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Discussing Race, Policing, and Privilege in a High School Classroom

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Discussing Race, Policing, and Privilege in a High School Classroom

Arianna Banack

Racial profiling, police brutality, and white privilege: these were three topics I knew I needed to talk about with my students, but I wasn't confident about how to approach them, especially with my position as a middle-class, white female. It was my fifth year of teaching ninth-grade English, and I wondered: would my students have an opportunity to discuss these important topics in other classes? If they had discussed racism and privilege before, those conversations need to be ongoing, so why weren't my classes adding to the conversation?

The high school in which I taught was a large school in the Northeast and had a predominantly Black and Hispanic population (approximately 80 percent). The school participated in the Community Eligibility Program (Community Eligibility Program, 2019), which provides free meals to students who are enrolled at a school in low-income areas. From previous but scarce class discussions around racism, "othering," and stereotyping, I knew these topics were timely and meaningful to my students (Drossopoulos & King-Watkins, 2018). I also knew that while books in my curriculum like *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry, 1958) could facilitate discussions around race, I wanted to find literature that would center topics of race, privilege, and police brutality in a way that was more contemporary and relevant to the time period.

Turning Towards Young Adult Literature: Why YAL?

As an advocate for and avid reader of young adult literature (YAL), I knew the genre could offer books that would directly address social issues in meaningful ways and encourage growth in students' thinking. I am in the second year of a doctoral program specializing in literacy with a concentration in children's and young adult literature, and I have spent the last two years reading and researching using YAL in the classroom. Thanks to this access to research literature, I now have citations to support my assertions about YAL's engaging nature and usefulness in a secondary setting (see Gallo, 1982; Ivey & Johnson, 2013; Darragh & Radmer, 2016; Buehler, 2016; Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2020). But when I reflect upon how and why I chose to turn to YAL in 2017, I recognize it was because of craft knowledge as defined by Murphy (2019): an "understanding gathered over time by practitioners, including through stories, ad hoc observations, and intuition" (p. 16). I intuitively knew that using YAL to teach would foster meaningful conversations with my students and give them a chance to find relevance in the text.

Finding the Book: *All American Boys*

The search for the right YA novel began by reflecting on what I had previously read around the #BlackLivesMatter movement and asking my colleagues for recommendations. I decided on *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, winner of the 2016 Walter Dean Myers Award and Coretta Scott King Book Award Honor. I found the dual character narration and dual racial identity of the authors compelling, as the novel tells a complex and nuanced story of an act of police brutality. I also believed the dual narration would allow students to engage with multiple perspectives in ways that support empathy development and critical thinking. See Figure 1 for a synopsis of the novel.

Rashad is a 16-year-old Black male who is wrongly accused of trying to steal from a convenience store. A white police officer, who assumes Rashad is guilty, forcibly removes and beats him. Quinn, a white male classmate of Rashad, sees Rashad brutalized by the police officer, Paul Galluzzo. Paul is the older brother of Quinn's best friend and helped raise Quinn after Quinn's father's death. While Rashad is in the hospital as a result of his injuries, the words "Rashad Is Absent Again Today" are spray painted on the sidewalk outside of his school. Both Quinn and Rashad struggle to decide how, and if, they want to take action and what consequences may result from their actions

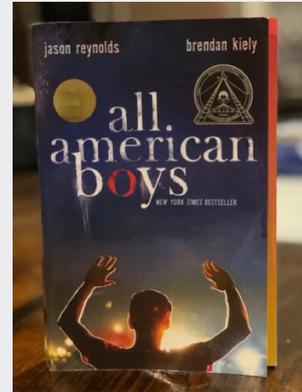


Figure 1. Summary of *All American Boys*

Reynolds and Kiely directly address issues of racism, police brutality, and privilege, which is what I wanted from a novel. For example, a friend of Quinn's and cousin of Paul's states: "I don't think most people think they're racist. But every time something like this happens, you could, like you said, say, 'not my problem.' You could say, 'it's a one-time thing.' Every time it happened" (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 184). This explicit naming and explanation of racism is woven throughout the text, in stark contrast to all the other texts in the curricula. At the conclusion of the novel, Quinn joins a public protest in support of Rashad and reflects on racism and privilege:

Some people had told me racism was a thing of the past, they'd told me not to get involved. But that was nuts. *They* were nuts. And more to the point—they'd all been white people. Well, guess what? I'm white too—and that's exactly *why* I was marching. I had to. Because racism was alive and real as shit. It was everywhere and all mixed up in everything... Nothing was going to change unless we did something about it. *We!* White people! (p. 292)

In *All American Boys*, Reynolds and Kiely urge their readers to reflect on their own beliefs, values, and actions. The novel doesn't shy away from difficult topics—and brings these issues to the forefront of classroom discussion.

Looking Back: Moments of Discomfort and Sharing

When I conceived this unit, I pictured students having engaging class discussions, sharing their opinions, and reading passionately every day. I soon learned that my students weren't always as eager or comfortable discussing these topics as I had hoped. When I started the unit, we were three-quarters of the way through the school year, and a class culture of mutual respect, care, and rapport had already been established. While many students shared personal stories and demonstrated a willingness to engage in difficult conversations, I was, naively, surprised when some of my students acknowledged feeling "awkward" (their words) when discussing racism and police brutality specifically. I would have benefited from knowing the words from Kay (2018), who reminds us:

Just as we cannot conjure *safe spaces* from midair, we should not expect the familial intimacy, vulnerability, and forgiveness needed for meaningful race conversations to emerge from traditional classroom relationships (p. 29).

I was expecting the same intimacy and openness I saw my students demonstrate when discussing other texts, but had not considered how this specific text, one that names racism as a contemporary issue, would elicit a different kind of vulnerability from my students, many of whom consistently experienced systemic racism.

“You’re White”

In a discussion activity I asked students to respond to the question: How comfortable do you feel talking about races and cultures outside of your own? Why? Some students stated that they felt a little uncomfortable because they didn’t want to offend me as a white person. When I asked why they thought they would offend me, Aliyah (all student names are pseudonyms) answered, “Well because you’re white and sometimes white people don’t do the best things, like Paul in our book, so I don’t want you to feel bad.” Other students echoed this sentiment; Alexis remarked, “Well you’re not like them but it’s hard not to generalize.” When asked what she meant by “them” she reiterated I wasn’t like a “bad white person” who would hurt someone like Paul did. Many other students used language signaling an “us vs. them” mentality when they referred to white people and police officers. Their language signaled that my students often felt marginalized by white people, and my presence was a reminder of that daily reality. I assured the class that they wouldn’t offend me and that I wanted them to feel comfortable sharing. I also said that I was not a representative of all white people and that I would not shy away from pointing out the racist actions of white people.

The power dynamics of the classroom could have added extra pressure on the students to censor their feelings if they feared offending me. While the power dynamic of me being a white middle-class female was present in the classroom, there was also the reality of me being responsible for my students’ grades. I attempted to alleviate student concerns about grades by grading many assignments solely on completion. For example, in their weekly journal entries, as long as students reflected on what we had read that week, they would receive credit. I hoped the recognition that there was no “right” answer would allow them to feel more comfortable expressing their opinions through their writing. Additionally, during discussion activities, I did not grade students on participation in case they were uncomfortable sharing. Class discussion was an ungraded activity that was meant to enhance learning and critical thinking.

Thinking back, I should have taken the time at the beginning of the unit to address the racial differences between myself and my students. While the racial makeup of the school was 80 percent Black and Hispanic, my classroom was even higher because I had only two white students. I should have positioned myself as someone who strove to be an ally and an advocate to my students before we started reading and discussing racism and privilege. I should have acknowledged my own white privilege and shown vulnerability before expecting it from my students. I also could have shared the background research I was doing to create the unit and share all the unlearning I was doing as a white woman, as well as letting my students know I was there to learn from them.

A tenant of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996) is that race is a social construct. I should have taken the time to define this with my students. I did not define race with them, but instead assumed my students had working definitions of race. Having a definition of race would have helped my students and myself grapple with naming race in the classroom. There were missed opportunities for me to show my students that I was committed to having meaningful discussions about race and white privilege and that this unit was not about me or my feelings.

“No, Thanks”

The discussion of my whiteness was not the only instance of students showing their discomfort. They were often upset at being stereotyped, like the character Rashad, and while many students told their stories, there were some who, when asked to describe a specific instance, would simply say “no, thanks.” These moments occurred during whole class discussions like a four corners activity, in which I asked students to read statements related to themes in the novel. These included statements like “I feel like police officers are there to protect the people in my community” and “People feel uncomfortable discussing racism.” I asked them to circle whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statement and to explain their thinking in writing. I would then attach posters to four corners of the classroom with the choices of *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. After the students reflected individually, I read the statements aloud and asked students to move physically to the corner of the room matching their choice. I asked them to share their opinions with classmates who had made the same choice, and then each group shared their discussion with the whole class.

When discussing the statement “I experience (or see others experience) racism, prejudice, and/or stereotyping in my daily life,” all of my students stood under either the agree or strongly agree sign. After giving them a chance to debrief with their classmates, I asked for the group to share. While some students shared stories of being followed around by salespeople in stores or thinking a teacher didn’t like them because of their race, other students simply shook their heads or said “I’d rather not, no thanks, and not now,” when I asked if anyone else would like to share.

Students were given multiple avenues to reflect on the novel (whole class, individual, peer sharing). Jayden demonstrated his hesitation with sharing through one of his weekly journal entries. He wrote that he experienced an interaction with a white cop, but did not wish to give any more details. This statement in his journal was brief and vague as he acknowledged both his experience with police brutality and his reluctance to share any further details.

While I did not press any of my students to share, either during discussion or in their writing, I do not know if they felt uncomfortable sharing with me or their peers, if the memory was too difficult to retell, or a combination of all, or none of these things. However, their silence spoke volumes. My students had had many experiences around racism and I was expecting them to share those experiences—without considering how painful it might be for them. The silences told a story of their own, and I recognize the many factors, like power dynamics or emotional trauma, that could have been present for my students to choose silence in those moments.

I learned from instances like this that my students felt much more comfortable discussing their opinions from a distance. When I would ask, “When have you seen others being stereotyped?” or “How does Rashad get stereotyped and how does that happen in our world today?”, most students who declined to share their personal stories would readily share stories of people they knew, things they saw at school, or identify and discuss instances of stereotyping in *All American Boys*. While the novel opened the door for discussions around race and stereotypes, I realized these were deeply personal topics for some of my students, who weren’t ready to share with me or their peers.

“My Dad’s a Cop”

Another reality I neglected to consider when planning a unit around police brutality was that some of my students had parents who worked in law enforcement. During a mid-unit whole-class discussion, Makayla said that it was very unfair for all cops to get a bad reputation because of the bad cops out there. She explained that her dad was a police officer and that she was afraid for him every day when he went to work. A similar conversation occurred with three other students who had family members or family friends who worked in law enforcement. I acknowledged these students’ feelings but was at a loss to explain that police brutality is a systemic problem in our country and that discussing police brutality and #BlackLivesMatter was not a personal attack on their loved ones.

I was concerned with making my students feel safe during discussion and spent so much time reassuring them that our conversation was not an insult to their loved ones that I missed an opportunity to discuss the history of police brutality. These conversations were not only uncomfortable for me, but for the students who voiced feeling unsafe around police officers— who were met with comments like, “My dad would never do that.” Sometimes the students would push back and ask, “How do you know?” or they would concede and acknowledge they weren’t specifically speaking about that student’s loved one.

The novel complicated students’ perspectives on police officers. Rashad’s father was a former police officer who admitted he stereotyped an innocent Black boy and ultimately shot and paralyzed him. After reading this scene, students who had families in law enforcement seemed shocked and conceded that it was possible for “good cops” to make “bad decisions.” This scene led to a class discussion around how fear of Black people has been so engrained in our society that even Black police officers have internalized this bias. Some students noted that being Black is often associated with being guilty and that Rashad’s dad made the same assumption. Rashad’s dad being guilty of harming an innocent Black boy caused many students to take a step back and reassess how pervasive racism is in our society and how that affects policing.

“The Police Don’t Protect My Community”

When responding to a four corners activity statement—*I feel like police officers are there to protect the people in my community*—Ryan stood on the disagree side. He asked, “If police officers are there to protect us, why do my parents have to have the ‘police talk’ with us?” This spurred a lively discussion, with students contributing rules they had been given on how to interact with the police: always show your hands, don’t make sudden movements, and do what the officer asks. Jaida turned to me and asked, “Did your parents tell you this?” I said no. Apart from my parents telling me to be respectful of police officers, there were no other rules or conversations about how I should behave around the police.

The student who asked exclaimed “*See!*” and gestured to me. When I asked her to say more she explained that police are not there to protect Black people like her, but to protect white people like me. During this discussion, many students shared the conversations they had had with their relatives and peers about how to interact with law enforcement. For some students this conversation created a sense of community as they discussed a common experience, while for the two white students and students with family in law enforcement, it created a moment of reflection on our privilege. These exchanges highlight how uncomfortable moments and moments of sharing were often inextricably linked throughout the unit.

In response to this conversation, we watched excerpts from a PBS documentary, *The Talk: Race in America*, which shows “conversation taking place in homes and communities across the country between parents

of color and their children, especially sons, about how to behave if they are ever stopped by the police” (pbs.org/wnet/the-talk/). Watching the documentary helped bridge gaps and understanding. Everyone in the class listened to the multiple viewpoints from parents, children, the police, and community members and empathized with their stories. These new perspectives added a layer of nuance to our discussion.

“Does the Way a Person Looks Trigger a Fear Response?”

At the end of the unit students worked in self-selected groups of two or three peers to share their learning in a form of their own choosing. I suggested creating a movie trailer, writing poetry or a news article, or making an artistic representation of themes/scenes from the book. Throughout the unit, we had examined a variety of spoken word poems (e.g., “Hashtag” by Prentice Powell, Black Ice, and Chief the Poet, youtube.com/watch?v=MnDA2vPj-sQ) and songs (e.g., “Water Guns” by Toddrick Hall, featuring Jordin Sparks) that my students could use as exemplars in creating their summative assessment.

In response, the students created some of the most meaningful work I had seen all year. One group created an informational video about racial profiling. They acted out scenes from the novel where Rashad was profiled, defined racial profiling, and discussed how it is harmful to our society. Another group wrote and performed a rap from the perspectives of different characters in the novel. They spoke through the voices of Quinn, Rashad, Paul, and Katie (another witness of Rashad’s brutalization). Kesnah, who was often quiet in class, elected to work alone and wrote and recited a poem inspired by the novel. See Figure 2 for an excerpt from his poem. His peers gave him a standing ovation when he finished reciting the poem, showing their respect for his words and his bravery in sharing.

Does the way a person look trigger a fear response and that causes you to drive them away?
We’re all humans and because a human looks different than what you like doesn’t mean the human
is less of a human than you
Just because a human looks like something you fear doesn’t mean the human IS to be feared
Us humans need to stop fearing each other and stop attacking another for dumb reasons like
someone’s skin tone...
A black man is still a human and will always be a human.
Same for the white men, the Asian men, the European men
And the Black woman, the White woman, the Hispanic woman, the Asian woman, the European
women...
We are all human and we shouldn’t treat others like they are less of a human because of what they
look like.

Figure 2. Excerpt From a Student Poem Inspired by *All American Boys*

Sharing their projects with the class was the final assignment in the eight-week unit on *All American Boys*. I ended the unit this way because I wanted students to feel ownership over their projects so they could express what they had learned in an authentic way.

Looking Back: Reflecting Critically

Two years after teaching this unit and with the advantage of being enrolled in a literacy graduate program, I reflect with a much more critical eye. Many of the uncomfortable moments could have been mitigated by

more intentional planning and a stronger vision for the unit. If I had structured the unit to center around understanding the systemic oppression of people of color, I could have better explained the history of police brutality and white privilege and clearly articulated my positionality. I could have guided my students to research how these systems of oppression are at work in our society today and create opportunities to discuss as a class how race is a social construct.

There would still be uncomfortable moments during discussions, but the purpose of the unit would be clearer both to myself and to my students. My students were from diverse cultural backgrounds that differed not only from mine, but from each other's. Students would get upset when discussing stereotypes, and remark, "That's unfair—that doesn't represent me!" There were moments when voices were raised and we had to talk about how to respectfully disagree with one another. There were bound to be some moments of discomfort in such emotional discussions, but it was my responsibility as the teacher to make sure we were having productive discussions.

When I was teaching in 2017, I had not heard of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996) or antiracist pedagogy (see Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Baker-Bell, 2019; Kay, 2018). In my current position as a graduate student, I am encouraged to spend my time thinking and writing about how to apply CRT and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) to my practice (Groenke, Garcia, Banack & Metheny, 2018). I have thought about my positionality as a middle-class, white woman and committed to being an antiracist educator and advocate.

One step in that direction might include bringing these lessons into a course I teach for pre-service teachers on how to use YAL in the secondary classroom and giving them the language, tools, and practices to support the teaching of #BlackLivesMatter texts. It will be important to tell my undergraduate students, as I should have told my ninth graders, that I, too, am still learning. Bettina Love (2020) reminds us:

The shift to anti-racism does not happen overnight or after one professional development session: It happens through a process of self-discovery, healing, and learning to reject and call out racist ideas, people, and structures. Anti-racist teaching is not a teaching approach or method, it is a way of life.

In my future classes, pre-service teachers will find readings on Critical Race English Education (CRT) (Johnson, 2018), white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), and abolitionist and anti-racist pedagogy along with professional anti-racist resources and teaching (see this blog post by Sarigianides & Borsheim-Black, 2020). Scholars of color will be highlighted in course syllabi (see Durand, 2015; Emdin, 2016; Toliver, 2020, Clark, 2019, to start) along with #ownvoices novels, to model the importance of a sustained approach to racial literacy in a classroom (Skerrett, 2011). Students will also be exposed to critiques of popular anti-racist activities (see Leonardo, 2004; Lensmire et al., 2013), such as privilege walks inspired by McIntosh's (1988) article examining white privilege.

Another step in becoming an anti-racist educator is to ask my students to examine their own positionality and reflect on what types of privilege they bring into the classroom with them. As we unpack our own privilege and biases, we will discuss the CRT tenant of race being a social construct and look at what systems of oppression are at work in today's society. Then we will examine how those systems are related to the educational systems, curricula development, and books they will teach their future students. My students will be reminded—as I always remind myself—that becoming an anti-racist teacher requires constant work and reflection.

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