson, he produced no drawing and wrote no words that day. A full week had passed when he asked me privately before school if he could write something about Ruby. He wrote: "Ruby felt sad because the crowd was mean to her." Damon was beginning to become a part of our learning community.

RACIALIZING LIBERTY

While the children were quick to internalize the concept of justice, liberty proved far more elusive. Children deal with issues of justice every day in school and at home. Liberty, however, is more abstract, for young children experience little liberty in their daily lives. I thought to approach the notion of liberty by examining its complete absence — slavery. The book I used to open a conversational door into slavery was *The Eagles Who Thought They Were Chickens*, by Mychal Wynn. It is a difficult book and perhaps not developmentally appropriate according to traditional criteria: there are no pictures, the text is dense, and the concepts are abstract. Yet I believed that, with support and multiple exposures, my young students could use this book as a springboard for learning.

West African proverbs and fables offer many versions of the "eagle story." All versions of the tale show the tragedy of unrecognized potential: eagles who do not realize that they

can fly. In Wynn's account, an eagle is captured, caged, and set aboard a slave ship. Denied her freedom, she dies, but not before laying three eggs, which are placed in the chicken yard. The hatchlings, two boys and a girl, are continually harassed because they do not look like chickens. Knowing nothing of their great heritage, they "walked through the chicken yard with their heads down, feeling that they were indeed chickens."

Another eagle is captured but survives the Middle Passage to join the three eagles who believe they are chickens. This eagle, with his wings clipped, endures the taunts of the chickens but never loses sight of who and what he is — an eagle destined to soar. In time, the eagle's flight feathers grow strong, and he flies out of the chicken yard. He inspires two of the other eagles to find their wings and take flight. The remaining eagle had lived with ridicule too long, and his spirit was broken. He was unable to fly. "Since that day, eagles have been soaring throughout the world helping others to believe in their beauty, their brilliance, their potential, and the extraordinary possibilities in their lives." It is a stunning story about liberty.

I read the book to the children twice before Glenn's lesson and sought to unpack the sophisticated vocabulary. I even reread some of the text at a more developmentally appropriate level. Glenn's reading was the children's third time through the text, but the children were still captivated by the story. Glenn's rich voice, his thoughtful explanations, and his repeated connections to liberty and justice found a receptive audience. Following this lesson, the children did some writing and some drawing — a process that we continued to use to acquire the data we would need to make decisions about our work.

Damon produced a haunting im-

age of a ship. In the cargo bay are two black people — a man and a woman. There are sharks in the water, and the sea is drawn with jagged waves. An eagle sits in a cage on top of the ship. The ship flies a flag that reads “Slave Ship.” Damon’s picture tells something of what he knows and something of what he needs to know about the slave ship — an episode downplayed in Wynn’s book. Damon’s text tells a different

them to function in his picture as the chickens had functioned in Wynn’s story, it is not insignificant that they are drawn as faceless people, not as chickens. Cory’s written commentary is poignant: “It was not nice to put the African people in a pen.” Cory understood that Wynn was not talking about chickens and eagles but about real people enduring real injustices.

In addition to our usual drawing

wanted to know more about “when they put the eagle on the slave ship.” Cory related to the story on a much more symbolic level. He looked at the story as an interested, concerned outsider. Cory recognized the powerful influence that the eagle exerted on the eagles who thought they were chickens, and he also noted the limitations of this power as displayed by the single eagle left behind. Cory looked at the story through a lens of leadership and power. And, like Damon, Cory needed and wanted to explore slavery.

Damon wrote that the best part of the story was “when the eagle’s wings grew back. It was fun.”

story. He wrote: “The eagle did not like to be called a chicken ’cause the chicken broke his heart. It was sad.” Damon felt great empathy for the eagle who thought he was a chicken. I can only wonder about the times Damon had been made to feel that he was a chicken and about how that must have broken his heart. Our study, our conversations, our growing trust in one another, and the importance of our work were beginning to provide the words and a context for some of Damon’s thoughts and feelings.

Cory’s picture told yet another story. He carefully drew three black people — two boys and a girl, a purposeful match with the three eagle hatchlings. These characters are standing in a cage-like structure defined by many red bars. Outside the cage is a white person standing above and over the others. His face is drawn in pencil — a strategy young children use when they want to render more precise details than crayons will allow. The face is mean, angry, and scary. Standing on top of the cage are six stick figures. While I suspect that Cory intended

and writing, I gave the children a more structured assessment this time to help me get inside their learning from a different angle. Their task was to complete each of three sentence starters: 1) The best part of the story was . . . , 2) The worst part of the story was . . . , and 3) I want to know more about. . .

Damon wrote that the best part of the story was “when the eagle’s wings grew back. It was fun.” The worst part of the story was “when the chickens called the eagles stupid.” And he said he wanted to know more about “the slave ship because it is more important. That wasn’t justice.” Damon connected with this story on an intensely personal level, almost as though he saw himself in the story. He felt the eagle’s pain when he was ridiculed. He shared the eagle’s joy when his wings were restored. And he recognized the importance of slavery in our study of liberty and justice.

Cory wrote that the best part of the story was “when the eagle touched the hearts of the two eagles.” The worst part of the story was “when the eagle didn’t go with the others.” And he

HEROISM

We chose to focus on slavery by studying a heroine who stood against this dehumanizing practice. Harriet Tubman took us into, through, and beyond slavery, minimizing much of the horror while offering a vision of heroism that was as majestic as Wynn’s eagles. We launched this study using *A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman*, by David Adler.

But we did not confine our learning to a single resource. The children were thrilled with Tubman’s exploits and intensely curious about the Underground Railroad. I engaged in authentic side-by-side learning with my students as I too formed an intense interest in the Underground Railroad. A trip to our school library turned up a substantial text set that could have fueled our learning for many weeks. Glenn and I made a decision to limit our inquiry into slavery because we wanted to respect the innocence of the young children we worked with and because we wanted very much to bring our study up to the here and now. Yet our time with Harriet Tubman was powerful, and its effects linger in my heart and mind, as I suspect they do for the children.

The children embraced Harriet Tubman as nothing less than an icon.

Liberty and Justice for All: Heroism

Month	Text	Publisher	Date	Focus
September	<i>The Story of Ruby Bridges</i> Robert Coles	Scholastic	1995	Racializing justice
October	<i>Teammates</i> Peter Golenbock	Harcourt Brace	1990	Heroes
November	<i>Susan B. Anthony: A Photo-Illustrated Biography</i> Lucile Davis	Bridgestone Books	1998	White heroes fighting for justice
December	<i>The Eagles Who Thought They Were Chickens</i> Mychal Wynn	Rising Sun Publishing	1993	Racializing liberty
January	<i>A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman</i> David A. Adler	Holiday House	1992	Black heroes fighting for justice
February	<i>The Gettysburg Address</i> Abraham Lincoln, Foreword by Garry Wills	Houghton Mifflin	1995	The end of legal slavery
March	<i>Martin Luther King Day</i> Linda Lowery	Scholastic	1987	Racism and civil rights
April	<i>Smoky Nights</i> Eve Bunting	Harcourt Brace	1994	Racism in our neighborhoods
May	<i>Journey to Freedom</i> Courtney C. Wright	Holiday House	1994	Unsung heroes
	<i>Follow the Drinking Gourd</i> Jeanette Winter	Dragonfly Books	1988	
	<i>Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt</i> Deborah Hopkinson	Dragonfly Books	1993	
June	<i>The Hunterman and the Crocodiles</i> Baba Waque Diakite	Scholastic	1997	Rich traditions of Africa

They played Harriet at recess — hiding in the bushes when the dogs caught their trail, dashing from safe house to safe house on their northbound journey, taking their travelers all the way to Canada, and then returning for more. During one such game, Cory said, “I am not stopping until slavery is erased.” Damon, too, “played” Harriet, though in his own way. He came to school one morning with a kerchief carefully wrapped around his head. While this could have been construed as hoodlum garb, I took the time to ask Damon about his new look. He told me: “I’m covering up the cut on my head like Harriet Tubman did,” and he showed me the red marker “cut” on his forehead. Kerchiefs became quite the rage in our class for a time.

REFLECTIONS

Our study continued throughout

the school year. Each month we studied new heroes and tackled increasingly complex issues, each week we talked about our learning, and each day we worked to make ours a classroom in which liberty and justice for all really meant *for all*. Still, when I reflect on the list of books we chose to study (see “Liberty and Justice for All: Heroism,” above), I question the titles, the number of books, and the order of their presentation. Were these the right books? Did I use enough books? Did I teach them in a sequence that made sense?

But I also realize that our success had less to do with the specific texts than with our process for integrating these texts into our learning lives. The literature we chose became significant through the ways we referred to it. Our best lessons became anchor experiences on which we grew still more learning. Ruby became the referent for courage, perseverance, and youth-

ful heroism. Harriet Tubman gave a name and face to slavery. Glenn became our eagle and encouraged each of us to spread our wings and soar.

Glenn’s spirit and conviction played a decisive role in the concept, design, and substance of this work. Yet his collaboration raises an important question: Could I have done this work without him? I believe that I could have and would have. This work was my obligation and my responsibility. In truth, Glenn could not have done this work without me. While he provided many of the trigger events that defined our path and gave voice to our awareness, I constructed the daily curricula and formed the necessary relationships that supported the work before, during, and after his visits. Our daily interactions were the basis on which all this learning was founded. Liberty and justice weren’t just things we read about or talked about every now and again. These concepts became part of who

we were as individual and collective learners.

I am convinced that adding race to our formal and informal curriculum helped Damon find his way into the classroom. Damon learned to read that year. In fact, he ended the year reading above grade level. He “published” a great variety of animal books and adventure stories. He mastered subtraction with regrouping. He never joined the dodge ball group during recess, but quite often the children who did play would join Damon in his inventive chasing games. Our study touched Damon’s family, too. All three of his brothers began to visit me regularly before and after school. And I was honored when Damon’s grandmother invited me to church to hear her grandchildren sing.

Cory prospered too. He became an avid reader, trying his hand at the MagicTree series, at informational books, and at the Harry Potter books. He wrote chapter stories about dinosaurs, race cars, and snakes. He memorized most of the multiplication facts. The justice patrol Cory created grew and became a class project. Cory became a leader advocating for justice. To this day, I can hear his 6-year-old voice in my head, “But, Ms. Marriott, we have to be fair.”

LINGERING QUESTIONS

I left the classroom at the end of the year to pursue other professional opportunities. I have had and will continue to have many difficult conversations with Glenn about our work. Were we right to engage in this inquiry with such young children? Were we right to start an inquiry that we both knew might be unsupported — or even suppressed — later in school? How would other teachers respond to racially aware children?

I kept in touch with Damon and

Cory the following year. Damon got off to a bad start in third grade. I learned that he was spending a lot of time in the principal’s office. When I called his teacher to see if I could offer any insight or help, she said, “Damon is always telling me that things are not fair. I just can’t have him questioning everything that I do and say.” I had taught him to stand up for his convictions and to speak up against injustice. Did I set him up for this confrontation with a different teaching style? Did I teach him to expect more than schools and teachers could give him? Damon left the school shortly after the Thanksgiving break. His grandmother enrolled him in a charter school with an Afrocentric curriculum.

Did our study help or hurt Damon? I’d like to think that our work opened a door to literacy for him. I’d like to think that our work gave him the words and substance to surface and express his concerns. I’d like to think that our work gave him the courage and context to take action on his beliefs. I’d like to think that he is in a better place now, a place

where he is valued and valuable and where he can continue his growth as a reader, writer, thinker, and doer.

I had lunch with Cory about halfway through the year. He was thriving in school. He was reading a full grade level ahead of his peers, and he was one of the most popular children in the class. Yet he was grave when he said to me, “Ms. Marriott, you have to come back and teach us more about justice. We are forgetting.” Why wasn’t Cory seeking justice in his new class as he had done so relentlessly in our class? What had happened to his justice patrol? Did Cory need to know about Ruby and Harriet and the eagles? Could he afford not to know?

I’d like to think that our study will not truly be forgotten — by Cory or by the rest of the children. I’d like to think that the concepts of liberty and justice for all will remain in Cory’s heart and mind. I’d like to think that we gave Cory the words and substance so that, when the time is right, his voice will join those who are determined to end the silence. ■



“I’m not criticizing the notion of ‘professional student,’ per se, Gerald. But most of them drop anchor at a higher level than second grade.”