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TEACHING TOUGH TOPICS

How do I use children's literature to build a deeper understanding of social justice, equity, and diversity?



Teaching a Tough Topic: Black Lives Matter

Teaching a Tough Topic: How to Deal With It

Using Children's Literature to Build Understanding of Black Lives Matter

How do we help students make sense of what is happening in the world? How can children's literature help readers to understand racism, white privilege, and oppression?

Every educator concerned with teaching about differences and empathy and acceptance, asks "What can I do?" "What should I do?" Throughout my 40-year career as a teacher, children's literature has been central to literacy and learning and to enrich understanding of equity, tolerance, and belonging. In this particular time, citizens, young and old, are trying to make sense of systemic racism. Educators and parents might not know where to start in order to help students make sense of what is currently happening in the world. My answer is simple: *Start with a good book!* It is my contention that children's literature is a meaningful way to opening up conversations in order to build a deeper understanding of social justice, equity, and diversity—now more so than ever with the issue of Black Lives Matter.

A picture book, novel, or poem can help students to...

1. Make connections to the text, perhaps having students reveal their own stories
2. Raise questions about topics and issues of concern
3. Have meaningful discussions and work towards finding answers
4. Learn about the identity of others and come to better reflect on their own identities and values
5. Experience narratives that serve as case studies for relationships, values, and struggles that appear in fiction and can be applied to real-world contexts

Teaching Tough Topics is a comprehensive guide to choosing and using the best children's literature to address sensitive but significant topics in the classroom. This book shows teachers how to lead students to become caring, compassionate citizens as they read and respond to quality literature. The strategies and ideas and vocabulary outlined in Chapter One of this resource, *Race and Diverse Cultures*, supports teachers to help them to unpack the topic of race and racism. Anti-discrimination educator Michelle Grace-Williams writes that "children are often observers and recipient of racism. Thus, delaying conversations about racism in the classroom [and at home] is tantamount to delaying the support they need to understand this issue, cope with it, and address it." (2020, p. 27). Literature is a meaningful way to start these necessary conversations.

How do I address Black Lives Matter issues? Some recommended literature...

There is a wide range of books that feature black characters that open windows, mirrors, and doors to connecting an understanding. When we choose to share these titles with students, we are serving them with characters who may or not be different from themselves. There are a vast number of picture books written by diverse authors who tackle typecasting as they present stories of black characters. (e.g., *Not Quite Snow White* by Ashley Franklin, *Africville* by Shauntay Grant, *Those Shoes* by Marybeth Boelts.) Any novel by Kwame Alexander, Jason Reynolds, Walter Dean Myers, Christopher Paul Curtis, or Jacqueline Woodson will help student meet black fictional heroes.

The titles listed below can be considered specific to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Shout Out!

The following three titles, in particular, are certainly drawn from contemporary media headlines regarding race, privilege, and oppression.

Race Cars: A children's book about white privilege by Jenny Devenny (picture book)

This is a picture book designed to inspire tough conversations about race and privilege. Devenny tells the story of 2 best friends, a white car and a black car, that have different experiences and face different rules (“Bridge is for white cars only. All other cars must go around the river.”) while entering the same race. Advice is given about talking about race with kids and discussion questions are provided to help frame the discussion. I wonder what questions the kids will have?

Ghost Boys by Jewell Parker Rhodes (fiction: Ages 10–13)

Every student, grades 5 through 8 needs to be introduced to this novel.

A powerful novel about a black boy killed by a police officer who mistakes his toy gun for a real threat. As a ghost, this twelve-year-old observes the devastation that's been unleashed on his family and community in the aftermath of what they see as an unjust killing. The narrative draws connections through history as the boy meets other black boys, including Emmett Till, in heaven.

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas (YA)

Starr Carter witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend at the hands of a police officer and questions whether she should go to the police, fearing that they will not pursue legal action against the officer and justice will not be served.

Picture Books

Let's Talk About Race by Julius Lester; illus. Karen Barbour

Not My Idea: A book about whiteness by Anastasia Higginbotham

The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson; illus. by E.B. Lewis

Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights by Rob Sanders; illus. Jared Andrew Schorr

Race Cars: A children's book about white privilege by Jenny Devenny

The Undefeated by Kwame Alexander; illus. Kadir Nelson

Viola Desmond Won't Be Budged by Jody Nyasha Warner; illus. Richard Rudnicki

Novels

Dear Martin by Nic Stone

Ghost Boys by Jewell Parker Rhodes

The Gospel Truth by Caroline Pignat

Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli

All American Boys by Brendan Kiely and Jason Reynolds (YA)

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas (YA)

How It Went Down by Kekla Magoon (YA)

Monster by Walter Dean Myers (YA)

Poetry

Remember the Bridge: Poems of a People by Carole Boston Weatherford

We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices essays, letters, poems, and stories edited by Wade Hudson and Cheryl Willis Hudson

Woke: A young poet's call to justice by Mahogany L. Browne, with Elizabeth Acevedo and Olivia Gatwood; illus. Theodore Taylor III

Further resources

Activity: Thinking About Racism—What If...?

This activity provides a list of 17 scenarios dealing with race and racism. Students can choose one or more statements to respond to a) through writing and/or b) through small group discussion. (see *Teaching Tough Topics*, 32)

- What if... you witnessed someone spray-painting a piece of racist graffiti in your neighbourhood?
- What if... you heard someone tell a racist joke?
- What if... you were assigned to a group where everyone else's culture was the same, but different than yours?

Teaching Tough Topics, Chapter 1: *Race and Diverse Cultures* includes

- A personal journey with multicultural literature
- How to Talk About Race and Racism: 5 key points
- Perspective: *Challenging Racism: Developing Children's Critical Racial Literacy* by Michelle Grace-Williams
- Perspective: *Multicultural Books and Critical Reading as Mirrors, Windows, and Doors* by Maria Jose Botelho
- The Language and Vocabulary of Race and Diverse Cultures
- Opening Up the Topic of Race and Diverse Cultures: What Would You Do? Considering Racist Scenarios
- Responding to a Picture Book Through Thinking Stems (*The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson)
- Unpacking a Monologue Script (*Skin* by Dennis Foon)
- Great Books for a Tough Topic: Booklists

For recommended literature titles with annotations see: larryswartz.ca / Dr. Larry Recommends

***Teaching Tough Topics How do I use children's literature to build a deeper understanding of social diversity, equity and diversity* by Larry Swartz (2020) is available through Pembroke Publishers**