

# Let's Give Them Something to Talk (And Act!) About: Privilege, Racism, and Oppression in the Middle School Classroom

ASHLEY S. BOYD ■ JACINDA MILLER

*"Some of you will be in a situation soon, if you haven't already, when you'll need to have decided where your lines are between right and wrong. And where will that be? What will you do?"*

—Mrs. Miller

Talking with middle school students about real-world topics can be challenging, but it is necessary. In the eighth grade especially, students are beginning to develop their own perspectives on the world around them and to solidify their beliefs and values. The English language arts classroom, as a space in which texts open doors to contemporary issues, can provide students a medium through which to wrestle with oft-considered controversial topics, learn more about inequities plaguing society, and affirm their stances.

In this article, we describe how we strove to achieve such goals with two classes of eighth grade students living in a predominately middle-class suburban area. Ashley is a university teacher-educator with thirteen years of teaching experience, and Mrs. Miller is a middle school teacher with nine years of teaching experience. Both identify as White women, and both were raised in the small southern town and attended the middle school in which this work occurred, where 78 percent of the students are White, 8 percent Black, 5 percent Hispanic, and 34 percent are classified as low income (GreatSchools, 2019). We came together over our shared commitment to social justice literacies (Boyd, 2017) and through our passion for drawing upon young adult literature to engage students with current issues. For the unit we describe in this essay, we collaboratively planned and implemented lessons and activities utilizing Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's (2015) novel, *All American Boys*. While

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much work has been done to address ways to teach the novel (e.g., Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Rodesiler, 2018), here we wish to focus on the dialogue and accompanying activities we employed with our students and the ways that we unpacked deeply political and often contentious issues with them. We used the novel as a springboard for this work, hoping to cultivate our students' critical consciousnesses and abilities to engage in civil discourse about topics rarely broached in traditional school environments.

Talking about racism in classrooms, though, is not a new phenomenon. For years, teachers have documented their practice related to, for example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) or *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* (Curtis, 1995). Often, however, we as teachers forget that racism is intimately connected to Whiteness and privilege and that, if we are to truly talk about racism and its implications, we must also tackle the ways that the dominant group benefits and is complicit in reproducing oppression. We must focus on the systems at work and how those serve to benefit people in power at the detriment of others. Some educators have noted the import of such work, especially with privileged students (Swalwell, 2013), whose role in dismantling racism is key if we hope to effect change.

## *All American Boys*

As the visibility of police brutality grows in the United States and youth witness resulting protests and public debate, *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015) comes as a welcomed novel and conversation starter. Narrated in the alternating viewpoints of two teenage boys—Rashad, who is Black, and Quinn, who is White—the story opens with a police officer's brutal assault of Rashad, which Quinn witnesses from the shadows. As

the story unfolds, Quinn understands and confronts his White privilege and Rashad comes to terms with what happened to him and his initially undesired role as the face of a movement.

## Tackling Contemporary Topics

It is imperative to note that before introducing these topics, Mrs. Miller had established a dialogic classroom community from the outset and had built strong relationships with her students. They were accustomed to sharing their thoughts and opinions and asking their teacher for guidance when they were unsure of how to make sense of both literature and life.

### Privilege

As mentioned, we did not feel we could properly enter *All American Boys* and a discussion of police brutality and racism without having our students first understand privilege. Our community had recently, and within one week's time, donated thousands of dollars for each student in the middle school to possess a Google Chromebook. As a prereading strategy, we wanted our students to recognize and begin to understand that by little of their own doing did they receive these benefits, and that, in fact, they were quite privileged by the nature of many external factors.

We began with a general definition of the term

*privilege*, and then we led students through a poster walk of the various privileges they possessed. Providing colored markers for each student, we labeled four posters around the room:

- Privileges you have by attending this school
- Privileges you have as a resident of this town
- Privileges you have from being “you”
- Privileges you have from being a teenager

Students then circulated and noted their various advantages on each anonymously (see Figure 1).

In the conversation that ensued in the debrief of the posters, we asked prompting questions such as: *What privileges do you have that you may not have considered prior to this activity? How does this relate to the way society is structured? Who has privilege and who doesn't, and on what grounds? How do you think this plays out in our own small community? What does this mean for you, and what can you do now with your recognized privilege?*

Through this activity, students recognized our purpose and they began to grasp the meaning of privilege and its impact on their lives. They articulated having not previously considered these aspects and taking them for granted. While initially their thoughts on their privilege related to the quality of their education, for example, we were able to return to the word *privilege* and this notion of unearned social benefits throughout the duration of our reading and therefore encourage more depth in their understandings and make connections to race as a

potentially privileged entity. In the novel, Quinn's experience of seeing his social advantage was life altering for him—he transformed from being ignorant to the ways that race affects our society to coming to discern how it impacted him and his teammates as well as how it was part of a larger system of oppression. At one point in the novel, Quinn thinks, “I'd be afraid too. . . . But I didn't have to be because my shield was that I was white,” (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 180). We used Quinn's revelation to reflect on our observations in the poster walk and to talk with students about how it feels to see privileges.



FIGURE 1. Poster with student comments.

## Personal Boundaries

As illustrated in the opening quote of this article, one ongoing conversation in which we also engaged students throughout our novel study focused on drawing their own lines and boundaries in terms of their values and beliefs. Quinn struggles incessantly in the novel with speaking up and doing the right thing, having seen his father figure, Paul, the police officer, who was also his best friend's brother, brutally attack Rashad. Quinn is uneasy about speaking out against his family friend and risking his position of privilege, coming to terms with the many ways that he has experienced benefits because of his own skin color and social position as the son of a veteran and army hero. Because we worried that students would dismiss Quinn's struggle as cowardly and insist naively that his position wasn't as difficult as it seemed, we engaged students with questions: *Why is it so difficult for Quinn to speak up? What will he gain by doing so? What will he lose? How is Quinn able to stay silent—what protects him?*

Since students' boundaries are personal and we knew that many of them were beginning to experience peer pressure and precarious situations, we wished to engage them in a writing activity to think more about the topic. So, we offered an individual journal prompt at the start of one class that asked: "How has Quinn grown throughout the story to this point? What have you learned about yourself while reading?" In students' responses, they shared their own stories of coming to terms with the idea of what "wrong" means, regardless of popular opinion.

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One White student noted she "learned that it is okay to change how you feel about something. It is also okay if no one else accepts/understands you, your perspective, or your opinion. No matter if no one agrees with you, you have to stand up for what you believe in." Another student, who identified as Asian, noted that she "learned that standing up for what is right can affect more people than just who it directly happens to," identifying the social impact of decision making.

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## Oppression as Systemic

Perhaps one of our most difficult conversation topics, because it can be tough to grasp at any age, was racism as a systemic entity and not merely

as one discriminatory act of a person against another. Students were quick to see Paul as racist and his actions unjustified, but they had a more difficult time connecting his actions to larger structures, such as the justice system, which has historically allowed such instances to occur, and to understanding how Quinn was complicit in racism through not only his previous actions allowing Paul to beat up another character, Marc Blair, on his behalf, but also in his silence surrounding Rashad.

In order to help students discern structures, we began by discussing stereotypes. Similar to privilege, we first defined the word *stereotype*. We began this discussion with a question that the two of us, as adults and as White women, wrestled with before we brought it to class,

## CONNECTIONS FROM readwritethink

This article shares about the importance of reading texts of all varieties, including those that address contemporary social problems, in the English language arts classroom. This lesson plan shares a way to do this. As part of their study of Angie Thomas's novel *The Hate U Give*, students build background knowledge of the Black Lives Matter movement by listening to radio interviews and examining the network's official website. They then take an interest-and-knowledge survey to help select the topic for a short directed research project designed to establish context and depth around several aspects of the novel: double consciousness/codeswitching, the Black Panther movement, Tupac Shakur as activist, media portrayal of police violence, and the complexity of gang culture. Students share their learning at key moments during reading and discussion of the novel, followed by work with excerpts from James Baldwin's essay "Letter from a Region in My Mind" and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Letter to My Son*.

Lisa Storm Fink  
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<http://bit.ly/2Z0mhRE>

asking: *Are all stereotypes negative?* A lively, somewhat intense dialogue ensued in one of our classes. As one White student attempted to argue that some stereotypes are “nice,” such as that all Asians are smart, a student in the class who identified as Asian rebutted this, sharing that he did not want to be thought of as smart because of his race, but rather because he was, in fact, smart. This moment in conversation was eye-opening for many students, and they received their classmate’s comment with humility and sensitivity.

We then tasked students in small groups with identifying a stereotype represented in popular culture and analyzing the ways it appeared in media. We led a discussion on the harmful nature of stereotypes, asking: *What are the negative consequences of your group’s particular stereotype? Are some more damaging or harmful than others? Which ones have social power or consequences, and how?* We wanted to be sure to show students that for some people, such as Rashad who was a young Black man, stereotypes can have life-threatening effects. Students struggled to think beyond the concept of all stereotypes being “bad” but some having potentially more harmful effects than others. We connected this notion to larger systems of oppression and how stereotypes help create and perpetuate those, noting how, for example, our justice system relies on humans who may harbor stereotypes which can result in severe consequences for those in their charge.

## Enough Talk: Let’s Act

In doing any sort of social justice work such as what we described above, we believe it is imperative to follow such critical conversations with the opportunity for students to act. Without such, we fear leaving students in a state of helplessness, when we want to develop instead a commitment to ongoing critical awareness and a propensity to intervene as concerned individuals and community members, as “justice-oriented citizens” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 238). Especially because we constantly asked them questions framed around *What will you do. . .?* and *How can you. . .?* we wanted them to start acting in the moment—to see that even as teens they could begin to do something about the injustices they recognized and with the privilege they understood they had.

We thus took on two social action projects: one was a whole-class creation of graffiti art and the other

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was a set of group-based social action projects (Boyd & Darragh, 2019; Epstein, 2010). Mrs. Miller invited a graffiti artist from the local museum to come and work with the students on creating this art as a form of protest and awareness-raising. Each student claimed a square of concrete in the school courtyard on which to illustrate an important takeaway from the book (see Figure 2).

In this image, the student artist, who identified as White, focused on the notion of actually “seeing” individuals for who they are. Her eyes looking at a world surrounded by people was to emphasize us seeing one another as equals. This piece echoed a conversation we had in class during which one Black student focused on police officers not “seeing” young Black men as individuals. The graffiti art also led to further conversations, as the class hosted a viewing night for the public in which guardians/parents and community members came to see the students’ work and during which students explained their choices and connections to the book. This activity was well received by both students and community members. One White student shared in a reflection that the street art made “me feel special and feel a part of something” and another White student said, “It was very creative and let us express what we believe in.”

In the social action projects, students drew on the various topics we discussed to follow a guided action assignment called COAR (Boyd, 2017) in which they named and contextualized a social problem, organized for action, acted, and reflected. Over the course of two weeks, students developed and implemented their actions. Their projects took on various forms, from antistereotype posters and racial equality banners that were hung around the school to racial equality raps that were recorded and disseminated to community stakeholders.



FIGURE 2. Student graffiti artwork.

## Conclusions

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In response to the unit, one White student, noted that it allowed them “to see the huge problem we have with racism and how it affects everyone.” Our youth communicated an appreciation for the authentic issues we tackled and even for the challenging discussions. One White student explained, “The conversations added a little bit of a weird mood to the classroom, but they changed us as people.” While we feel the results were positive, we recognize that our positions as White women likely influenced the reception from our students, who mostly looked like us, and therefore our positions contained privilege in themselves.

As teachers whose students were mostly advantaged, we knew we were taking a risk in implementing this unit, in asking our students to read their worlds critically. And there were some initial concerns from parents about the language in the text. Mrs. Miller explained their authenticity based on the topics undertaken and the ages of the protagonists, noting that the words were used with purpose, and this seemed to assuage the parents. We feel that reading texts of all varieties, including those that address contemporary social problems, belongs in the English language arts classroom; it is our responsibility to teach students to analyze all facets of the world they encounter and to become critical participants in those worlds. The risk was thus worth the effort, as we witnessed our students engage in lively dialogue and action. Students *want* opportunities to wrestle with social topics in their classrooms. As teachers, we must mitigate our own concerns about potential pushback and give youth the space to talk—and act—for a better society.

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