



TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Using *All American Boys* to Confront Racism and Police Brutality

BY ASHLEY S. BOYD AND JANINE J. DARRAGH

Racism is a systemic issue, meaning it is much larger than one person, although people certainly uphold and perpetuate it both knowingly and unknowingly.¹ It is woven into the fabric of daily life so tightly that it can be difficult to untangle. Racism works alongside white privilege, a system of unearned benefits, such as obtaining financial breaks and loans, being reflected consistently in classroom curriculum, and being assumed as the “norm.” Assumptions about people with light skin include their being honest, responsible, and safe. Thus, white privilege also simultaneously works through the oppression of people of color, about which the opposite assumptions are made—they are often portrayed (especially through the media) as unsafe, powerless, and less deserving of resources such as health care.

In this article, we focus on the novel *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (2015) to help students work through

the implications of racism and the manifestation of racism in police brutality. Reading about youth who are similar in age will potentially help students discern how they are affected by racial relations in their own lives and to consider (and hopefully act on) the methods through which they can enact change to combat the negative effects of racial inequity.

All American Boys

All American Boys is a novel that reflects an incident of police brutality through the perspectives of two adolescent males, one Black, Rashad, and one white, Quinn. Told in alternating points of view, the story catalogs how Rashad is wrongly assaulted by a police officer, Paul, who mistakenly assumes that Rashad is stealing from a local convenience store. Paul’s attack is ruthless and leaves Rashad with a broken nose, fractured ribs, and internal bleeding from torn blood vessels around his lungs.

Quinn, a classmate of Rashad’s, accidentally stumbles upon the scene and watches from the shadows, horrified and astonished that Paul, a person he looked up to as an older brother, could commit such violence. As the novel progresses, Rashad is treated in the hospital for his wounds and is encouraged by his brother, Spooky, to confront the racist act of which he is a survivor. Raised by his former-police-officer traditional father, who is “all about discipline

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familiar with structural privilege will need an introduction to the concept. All students, however, could benefit from unpacking key terms. Thus, we suggest that teachers begin with basic vocabulary with which to discuss the topic of the book and the social problem it addresses, including terms such as *privilege*, *oppression*, *micro-aggressions*, *discrimination*, *prejudice*, *race*, and *socialization*. It will be key to note that:

Oppression is different from prejudice and discrimination in that prejudice and discrimination describe dynamics that occur on the individual level and in which all individuals participate. In contrast, oppression occurs when one group's prejudice is *backed by historical, social and institutional power*.³

and believed that if you work hard, good things happen to you no matter what,"² Rashad learns more about his family and struggles to come to terms with institutional racism and its impact.

As the story progresses, Quinn learns to recognize his white privilege and to speak out for others. His best friend, Guzzo, is Paul's brother, who has served as a father figure to Quinn after Quinn's own father was killed in Afghanistan while serving in the US military. Being raised by a single mother, Quinn wrestles with defying close friends and family members to do what is right, recognizing that if he does not act against such forms of racism, the system will continue to thrive. In the end, all characters participate in a march to protest police brutality and perform a die-in, or lying on the ground, to protest. They then read a list of real names to honor those who have suffered from such assault. The novel's conclusion, however, does not include any indication of what becomes of Paul, and thus readers are left in somewhat of a state of uncertainty regarding systemic racism and justice.

All American Boys is an especially valuable text because it simultaneously tackles white privilege and racial oppression, rather than focusing only on one issue or the other. It provides students multiple perspectives from which to examine the social problem and does so in ways that are thoughtful and prompt dialogue. Thus, we chose this book to delve into police brutality because of the way it represents the themes from readers' potential viewpoints and because it challenges and informs its audience.

Teaching Strategies

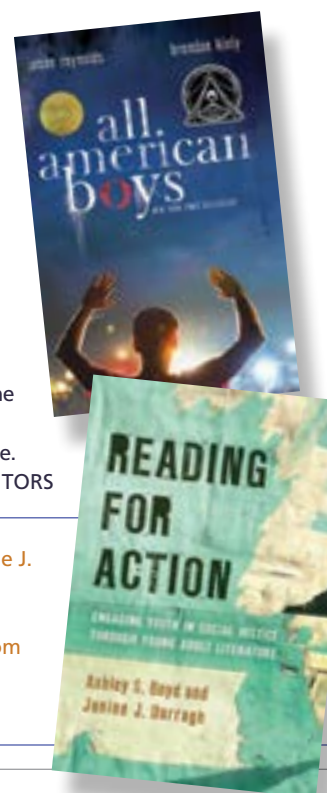
Before Reading

The context in which a teacher works will certainly influence the approach they should take with this novel. Often, students of color will be familiar with systemic discrimination and racism, having experienced it in their own lives. White students who may be less

The chance to explore lives and cultures different from our own is among the many benefits of reading for pleasure. Whether fiction or nonfiction, the written word has the power to deepen our understanding of ourselves and others—and inspire us to change the world. In *Reading for Action: Engaging Youth in Social Justice Through Young Adult Literature*, Ashley S. Boyd and Janine J. Darragh show educators how to harness that power in their classrooms. The authors devote each of the book's 12 chapters to a work of young adult fiction focused on a critical issue of our time, such as bullying, global poverty, women's rights, and immigration reform. Here, we excerpt chapter 9, which addresses police brutality through the novel *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely. The novel can help to ground discussions of systemic racism in the United States and engage youth in learning more about our country's complex relationship with race.

—EDITORS

Reading for Action, by Ashley S. Boyd and Janine J. Darragh, is published by Rowman & Littlefield, which is offering a 20 percent discount off the purchase of this book. To order, visit rowman.com and use discount code RLEGEN20. This offer is good through December 31, 2021.



Students must understand that discrimination can happen against any one person by another, but oppression includes an element of power and works on a larger scale. In order to facilitate understandings, teachers could ask students to give examples from their own experiences or from events in society to demonstrate their understanding of each of the above terms (once definitions have been provided).

Other concepts for discussion include the use of *white, people of color, Black, and African American*. Students could read a few informational texts to more deeply consider these topics, such as *The Observer* article “Should We Say Black or African American?”⁴ and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s essay “What We Mean When We Say ‘Race Is a Social Construct.’”⁵ Discussion questions based on these two could include: *Why should people self-identify their race or ethnicity, rather than having someone label them? What does it mean to say race is socially constructed? How is race important in our society?*

Once students have a basis for engaging in conversation around these issues, teachers can move them into considering white privilege as a system. They might ask students to construct a list, similar to scholar Peggy McIntosh’s,⁶ of the benefits and unearned advantages that white individuals experience in our society.* McIntosh⁷ catalogs the everyday benefits she experiences, such as being able to find bandages that match her flesh or not being assumed to represent her entire race if she makes a mistake. Reading her list and updating it would be helpful, and students could complete this activity regardless of their own racial identity to denote the aspects of white privilege that permeate today’s world. They could be encouraged to consider television, movies, and music, such as Macklemore, Ryan Lewis, and Jamila Woods’s song, “White Privilege II,” as well as everyday activities such as shopping and resources available in hotels and grocery stores. Teachers could assign these categories to groups of students so that they are looking collectively at our culture with a critical eye rather than only at their individual selves.

Beyond these sorts of individual privileges, however, it is key to help students discern the systemic nature of racial oppression. Professor Barbara Applebaum⁸ warns against merely stopping at “white privilege pedagogy” because “students often walk away from reading McIntosh’s article thinking that all there is to being anti-racist is ‘taking off the knapsack’ without acknowledging that privilege is often ascribed even when one is not aware of it and even when one refuses it.”⁹ Instead, she advocates for utilizing “white complicity pedagogy,”¹⁰ which focuses on the ways that the dominant group maintains their status and encourages individuals to discern their part in upholding the status quo.

In order to illustrate this for students, teachers can ask students to practice skills of critical literacy and to examine instances in which ignorance or complicity exists, both historic and current, and ask them to imagine how people could act differently in that situation. For



*For a collection of Peggy McIntosh’s work, see nationalseedproject.org/about-us/white-privilege.



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instance, they might examine the case of Silent Sam, the statue of a confederate soldier at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that was torn down by protestors and set off a firestorm of debate. Teachers might ask students, upon learning about Silent Sam and the issues surrounding his existence on campus: *Who were the protestors? Who were the bystanders? Who had privilege in this situation, and how could they have used those privileges productively, for the safety and betterment of students of color on this campus?*

Helping students understand that racism is everyone’s issue is vital. As Jill, Paul and Guzzo’s cousin, tells Quinn in the novel, “But everyone’s seen it, Quinn. It’s *all our* problem. But what *is* that problem?”¹¹ Facilitating students’ ability to name the problem and address it are key classroom goals for the study of this text. Learning for Justice has some great resources for helping teachers prepare to talk with students about race and for engaging in those difficult conversations, such as a self-evaluation for teachers to assess their own comfort levels talking about race and strategies for facilitating related discussions with youths.[†]

[†]One Learning for Justice resource we find especially helpful is the “Let’s Talk” guide: bit.ly/30UNvMI.

During Reading

As students read the novel, they will likely identify with one or the other of the protagonists—Quinn or Rashad. Teachers could select one point in the book, such as after the incident of brutality or when tensions rise on the basketball team, and ask students to compose a diary entry, tweet, or Facebook post, as if they were one of the two characters. Or, they could write a letter to the protagonist with which they most identify (Quinn or Rashad) and explain the connections they experience. These text-to-self connections¹² are key for honoring all students' voices in the classroom and highlighting the different ways that they will relate to the text. They might choose to share these with the class as a way of explaining their own relationship with race in their context.

Students could also be encouraged to empathize with the difficult decisions each of the protagonists makes in the story as they develop their understandings of race and society. At first, Rashad does not wish to become the face of a movement. He says, "I gotta admit, there was a part of me that, even though I felt abused, wanted to tell him [Spoony] to let it go. To just let me heal, let me leave the hospital, let me go to court, let me do whatever stupid community service they wanted me to do, and let me go back to normal."¹³ Teachers can ask students to consider: *Why would Rashad not want to be on the news? Why would he admit to doing something he didn't do and perform community service? Why might Rashad not want to be the face of a protest? What do you think eventually makes him embrace the role he does?*

At the same time, Quinn struggles to understand his white privilege and worries about his responsibility in reporting what he has seen during the incident. He realizes, "If I wanted to, I could walk away and not think about Rashad, in a way that ... any of the guys at school who were not white could not.... My shield was that I was white.... It wasn't only that I could walk away—I already *had* walked away."¹⁴ Realizing, as mentioned above with the danger of the knapsack metaphor from McIntosh's work, that he cannot take off his skin color but instead that he has unearned advantages because of it, Quinn begins to embrace his responsibility. He avows, "And if I don't do something ... if I just stay silent, it's just like saying it's not my problem."¹⁵ Teachers can ask students here: *Why is it difficult for Quinn to speak up and report what he saw to the police? What does Quinn sacrifice by making a report? Why does Quinn try to justify what happened to Rashad to his friends on the basketball team?*

Students could create digital stories about a time they had to speak up or take action to do what was right, or they could research key figures in history and share those stories with classmates. They could also note the similarities and differences between these individuals and Quinn or Rashad. Digital stories require research, writing, storyboarding, and a host of other technical elements that promote students' various literacies¹⁶ and are engaging ways to share information.

Another aspect around which to cultivate students' critical literacies is through media representations related to race. In the novel, Rashad's brother Spoony releases a photo of Rashad in his ROTC uniform for the media, saying he wanted "to make sure we controlled as much of the narrative as possible," because if he had not he was certain the news reporters would have "dug all through the Internet for some picture of you looking crazy."¹⁷ In order to

scaffold students' critical media literacies,¹⁸ they could begin by examining movie posters that tell stories of youths, examining how the images differ based on the youths portrayed—inner-city youths of color are often portrayed in dark colors with images that instill fear, while white youths are depicted in bright colors and ways that promote a "party" storyline.¹⁹

Teachers can then utilize resources provided by the Critical Media Project,²⁰ which provide an overview of stereotypes in the media and contain clips with discussion questions. One that relates well to the discussion of *All American Boys* is the Pepsi advertisement²¹ that gained negative attention for its casual treatment of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Teachers can then prompt students to consider the depiction of the protest in the

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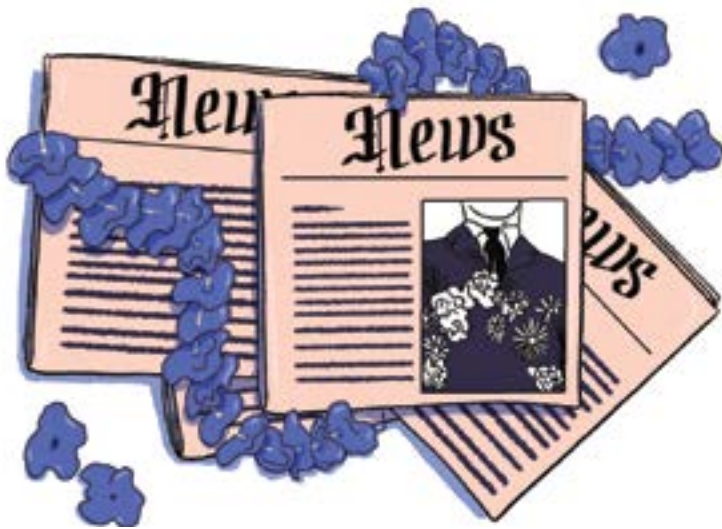
advertisement, which they could then relate back to the march in the novel.

Finally, students could conduct character analyses of the major figures in the book. Many of the characters are dynamic in nature, such as Rashad's father, who shifts from a mentality of blaming Rashad to having a more sym-

pathetic attitude toward Rashad's innocence. Most of the characters therefore undergo major transformations and exemplify internal growth. Students can trace this development through illustrations of each character's journey and/or symbolic images to represent the entities that become most important to each character. These will lead to how race is a defining aspect of each character's identity and development. For example, Quinn's whiteness is something he comes to recognize, question, and battle, and students could choose to represent that metaphorically in their artistic responses.

After Reading

The conclusion of the book does not offer a tidy culmination of its events. For some students, especially those who desire a happy ending, this can be difficult to process. Teachers could suggest that students compose and act out scenes they imagine would happen after where the book leaves off, either in the near or distant future. Students could write scripts and perform them for their classmates to illustrate the world they want to live in or to show where they hope the characters would be in the time to come.



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The realistic nature of the ending, however, which portrays resistance but not necessarily justice for Rashad, shows the complex nature of the topics tackled in the book, and this ending is worth having students consider deeply. Students could therefore research the history of resistance, especially in movements such as the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and discuss the forms of resistance taken and the achievements for change such movements have secured.

As many critique classroom curricula for romanticizing the civil rights movements, it's important that students understand the historic oppression in which today's events are rooted rather than highlighting a few key figures and only praising them as heroes. Educator and author Jamilah Pitts²² offers guiding questions for this research, such as, "What distinguishes a rebellion from a riot? Whose murders are labeled genocide? What racial groups and tactics of resistance are praised over others?"

Once students have researched these histories, they can then draw connections to contemporary instances of police brutality and racism. In groups, they can investigate one case of police

brutality and examine court documents, news articles, and first-hand narratives to construct their understanding of the instance and then share it with the class. As a whole class, they can trace patterns across these cases to again discern how the issue is systemic and broad reaching.

In order to further emphasize the institutionalized nature of racism, students could research national and local policies for training police, especially as related to implicit bias.* They would first need to unpack the concept of implicit bias, which "refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner" and "are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control."²³ Students can examine an Implicit Association Test themselves that assesses the test taker's own biases, and they could explore the Project Implicit website (implicit.harvard.edu/implicit).

In the novel, Quinn states, "I don't think most people think they're racist," to which Jill later responds, "I think it's all racism."²⁴ The notion of implicit bias will help students discern that while individuals may not consider themselves racist because they do not commit individual acts of discrimination openly or knowingly, social conditioning leads many to harbor negative associations with people of different races. This can be connected to Rashad's dad in the book, who mistakenly assumes a Black adolescent male is culpable in a fight with a white male. These biases are deeply embedded in our culture and can infiltrate the psyche of all members.

Ideas for Social Action

From the research conducted after reading, students can then move into action. Students might decide to organize their own resistance movements, protesting police brutality at large, or they could choose a more local (even school) issue dealing with racism about which to raise awareness and work to remedy. For instance, students might wish to address microaggressions, or "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color."²⁵ These include comments such as, "'You [a Black person] are not like the rest of them. You're different,' 'If only there were more of them [Black people] like you [a Black person],' and 'I don't think of you [a Black person] as Black.'"²⁶

In order to act for change surrounding microaggressions, students might design a poster campaign, sharing examples of microaggressions through social media and visibly throughout the halls of their school to encourage their peers to stop using damaging language. They could research common microaggressions and provide evidence of how these are psychologically destructive to the groups they target.

Students might also design a survey to implement at their school to determine what areas of racial inequity are most prevalent and need to be

*For more on implicit bias, see "Understanding Implicit Bias" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*: aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/staats.



addressed, and they could analyze the results and present their findings to school administrators, board members, and district representatives and provide recommendations for addressing the concerns they collected.

From their research on resistance, students might also write and perform their own protest songs or poems at an open-mic night hosted at the school. This would require research on popular songs and poems of resistance from the past and the movements they supported, such as Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready," Sam

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Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come," or Gil Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." Students might attempt to emulate these and relate them to their present concerns. They might also wish to examine current songs such as Childish Gambino's "This Is America," which rocked the popular music scene in 2018 for its graphic presentation of injustice in the country. Students could consider why such songs receive national attention and how they reflect those affected as well as the public conversation about topics such as racism and police brutality.

Since police brutality is an issue that affects the entire community, students could organize a community meeting to discuss the issue and generate solutions. They might consider a

public reading group in which parents, stakeholders, and community members are invited to read and discuss the book with the students.²⁷ Engaging intergenerational dialogue about racism could deepen understandings as well as develop empathy among all participants.

Students might also wish to broaden their study of police brutality and race to examine how other minoritized groups, such as Latinx and Native American populations, are similarly targeted. They could research specific instances, such as police assault at Standing Rock or even at the US border with Mexico, extending their understandings of how racialized groups are mistreated and are often the recipients of violence.

Finally, from their work on police training and implicit bias, students could create a document compiling suggestions for officer preparation and continued education. They might include articles, documentaries, and personal narratives they located and think are relevant. The key here is that their recommendations are research based but are balanced with their own creative ideas for what could make a more just world for all. Enacting and offering solutions to police brutality will help students see that this is a social problem that can and should be addressed. □

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