

“Why Is This the Only Place in Portland I See Black People?”

Teaching young children about redlining

BY KATHARINE JOHNSON

MY 1ST- AND 2ND-GRADE STUDENTS wrote a play about Portland, Oregon. It wasn't about bridges or roses, although both are associated with our city. It was a play about segregation and how people stand up to fight for justice. It began with two things: a question and a belief that little kids can do big work.

One afternoon, as my then 6-year-old son and I headed home from school, he sat in the backseat looking out the window.

“Mom, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why is this part of Portland the only place I see lots of black people?”

We were driving into our northeast neighborhood, a part of town called Albina, which for a long time has been central to Portland's black community. Although northeast Portland has more African Americans than other sections of the city, they are being pushed out, replaced by white families (like mine) lured by low home prices and central locations. How could I begin to explain the legacy of segregation to my son? How could I explain the complications of our presence as white people in this neighborhood?

“Well, for a long time, black people couldn't live wherever they wanted. This part of town was one of the only places that bankers and real estate agents would sell or rent houses to black people,” I began. “But today, fewer and fewer black families live in this neighborhood.”

Over the rest of that evening and into the next week, I kept coming back to his question. At that point, my class was at the tail end of a months-long study of the Civil Rights Movement. We had read dozens of picture books, watched several videos, and generated lots of wall charts and posters. But all of our research had been about the South in the 1950s and '60s.

I began to fear that, mixed with the intended messages of this unit, was an unintended message: The fight for racial justice happened long ago and far away, and now it is over. Did my students think racism died when the last “whites only” sign came down? I wondered if talking about the history of the

neighborhood was a way I could bring civil rights home for my students.

Segregation: Not Just the South

I began to do some research. As in many historically black neighborhoods in the United States, the gentrification of northeast Portland rests on an older history of economic injustice perpetrated by banks, realtors, governments, and white property owners.

Redlining was one piece of an elaborate puzzle denying people of color access to housing and to wealth. The term refers to the practice many banks used to designate “undesirable” areas of a city by drawing a red line around those neighborhoods on a city map. These areas were largely

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inhabited by African Americans and/or other people of color. The banks were loath to provide loans for property inside the red line, claiming the loans were too high risk or were for sums too low to be worth the bank's effort. This artificially devalued property inside the red lines.

Low property values and the inaccessibility of financing for homeowners encouraged ownership by absentee landlords, who often let property fall into decline. Ignoring their importance as centers of African American business, religion,



politics, and culture, whole neighborhoods were deemed “blighted,” which made it even more difficult to secure loans.

Until a 1948 Supreme Court decision, it was legal for property owners to establish deeds that could not be transferred to nonwhites or Jews. In some cases, the Federal Housing Administration made its assistance contingent on the use of these restrictive covenants, claiming a need to protect property values. The participation of realtors in this approach to segregation was codified in the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Real Estate Boards, which instructed realtors to never

introduce “members of any race or nationality . . . whose presence will be clearly detrimental to the property values in that neighborhood.”

By the 1950s, references to race were removed from the code, but redlining lived on. By one means or another (including subprime loans), discriminatory lending and real estate practices have continued.

The more I learned, the more the history of redlining became part of my story. I live in a formerly redlined neighborhood. I teach in a K–8 school in central northeast Portland, also formerly redlined. Today, the population of both neighborhoods is predominantly white and growing ever more affluent. Irvington, my school, is still fairly integrated, but the neighborhood is not. Fewer and fewer black families live in the actual attendance area every year. Most of the early-grades classrooms are now predominantly white and the middle school classrooms are predominantly black, mirroring the changes in the neighborhood.

Portland's suggested social studies scope and sequence includes having 2nd graders learn about neighborhoods. I decided to add part of the history of racial injustice in our own neighborhood to our unit on the Civil Rights Movement. I wanted the changes in the neighborhood to be something we talked about in school, something that was central to the curriculum.

My first plan was to read a few picture books to the class and make new charts of their responses. I spent days searching the internet, asking fellow teachers, and talking with the local children's librarian—to no avail. We uncovered no picture books about redlining. I needed to create the materials I wanted, so I decided to design a role play about redlining.

What Is Redlining?

I decided to connect redlining to the history we'd already encountered by reminding students about ways discrimination continued even after laws were passed to stop it.

“Remember how the white townspeople filled in the pool with asphalt so that black people and white people couldn't use it together?” I

asked, pointing to the chart listing their responses to *Freedom Summer*. “Tell your neighbor one example you remember of segregation.”

After a few minutes for sharing, I said: “Segregation looked different in different times and difference places. We are going to learn about a time, not too long ago, when I was a little girl, that our neighborhood was segregated—on purpose.”

I showed my students a map I had sketched of the neighborhoods around our school and said: “Today, black people, white people, Latinos, Native Americans, and people from Asia and the Middle East live in this neighborhood. On my block there are three black families, one Asian family, and six white families. How many of you live on a block with people from various races?”

Several hands went up, some didn’t.

I drew a red line around a section of the town map. “See this area here?” I pointed to the area inside the

red line. “When I was your age, if black people wanted to buy a house, this was the only place they could do it. And, if you were black, it was really hard to get a bank to lend you money for a house, even in that area. That was called redlining. What does it remind you of?” Students talked in pairs about segregated buses, schools, and movie theaters.

“We are going to learn about redlining—how people, banks, realtors, and the government worked together to keep segregation going even after laws were passed saying it had to stop,” I continued. “You are going to practice what justice fighters could do about it.”

Our Redlining Role Play

There are so many ways a role play about racism can go wrong in a room full of 6-, 7-, and 8-year-olds. I worried students might not understand what redlining was or why it was wrong. I

worried that students would feel uncomfortable portraying a person of a race other than their own, and I worried that my African American students would feel put on the spot. To avoid these potential problems, I did some thoughtful planning. I tried to design roles that would provide students with ideas of the motivations and beliefs of the various groups. I tried to write roles in language the students could understand. Although I included specific details to clarify important information, I made the roles general enough to allow students to weave in their own ideas about what their character would have done when faced with redlining.

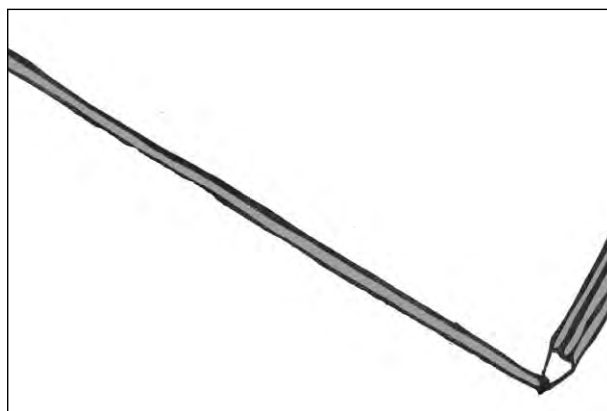
I knew my students were comfortable talking about race and racism because in poems celebrating skin tone, our study of the Civil Rights Movement, and interviews with family elders, we had been doing it all year long. But this project was asking a lot of young learners. Before dis-

tributing the roles to the students, I thought carefully about the roles to assign my six African American students. In the end I decided to assign four of them African American roles and to assign the other two the role of white real estate agents. I made sure that no student of color was isolated in a group with only white students.

I also thought about how to handle asking students to portray perpetrators of injustice. For each perpetrator role, I assigned at least one student who I was confident would approach the role with sincerity but not aggression. The rest of the roles I distributed randomly.

I gave each student one of six roles: African American homeowner, African American renter, white homeowner, white banker, white real estate agent, and white mayor. I put the students in groups with others who had the same role.

“You each have a role of someone affected by redlining. Some roles are people of a different



Meredith Stern

race from you, some are the same race as you. The character you are playing may want something that the real you does not agree with. Remember, we are acting. Imagine yourself as that person. Use what you know from our civil rights study to help you imagine being someone else.

“Read your role together. Then use your highlighters to mark information you think is important about your person.”

I roved the room as they talked and highlighted. A few students needed help finding key facts and I asked for more specific partnering in those groups: “Make sure everyone in your group has some of the same ideas highlighted. If not, help each other.”

I paused to give three kids who had highlighted every word on their paper a new copy and a partner. Then I said: “Now talk in your group about what your person wants and what they are worried about. You can find that information in your role sheet.” I wrote sentence starters on the whiteboard:

My person wants . . .

My person is worried about . . .

I gathered the class back together on the rug after a few minutes and asked to hear their ideas.

Shaniece started: “My person wants a house.”

“Great. Why doesn’t your person go out and get a loan?”

“The bank won’t give us one.”

“Why not?”

“The banks won’t make loans in my neighborhood and my person is black. It is hard to find a bank that will make us a loan.”

“No,” interrupted Andrew. “Remember, we are going to Lincoln Bank for a loan.”

“No,” said Adriano. “Lincoln isn’t fair. They will cheat!”

“Sounds like you have some tough decisions to make,” I said. “Everyone, turn to a neighbor and tell what you learned about the African American renters. Renters, talk together about what you’d like to do about trying to buy a house when people are trying to stop you. It is



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Redlining was one piece of an elaborate puzzle denying people of color access to housing and to wealth.

OK if you don't agree. You can have different ideas."

Students talked in pairs. Then it was time to hear about another role.

Luke's hand went up. "I got the white banker role. My person doesn't want to give them a loan."

I continued to invite groups to share information about their roles and have the rest of the class pair-share about what they learned. Then I asked each student to invent a name for their person, draw their picture, and answer the questions we had discussed as if they were that person:

My name is . . .

I want . . .

I worry about . . .

Mia created an African American grandma who was fed up with segregation. Sandy chose to envision her African American homeowner as the child in a family. Luke's banker wanted to change the loan process but worried he would get fired. Jeremiah's African American homeowner was reluctant to cause trouble.

The following day I had my students sit in role groups on the rug. "Today, your characters are going to meet each other. What is the problem all these characters are dealing with?"

"Some people want to buy houses, but they aren't allowed," said Matt.

"Why aren't they allowed?" I asked.

"Because of racism," Shaniece answered. "They can't get money because they are black."

"Does that sound like something people should change?" I asked. There was a chorus of nods and yeses around the circle.

"Will it be easy to change this injustice?"

"No," Carly answered. "My person doesn't want to let black people into the neighborhood. My person won't want to change."

"Who else has a role for someone who will not want change to happen?" I asked.

A few hands went up.

"So different people want different things. Some want justice and some don't. Remember, if your character doesn't want justice that does not mean that you, the real you, doesn't want justice. It is your job to play your role so our story about redlining seems true. Playing your role doesn't mean you believe what your character believes.

"OK, let's do our role play. Now I want you to act out what might happen when African American families tried to buy a house."

"Like a play?" Caitlynn asked.

"Yes, like a play. But we're going to make it up as we do it. That is called improvisation. We don't have a script, just your roles. I'm going to give you three minutes in your role groups to talk about what your character would say and do. If you run out of ideas, look at some of our civil rights wall charts to help you keep thinking."

The African American families wanted houses. One family wanted to stay inside the redlined area, the other wanted to move into a white neighborhood to be closer to work. Bankers and realtors feared the loss of their jobs if they disrupted the status quo, the mayor was conflicted, and the white homeowners feared loss of property values.

Before starting the improvisation, I told the white neighbors, bankers, mayor, and realtors to stay in one spot. Only the African American families would move around the room. I wanted to have only one point of action at a time and to make sure the kids would listen to each other.

"Who has an idea for how we can start?" I asked.

Trevon raised his hand. "We are going to talk in our family about moving."

"Good. Let's listen to Trevon, Sandy, and Mia to get us started."

"I got the job! I got the job!" Trevon began.

"That's great, Dad," Sandy said.

"But it's so far away," Mia said.

"We could move closer," Trevon said.

"Outside the red line?" Mia asked. "That scares me."

"Let's at least try," Trevon said.

I interrupted here: "Great! What should the family do next? Where should they go?"

Students began calling out: “The bank!” “The real estate office!” “No, the bank.”

“Where will you go next?” I asked Trevon, Mia, and Sandy.

“The bank,” Mia answered.

As Trevon, Mia, and Sandy headed to the bank, I invited the bankers to get ready for their scene. “What will you do when they ask for a loan? What can you say?”

After Trevon, Mia, and Sandy were denied a loan by Luke, Alex, and Sydney, I asked: “What do you think your character would do now? What should happen next?” Later, when Jeremiah and Shaniece approached the real estate office as African American renters, I asked the realtors, Caitlynn and Matt: “How can you be sneaky about refusing them? You can’t come right out and say no loans for black people. What can you do or say?” When both African American renters and owners were denied by realtors, bankers, and the government, I asked: “What action can you take? You need a house. You have a right to a house. What might someone who wants justice do?”

These questions were very important. It is unreasonable to expect young students to keep an activity like this going on their own. My questions held the group close to the content I wanted them to learn: How did injustice show up again and again and how did people act for justice? The questions also allowed me to bring the students back to the broader historical context of their role play. I did not want the role play to slip away from our civil rights study and become personal and immediate for students. Some kids were perpetuating racism in their roles, others were resisting. Young learners could easily confuse the role play with reality, so it was important to keep drawing links to our broader civil rights study.

“When Can We Do Our Real Play?”

The improvisation lasted only about 10 minutes. I am sure it looked like chaos from outside the room, but my students enacted the mistreatment of two families and the action those families took to demand their rights. From the actions they

improvised in the role play, I saw evidence that they had internalized some of the ideas from our civil rights study. I felt satisfied and prepared to debrief the experience as closure. But when I gathered my class back to the rug, that was not the conversation students wanted to have.

“How did that feel?” I asked, marker in hand to record their ideas on chart paper.

Students began to talk to their neighbors about how hard it was to be the mayor who said no, and how frustrating it felt to be told no over and over again.

I called on Andrea. Rather than tell me her feelings about the enactment, she asked, “When can we do the real play?”

The real play? I had planned for an experience for my class, not a play to be performed.

“I think this play will be great, but we shouldn’t use puppets like we did for Momotaro,” Brandi chimed in. “We should be the actors. That is more realistic.”

“Well, what would that look like?” I asked, stalling for time. “Talk to your partner again about your ideas for an actual play.”

I wove among the students as they sat knee-to-knee talking about what they thought should go in our play. They had a lot to say. I decided to see what we could do.

“What parts of our improvisation felt real to you?” I asked.

“I think that the African American dad seemed worried about what to do. He wants to move for his job, but he’s scared,” Sydney began.

“Who agrees that it’s important to keep some part of the play when the family explains what they are worried about?”

Thumbs up.

Without opportunities to talk about race and power, justice and injustice, we cannot expect that children will develop a critical lens to view these issues in their lives.

“I think the bankers would say no. I was a banker and it felt bad saying no, but I think that is true,” Andre added.

Again, the class agreed to keep a scene with the bank refusing to provide a loan.

“What parts didn’t feel true?” I asked.

Aisha raised her hand, “I don’t think Neil should have shouted at the bankers.”

“Why not?”

“Well, when we read the sit-in book, it said they were silent and waited.”

“What do you think, everyone, does a silent sit-in sound more true? Neil, what do you think?”

Neil agreed that shouting at the bankers was probably not an authentic action for this time period and this movement. I was about to write silent sit-in on our brainstorming chart when Larry, usually quiet, interrupted. “Teacher Katharine, couldn’t we sing? You know, to keep up our courage?”

The class agreed that singing matched the time period and the strategies we had learned.

In the improvisation, Neil had acted very differently from the civil rights activists we had studied. What, I wondered, did Neil’s overacting have to do with his whiteness? Did race have anything to do with Sandy, a black student, deciding she wanted her character to be a child? I watched and listened closely as students brainstormed ideas together to see if my students of color were engaged. Had they not been, had the brainstorming been mostly white students, I might have abandoned or revised the project. But Shaniece had lots of ideas to share and suggestions for strengthening other people’s ideas. Sandy wanted her character to speak in almost every scene. Jason was willing to play a white banker because he said we needed to have someone play the bad guy. Given the eager participation of my students of color, I felt confident about moving forward.

We generated a series of scenes that showed the dilemma faced by African Americans in redlined Portland and gave voice to justice by acting out how they might have protested. The class agreed to open with an African American family discussing their desire to move and fears of being denied. Subsequent scenes included that family

attempting to get help from bankers, realtors, and government officials. The students decided on a sit-in as the action the people would take when no one would help.

There was a debate about whether some white neighbors would join the sit-in as allies. Audrey insisted that some white neighbors would have helped. She grabbed *We March* and *My Brother Martin* to show the class pictures of black people and white people working together for justice. Finally, the class agreed that one white neighbor would become an ally, but others would support redlining.

The class decided to end the play with victory. The justice fighters are successful in changing the mind of the mayor first, and then the bankers and realtors. The final scene is a housewarming party at the African American family’s new house. And everyone is invited.

I assigned scenes to small groups for writing. I typed these up and returned the first draft of the play to the class the following day.

“These scenes are wonderful,” I told the students. “Today we need to make the scenes all go together.” I had students read the play in their small groups, marking their favorite parts with highlighters and placing question marks on spots that were confusing. I gathered the class back to the rug with their marked up drafts. We used shared writing to revise the play. I retyped everything and we had a play.

Then we practiced. A lot.

When the day of the performance arrived, the kids were excited and nervous as family members and the principal took their seats. Everyone in the class had a part. And they did it! They acted out the whole play, closing by inviting the audience to join in a round of “We Shall Not Be Moved.”

I am proud of the learning my students did. They demonstrated understanding of some very big ideas through their talk, their writing, and the production of an original play. When I do it again, there are things I will change. I will begin with the stories of everyday people taking action against racial injustice, then use those as a springboard for learning about the broader historical events. I will draw links to other movements, like

protecting undocumented immigrants' rights. I will invite guest speakers: people who have lived in the neighborhood for decades and lawyers who fought against redlining.

I will make changes to my teaching, but I won't shy away from doing this big learning about justice with little kids. It is through creating spaces in our classrooms for children to rehearse acting for justice that we manifest hope that they will take action in the world at large. Without opportunities to talk about race and power, justice and injustice, we cannot expect that children will develop a critical lens to view these issues in their lives.

Although sections of the play don't match the historical record, that was less important to me than practicing justice through acting. I wanted my students to develop a habit of mind that they could carry with them—that little voice that whispers, "Somehow, together we can change the world."

RESOURCES

There is a picture book about fair housing, *The Fair Housing Five & the Haunted House*, written by the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center (fairhousingfive.org).

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Roles for Redlining Improvisation

African American Homeowner

You are an African American homeowner. You live in a segregated neighborhood in Portland called Boise. Most of the people who live in your neighborhood are also African American. Most of the businesses are owned by African Americans. You like your neighbors a lot. You like going to Smitty's Ice Cream Shop with your family and getting your hair cut at the Bogle Barbershop. You like your house, but you want to move so you can be closer to your job. You want to sell your house and buy a new one.

White Homeowner

You are a white homeowner. You live in a segregated neighborhood. All of your neighbors are white. All of the businesses in your neighborhood are owned by white people. A house on your block is for sale. An African American family wants to buy this house and move in. Some of your neighbors want to stop them. Your neighbors tell you they are worried their houses will be worth less money if African American people live in the neighborhood.

White Real Estate Agent

You are a real estate agent—someone whose job it is to sell houses. You are selling a house in a segregated neighborhood where only white people live. An African American family asks you to show them the house because they might want to buy it. You know that the white community will be angry if you sell a house to an African American family. You know you might get in trouble at your job. You could even lose your job if you sell to African Americans outside the red line. The other real estate agents and you all promised not to sell houses to African Americans in white neighborhoods.

White Banker

You are a white banker. Your bank makes loans to help people buy houses. Your boss has told you that you are not allowed to lend money to African Americans who want to buy a house. He said you absolutely cannot lend money to black people who want to buy in a white neighborhood. Your boss gave you a map with a red line drawn around the neighborhoods where African Americans can live.

The bankers all agreed to pretend that the loans African American people tried to get were not for enough money. You are supposed to say that the loan is too small when African Americans ask for a loan. That way you won't get in trouble for being racist, but you won't have to give a loan to African Americans. Even if they want to buy a house in a segregated black neighborhood, you are not supposed to lend any money to African Americans.

White Mayor

You were elected by the people of Portland to be their mayor. Some African Americans are trying to buy houses in neighborhoods that are all white. The white people are asking you to stop them. The African Americans are asking you to help them get houses. Some of the town's bankers and real estate agents have asked you to keep things just the way they are.

African American Renter

You are a young African American. You have been saving up your money to buy a house for you and your family. You are ready to buy a house, but you need a loan from a bank. The house you want to buy is near where you live now. The house is in a segregated black neighborhood called Woodlawn. You like living in that neighborhood because all your friends are there and you like to feel safe and comfortable. You try to get a loan for your house, but no bank will give you one. You have heard about a company called Lincoln Loan that might make a loan to you. You are worried that Lincoln Loan is not fair and honest because you have heard about other people who got cheated by them.

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