Encouraging Activism in Secondary English: Reading and Writing for Social Justice

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This dissertation presents researched backed, social justice oriented teaching strategies secondary English teachers can implement to encourage their students to think critically and take action on issues that matter to them. Foundational to this research is critical inquiry which encourages students to not read or listen to information passively, but rather to investigate, critique, explore, and ask questions of what they are reading. This approach is necessary when encouraging students to dispel myths and stereotypes, understand questions of rights and justice, and find the right way to be involved. The English classroom is an ideal place for students to do this work because they read texts that present ideas that are reflected in the real world. This dissertation addresses canonical and young adult literature, and other potential classroom texts including media, film, and historical documents and studies.

Chapter One: Background and Key Concepts for Teaching with a Justice-Oriented Approach describes the purposes and opportunities of schooling and key concepts that will be explored in each chapter. Chapter Two: Reading The Outsiders Through a Social Class Lens: Using Critical Inquiry to Investigate Causes of Social Class Inequality presents strategies for teaching the novel The Outsiders and encouraging students to ask questions about social class inequality and dispel myths and stereotypes. Chapter Three: Night, Narrative of the Life of
Frederick Douglass, I am Malala: The Power of the Public Narrative details teaching strategies for teaching the Holocaust narrative Night by Elie Wiesel. The chapter suggests pairing the book with other powerful narratives and assigning a public narrative as a writing assignment. This genre of writing allows students to reflect on their own circumstances, name issues that they face, and imagine steps that can be taken to create a more equitable society.

Chapter Four: Representation and Power: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Marrow Thieves is about representation and perspective in texts. The chapter encourages teachers and students to ask important questions about whose perspective books portray and how that representation can at times be problematic if stories silence voices. Finally, Chapter Five: Possibilities and Challenges for New Social Justice Teachers: Goals and Concerns of Preservice and Early Career Teachers looks at secondary English teachers embarking on social justice teaching. The chapter features interviews conducted with preservice teachers as they were being prepared for social justice teaching during methods courses, internships, and during their first year teaching as they reflected on how they were prepared and then implemented strategies to be social justice teachers.

Drawing upon theory, scholarly research, the author’s own teaching experiences, and interviews conducted with preservice and early career teachers, this dissertation addresses effective and applicable strategies for social justice teaching in secondary English. The teaching ideas will help students to be critical readers and thinkers, effective writers and speakers, and empowered to take action in social issues they see and experience.
ENCOURAGING ACTIVISM IN SECONDARY ENGLISH: READING AND WRITING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

by

Elisabeth Spinner

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND KEY CONCEPTS FOR TEACHING WITH A JUSTICE-ORIENTED APPROACH

My Background

I taught high school and middle school in schools that resembled the schools I attended growing up. They were rural schools and the students were mostly White, from middle to lower socioeconomic groups. My teaching English and history continued the focus on White, Euro-American experience that had also been the focus of my schooling. When, several years into my career, I was assigned a World Literature class for juniors and seniors, it seemed an opportunity to break away, to bring broader perspectives to the curriculum, and I began teaching more diverse texts like *The Kite Runner* (2003), *The House on Mango Street* (1983), and *Things Fall Apart* (1958). As I was teaching these texts, I still felt like something was missing, something that would make these diverse texts matter to my White, rural students. There were important things going on in these texts and my teaching wasn’t reflecting them. Looking back, I realize that I was trying to teach these powerful, multicultural works using a narrow literary analysis approach, an approach favored by the textbooks that I had, and one that avoided controversy, but an approach that wasn’t raising the important issues, and that wasn’t allowing my students to make personal connections or become involved.

Eight years after beginning my teaching career, I read Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* (2018) and saw it as a text that could be used in a high school curriculum to help students see important issues. It was after reading this book that I began my doctoral program with the goal of helping other English teachers begin their careers using literature to support students as they make personal connections and to become involved in issues that matter to them. During my
doctoral program, I learned about critical inquiry and understood that this would have been a powerful approach to my World Literature class in order to help students identify important and relevant societal issues that were going on in the books and to make connections to the world around them. That is the goal of this dissertation, written as a professional book for teachers and a class-text for teacher education courses. It will present examples and teaching strategies that can help preservice and inservice teachers use reading and writing done in the classroom to connect to social issues and encourage students to take action on issues that matter to them.

**Purposes of School**

There have been different purposes for schooling in America since public schools were founded in the 19th Century. In the 1830’s, Horace Mann was influential in creating public schools that stressed the importance of turning children into successful and productive citizens. Public schools aspired to prepare children to have the literate skills increasingly necessary for jobs in a growing industrial society. Schools were also envisioned to educate citizens to vote and participate in civic duties. Schools across the country were established and were controlled by local communities.

In the 1860’s, Matthew Arnold argued that public education could be a “unifying and civilizing agent” that would halt “the erosion of traditional systems of value” and the erosion of social bonds caused by increasing class antagonisms and non-English speaking immigrants (Applebee, 1974, p. 23). In 1880’s, the Progressive Movement began to make changes in the education system by emphasizing different ideals. John Dewey, a proponent of the movement, believed “democracy demands education in the problems of living together for all in the community; there could be no provision for a cultural elite” (Applebee, 1974, p. 48). This belief was very different from what Arnold had been proposing. The Progressives believed that a good
citizen was one that cares about all people and supports diversity. Critics of the Progressive Movement felt that the education standards being put forth weren’t rigorous or intellectual enough and that students wouldn’t have the discipline previous education models inculcated through memorization (Applebee, 1974).

Thus tension between unifying society by instilling traditional values, and creating a more diverse, equalitarian, and democratic country was baked into American public education from the beginning. This tension continues into the present, for instance in the difference between critical pedagogy and the increasing educational standardization.

In 1968, Paulo Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which he describes a liberating education, one that focused on students naming the world and critiquing society. Freire is known for being the founder of critical pedagogy, a philosophy of education that focuses on critical consciousness, encourages people to reflect on injustices, and become more aware of root causes of social issues. This awareness is empowering and liberating. He argues that “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 1968, p. 83). With this approach, students are encouraged to ask questions in order to help make a difference. Critical pedagogy warns against the banking method of education, which Freire describes as teachers depositing information into students’ minds. Instead, critical pedagogy encourages dialogue between the teacher and student to ensure a student-centered approach to education.

The Common Core State Standards, initiated by the National Governors Association in 2010, focused on skills that students needed to be “career and college ready.” In the English Language Arts, the Common Core Standards specify what students should be able to do at the
end of each grade level. The Standards, they felt, would help high school graduates be better able to compete in a global economy. The largely “content-free,” isolated skills identified by the Standards were written to be measured by standardized, multiple-choice tests. While the Standards do not require specific works, they provide a list of exemplary texts at the “appropriate difficulty level” that could be used to teach the Standards. Most of these texts are traditional canonical works. The writing assignments suggested focused on analytical writing, information, argument, and persuasion. The Common Core State Standards have created somewhat of a hoop to jump through for teachers who want to teach in ways that Freire described, in liberating ways. As Beach et al. (2016) point out, none of these terms appear in the document: “unequal,” “unfair,” “justice,” “equality,” “inequality,” “fairness,” “truth,” “ethics,” or “ethical” (p. 60).

This dissertation will explore this tension- a tension that was present in my secondary classroom- and ways that critical, liberating, and empowering education can take place in secondary English classrooms today, even with increasing racial and class segregation, the rise of Standards, and the right-wing politicization of the English curriculum by attacks on diverse literature and “Critical Race Theory.”

**Educating Justice-Oriented Citizens and Social Justice Teaching**

Though people and institutions have had different goals for education, teachers have, for the most part, had some freedom in how they creatively implement curriculum to create successful citizens. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) take up this idea of educating citizens in their article “What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy.” They write that there are “three conceptions of “good” citizen- personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented- that underscore political implications of education for democracy” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 1). While all three conceptions promote good characteristics, only the justice-
oriented teaching encourages social justice teaching and empowers students to make a difference.

Personally responsible citizen education is limiting and, they explain, focuses on character traits, like loyalty and honesty and hard work (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Students learn how to be responsible in their own community by doing things like donating and volunteering. This kind of citizen education can be confining and possibly ineffective when creating a democracy that seeks equity. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) write that this type of citizen education “obscures the need for collective and public sector initiatives” (p. 243) and that the focus on kindness can distract from politics, policies, and systemic issues. They argue that “a focus on loyalty or obedience (common components of character education as well) works against the kind of critical reflection and action that many assume are essential in a democratic society” (p. 244).

Education that seeks to encourage students to be personally responsible citizens who demonstrate “good” citizenship by obeying laws, volunteering, and donating, isn’t asking students to look at issues. In fact, this type of education is essentially asking students to uphold the status quo and work to maintain it by obeying the way society currently is, not try to make it better. This type of education works to create citizens that fit in with society and provides no more skills than that. This is similar to what Matthew Arnold wanted for education. It resembles the banking model of education as defined by Freire. Students are not being asked to do anything with the information, just take it in and uphold the status quo.

In contrast, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) write about the participatory citizen. This type of citizen is a next level up from a personally responsible citizen. The participatory citizen “actively participates in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at the local, state,
and national level” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 241). They are involved in local organizations and create opportunities to improve the lives of others. This model promotes outcomes such as: increase in leadership skills, knowing they have agency, and personal responsibility to help others. However, students are not asked to look at the root causes of issues or systemic changes or see a connection to politics. So while students are involved in making a difference, they are not getting a deeper understanding of the issues going on. This approach could seem effective as students are helping others, but English teachers should understand that there are more powerful ways to teach citizenship.

The type of approach that perhaps best supports social justice teaching is what Westheimer and Kahne call the justice-oriented approach. This approach to citizen education focuses on “opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social, economic, and political forces” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 242). This approach seeks outcomes like: seeing the need for civic involvement that addresses issues of social justice, being more aware of and involved in discussing politics, and seeing other points of view and perspectives even if they don’t always agree. This citizen asks questions about issues of inequity and tries to figure out and address the root causes of issues. This type of citizen education closely resembles Freire’s critical pedagogy and the need for asking questions and working for a more equitable society.

This dissertation will explore students engaged in justice-oriented citizenship. It is with this model that students are encouraged to not just passively take in information, but to critically read, ask questions, and take action to make a difference in issues that matter to them.

**Key Concepts**

In order for teachers to think about ways of implementing justice-oriented teaching, this section will provide some definitions and background in the key concepts that ground the work
of this dissertation. The terms activism and social justice are important to this work but can be defined differently by different people. Ashley Boyd (2017) writes that “social justice denotes a commitment to understanding, studying, and continuously discerning systems of oppression and to taking action to work against those structures for a better and more equitable society for all individuals” (p. 5). This definition emphasizes the work to understand a problem and taking any action, big or small, to address it. That work might include investigating the root causes of an issue and then informing people of the policies that are causing an injustice.

In a recent interview with Angie Thomas, the author of young adult novel *The Hate U Give*, she was asked if she sees herself as an activist. She responds by saying:

“I’ve chosen my lane and it’s children’s books. It’s recognizing the power literature has for shaping leaders, and making sure all kids have books that reflect themselves. So, I’m fine with being called an activist. Though I wonder if I’m doing enough” (Khan, 2021). Thomas talks about her role and influence in her career and networks. Teachers can do similar things in their roles and networks, and so can students.

Everybody has the capability to make a difference, even if it’s seemingly small, and can help make society more equitable for all people. For this dissertation, being an activist means working towards understanding issues of injustice and taking action to address them. This action can be raising awareness, giving a speech, writing a letter, creating a poster, writing a narrative, and many other actions that students of all ages can take part in. These actions empower students and the people the students are helping by disrupting the status quo, critically analyzing the systems of oppression, and by changing the narrative. As teachers begin this work, they might want to develop their own definition of activist and activism, and work with students to
determine what they feel those words mean, too. For the purposes of this dissertation, social justice teaching means encouraging this type of understanding and action from students.

**Activism in Community**

When promoting activism, it is essential that teachers guide students to look into root causes of issues. Activism is not just creating a protest sign, but it is a deeper understanding of the injustice and then taking informed action to better a community. When writing about the feminist movement, bell hooks (1984) argues that the activism needs to investigate society as a whole. She writes that “Thinking that revolution would happen simply and quickly, militant feminist activists felt that the great surges of activity—protest, organizing, and consciousness-raising—that characterized the early contemporary feminist movement were all it would take to establish a new social order” (hooks, 1984, p. 159). It takes more than these great surges of activity to make change. It takes a questioning of systems of power.

Social organizing experts Engler and Engler (2016) write about how institutions and systems have pillars of support and how if enough support is pulled out from under an institution, it will fall. This pulling down of pillars is what social movements must do. They do this by getting people who support the institution to change sides, by refusing to comply and obey, by swaying public opinion, and by getting more people involved in the movement. Engler and Engler (2016) also explain social organizing theory promoted by Saul Alinsky and write that his model focuses on communication with the community and listening to their specific needs. The organizers themselves must give people the idea that they can do something about an issue so that they accept the idea that the organization has power. Finally, Alinsky says that organizations focus on all the needs of the community, not just on a single issue.
These ideas of understanding local issues, asking questions to understand the root causes, and then taking action to disrupt them is very doable for any age student and can be implemented by English teachers. Bomer and Bomer (2001) write that the idea of a participatory democracy “emphasizes ordinary people’s participation in democratic processes. By investigating alternatives, understanding others’ positions, trying to come up with solutions that appeal to the widest range of opinions and perspectives, we create our democracy as we go along” (p. 14). Bomer and Bomer (2001) go on to say that when students created a classroom community that has a shared interest in making life better for others, they were also working on their own personal identities. This will require students to learn about others, take other perspectives into consideration, make choices, and take action. Reflecting on their own identities, possible biases, and values can help students when they collaborate with others, which is essential in participating in democracy.

**Teaching Strategies to Promote Social Justice and Activism**

The following concepts and strategies are referred to throughout the dissertation. This section will introduce each one and provide background and research. Each chapter of the dissertation will then apply these ideas to various texts and writing and speaking assignments.

**Critical Inquiry**

Critical inquiry means questioning ideas that are usually taken passively and accepted without reflection. This approach leads to a deeper understanding and can be used to disrupt myths and stereotypes. Critical inquiry:

- Involves interrogating the basic assumptions we have about social science knowledge and democratic citizenship, including critical inquiry of differing accounts of historical events and current affairs and the extent to which democratic participation actually exists;
focusing in active ways on concerns and problems that are meaningful to students; and linking ideas, policies and practices to larger issues of social justice (Teitelbaum, 2011, pp. 12-13)

As this quotation suggests, critical inquiry can be most powerful when students ask questions about things in society that matter to them.

Critical inquiry draws on a long history of critical thought, including the early 20th Century Frankfurt school, and disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and political science where ideas about social class play a central role. Writing about secondary English teaching, Beach et al. (2016) write that:

a critical inquiry approach allows students to use academic skills and thinking to go beyond traditional notions of English language arts to examine larger aspects of human, interpersonal, and lived-world questions shaping reading, writing, speaking/listening, media/digital literacy and language use” (p. 5).

They argue that the approach encourages “students’ attempts to foster changes in the status quo and to address problems or issues in ways that enhance their sense of agency” (Beach et al., 2016, p. 5). When students are empowered by a class-conscious education and critical inquiry, they are able to interrogate the world around them, name the issues they see, and perhaps disrupt the status quo.

Wilhelm (2004) writes that “Critical inquiry approaches cover the known and accepted, but then question and critique this. Critical inquiry asks students to extend current understandings by developing new interpretations, creating new data, and finding new uses for what they have learned” (p. 47). Rather than students passively accepting information or interpretations of what they are reading, critical inquiry requires students to ask questions, to go
beyond understanding the language, to think about new meanings. This is exciting for teachers of any literature, but maybe especially canonical texts that students don’t always easily relate to. It can be a place where students can make new meanings and find new uses for texts. This strategy helps make the text relevant and meaningful. To enact this strategy, teachers might encourage students to journal and discuss any question that they have about what is going on in a book. Texts can also be used to spur questions about society today. These questions don’t have to have easy answers, or any answers at all. Students just need to get in the practice of interrogating and asking questions rather than simply taking in information.

Foundational to critical inquiry is critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire is known for constructing critical pedagogy as a way to investigate power structures and to work towards liberation and equity. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he explains that students must have a problem-posing education. This means students “are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1968, p. 81) and are encouraged to be conscious of issues in the world. Freire (1968) argues that as students learn more about the “problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, [they] will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge (p. 81). As students ask questions about issues they care about, they will be more likely to take action to address those problems and work towards a more equitable society.

**Class Discussions**

Another essential teaching strategy is classroom discussion and dialogue. Freire (1968) writes that people “cannot be truly human apart from communication, for they are essentially communicative creatures. To impede communication is to reduce men to the status of “things”- and this is a job for oppressors, not for revolutionaries” (p. 128). He goes on to say that “human beings in communication liberate each other” (Freire, 1968, p. 133). Dialogue and discussion in
the classroom is essential for a liberating education, one that empowers students and focuses on fostering their agency. It can’t be a teacher simply telling students information and not allowing for students to share their ideas.

Boyd (2017) writes that when teachers and students “engage in meaningful discussions to build awareness, and through an open analysis of power, students uncover the way that those dynamics are present in local and global contexts” (p. 79). Boyd (2017) goes on to argue that when students are used to thinking critically about their worlds, like through discussions of power, they are more likely to think about taking action. Freire (1968) writes that “Critical and liberating” (p. 65) dialogue must come before action and students need to name the world in order to take action (p. 88). Shor and Freire (1987) write that “Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can then act critically to transform reality” (p. 99) and that discussion is a way people can remake reality. Discussion, therefore, is an essential element of helping students to engage in activism and think about the changes they want to make.

Dialogue and discussion are also important in being able to respectfully and productively communicate with others inside and outside the classroom. If students are going to be encouraged to bring up issues of injustice, there will likely be different viewpoints represented. In today’s society, students often see people from opposing viewpoints arguing, yelling, fighting, or taking violent action towards each other. It is essential that students learn to listen and respect other people’s viewpoints, even, and maybe especially, if they are different from their own. Students need guidance and practice on how to communicate in these environments, to discuss issues in respectful ways and then work together to see the value in multiple perspectives and to find solutions.
Before engaging in discussions, it is important to establish the classroom as a space to have these important discussions. One way to implement respectful and engaging discussion is to promote classroom community. Korinek et al. (1999) write about establishing a classroom community through discussions about topics such as what it means to be a friend, the importance of community, and specific ways to show others you care. Classroom discussions can also center student experiences and stories. When students bring in their own experiences and contribute them to the conversation, they see that their experience matters. It also helps them to see other people’s experiences. This can lead to discussions that are respectful as students respect and appreciate other students’ perspectives and experiences.

While there are plenty of strategies that teachers can implement to have productive and respectful conversations in the classroom, it is likely that there will still be tensions and moments of discomfort if discussions are centering on possible controversial topics. Sometimes teachers avoid having class discussions on important issues in fear of these heated discussions, but they can be navigated and much can be learned from them. Yu Ren Dong (2008) writes that when teachers avoid these discussions, they are missing out on what students really care about and may be not allowing students to interact with other students. She argues that these discussions can be very beneficial to promote inquiry. She writes that:

A cognitive conflict, (a discrepancy or a contradiction between a reader's existing interpretation of the text and a new experience), is essential in stimulating adolescents’ cognitive development. At the beginning, most readers are satisfied with their mode of thought, are in a state of equilibrium. Next, they become aware of discrepancies in their existing thinking which may signify a cognitive conflict. The conflict motivates them to begin their inquiry (p. 232).
This growth in ideas can lead to productive discussions in the English classroom. Students need to know that it is okay to disagree and they can still be open to other perspectives such as those they read in a text or experience in a classroom discussion. They can lean into this discomfort and use it as an opportunity to grow during any tensions that arise in discussions.

Fecho et al. (2010) write about their findings of implementing dialogue in a classroom. They found that the dialogues in which students participated in during class often spread out into discussions students had with family and friends outside of class and these discussions sometimes pushed students to new understandings and challenged previously held beliefs. They also found that the discussions invited personal and emotional responses and that it wasn’t always about a text or the content of the course. Students were grappling with some deep questions and beliefs and this led to further inquiry. Finally, they argue that although there can be tension in important and emotional discussions, it is important and can help students grow and learn. These concepts can be transferred to situations outside of the classroom. Real life discussions with family, friends, or even strangers have the potential to invite strong emotions and responses from students. Practicing how to navigate these emotional and tense conversations is important.

Activism needs to be done with others, in collaboration, and in a community and where people work to better understand others. A social justice oriented classroom also needs to focus on better understanding others, even if they will never see eye to eye. Being able to respect and value other people, even with very different ideas, is an important skill for participating and informed citizens in democracy.
Collaboration

The work of social change cannot be done alone and it is essential that students see the value in community and collaboration. Collaboration will help students see that the issues they face are likely not issues unique to them and that they can work with others facing similar issues. Examples of taking action throughout this dissertation will provide models teachers can point to as evidence of the importance of collaboration. The English classroom is a great place to practice this kind of collaboration.

Students will need to be able to talk to each other in order to listen and learn from each other and in order to propose and implement social action. Group projects are often frowned upon in schools because there is usually one student who does all the work and the others can all slack off and get the good grade that really only one student earned. Activism isn’t like that. Students will be picking issues that matter to them and will see that they are connected to others in their classroom, in their community, across their state and country and even the world. They will see that issues that impact them and their families also impact others in their classrooms and collaborative groups of students can form around these issues. These groups can work together to better understand the issue and take action to address it. They will be more likely to care, be motivated, and participate because they will be invested in finding ways to help fix the problems that cause them to experience or see injustice everyday. This idea of activism will empower students to see that they have agency and they have what it takes to make a difference on their own and by connecting with others and with organizations. Examples will be provided of each of these opportunities throughout the dissertation.
Critical Media Literacy

Morimoto and Friedland (2010) claim that media and technology are so prevalent in the lives of youth that it is impossible to study the culture and life of youth without taking media and technology into consideration. It has simply become part of their lives, culture and identity. Technology can be used in the classroom to better understand issues as students develop skills to be able to critically read the media. When students better understand issues, they will be able to have more informed discussions about them. This can lead to social justice teaching.

Kelner and Share (2009) argue that the current technology and media situation in the United States means that people must be aware of how the media creates meanings, impacts the audience, and sends messages. To do this, they suggest using media literacy that “helps people to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media” (Kelner & Share, 2009, p. 4).

It is likely that many teachers have heard students make claims that seem based on false or misinterpreted information. Students may, in fact, get involved in debates with other students and may not have completely accurate information or may be skewing the information. Increasingly, more and more youth (and more and more adults) are getting their news through the Internet, and often through social media, which is considered news to many people (Cortesi & Gasser, 2015). Kentaro Toyama (2015) writes that Internet users tend to seek out people like them who have similar ideas and don’t interact much with users who are different (p. 47). This means that students, like most grownups, are likely only reading news that aligns with what they already believe and think, thus not necessarily challenging them or requiring them to read something with an open mind. It also might impact their ability to have real life discussions with
people who have differing ideas than they do. They aren’t prepared to hear others or accurately justify their own beliefs.

In order to employ critical media literacy, consumers of media must consider that “the messages of authors and the interpretations of readers are bound by cultural, historical, and political lenses” (Gainer, 2013, p. 16). When reading media messages, students need to think about these various lenses in order to make meaning from the texts. This can help students be more informed, better positioned to critique society.

Beach et al. (2017) write that using critical media literacy can improve students’ reading and writing skills for all texts, help students to understand the impact literacy can have, and help them to think creatively about disrupting dominant narratives (p. 82). They go on to say being literate means that students can think critically about the messages they are getting from media and entertainment (Beach et al., 2017, p. 83).

Teachers can consider how critical media literacy can help students as they communicate and collaborate online. Students can share their voices through social media, blogs, websites, and other forms of online communication. They can also make connections with others as they seek to make a difference. In his book Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture, Henry Jenkins (2009) defines participatory culture as:

A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others’ opinions of what they have created) (p. xi).
Technology and media offer opportunities for this kind of participation and connecting with others.

**Young Adult Literature**

One way to begin discussions about social issues is through literature. Traditional literary works can be powerful resources for examining social issues. Although they were often written long ago, the issues they present, such as social class and gender inequality, are timeless. Young adult literature also presents these issues and often has special relevance for adolescents as they can often more easily connect with the characters.

Groenke et al. (2010) write that youth need opportunities to think about and discuss issues like race, immigration, and disability, and that young adult literature provides this opportunity. They go on to say that literacy skills today include being able to articulate opinions and also listen to other’s viewpoints on issues. Joellen Maples (2009) writes that using young adult literature in the classroom helps to develop a classroom community and helps students have authentic conversations and develop critical stances towards issues. Richard Flynn (2016) writes that children *do* things with texts, meaning that children have agency to respond to texts. He writes that children’s agency is about their “capability as social actors” (Flynn, 2016, p. 262). Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel (2011) write that children’s literature “has been and continues to be an important vehicle for ideas that challenge the status quo and promote social justice, environmental stewardship, and greater acceptance of difference” (p. 445).

Literature is a powerful vehicle to help students think about issues and act on them and young adult literature can be used as a way to encourage adolescents to participate in social action. Mickenberg and Nel (2011) write that children’s literature “encourages activism” and “exposes unjust uses of power” (p. 445). Literature meant for adolescents calls them to action
when adult writers present an issue and expect the child reader to use their young age as a position to make change for the future. When teaching literature, teachers can ask their students what kind of change they want to make, what issues they care about, what kind of citizen they want to be.

**Reading Content and Strategies**

There are specific types of readings and reading strategies that may encourage activism in students. For example, informational reading is essential when seeking to better understand social issues. Both teachers and students need to know how to find, read, analyze, and question informational texts such as historical studies, documentary films, testimonials, speeches, biographies and autobiographies, legal documents, and historical and current policies. When people better understand what historical and contemporary legal documents and policies mean and their implications, they can be better informed when it comes to voting, discussing important social issues, and taking part in activism. It seems that too often in discussions people only know part of the truth or an inaccurate version of the truth. If people are better informed, they can participate in productive discussions.

Teachers need to also practice critical reading of the curriculum and ask themselves what viewpoints are being portrayed and which aren’t. This process can be done with students, too, so they become critical thinkers about what they are being taught. It might also provide opportunities for students to be co-creators of the curriculum, or at least co-investigators. This process will show students how empowering it can be to critically read and understand why they are learning a certain curriculum.

Similar critical reading should be implemented when reading fictional texts and can be used to address the issues of misrepresentation and under-representation in books. The Teaching
for Change website (teachingforchange.org) and Debbie Reese’s blog (https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/) are great resources for looking at how diverse characters are misrepresented in young adult novels. When reading fictional texts, whether traditional or contemporary, teachers can be modeling how to question what is being presented, whose voices and stories are heard and whose are not and the implications of this possible silencing of voices, like perpetuating stereotypes and false information.

Deborah Appleman (2015) explains ways teachers can use different critical theories and lenses when planning instruction to provide a range of perspectives that promote critical thinking, problem-posing, and analysis that may lead to action-taking. Appleman (2015) suggests that critical theory provides lenses through which to view issues in literature and see how social issues are represented and ways of talking about them. These reading strategies correspond with Rosenblatt’s (1983) ideas on how young people need to learn to think independently and critically so as to not blindly follow a leader (p. 129). In order to prompt students to think for themselves, they must be able to see the issue from multiple perspectives and consider topics in complex ways that involve different perspectives.

Appleman (2015) argues that the language arts class is an ideal place to help students learn to read, and possibly resist, ideologies around them. She describes lenses for social class, colonialism, reader-response, new criticism, gender/feminist, psychological, postcolonial, new historicism, and deconstruction. She argues that multiple lenses can be used at once and using lenses doesn’t bring the reader to any conclusions but helps them to ask meaningful questions.

People use these lenses naturally when they view the world. When students view the world, meaning they participate in various social situations, they have experiences that aren’t always reflected in school. When teachers incorporate the lenses Appleman (2015) discusses into
their reading instruction, students are encouraged to see multiple perspectives and consider how people experience the world differently, including how they experience social injustices. Developing this perspective will help students to identify ways to take action to address the issues.

By having students develop questions and then read widely to seek answers, they are seeing the importance of reading. This skill is important in order to encourage students to get involved in activism because students need to identify an issue and find ways to address it, which involves asking questions and seeking answers. While reading to seek these answers, Fisher et al. (2015) suggest close reading strategies that will help students understand what they are reading. These skills include annotating and tracking their understanding. A next step the authors suggest is talking about the reading. Learning is a social activity and talking about their questions, ideas, and information is essential. Students can then be inspired to do something with what they are reading.

Writing

Garcia and O’Donnell-Allen (2015) write about using writing to produce social change. They write about a “civic pose of writing guides the kinds of writing we teach and the purposes for it” (p. 57). They go on to encourage teachers to “maintain a clear understanding of writing as a means of engaging civically with the world beyond the walls of the classroom” (p 58). Garcia and O’Donnell-Allen (2015) write that this kind of writing is persuasive and all persuasion is audience-specific. In order to communicate, students need to understand their own positions on issues as well as the positions of their audiences. By having a real-world audience for their writing, students can see that their writing, their voice, matters.
Students should also explore how the context of the social issues they are addressing can impact the content of their writing. Garcia and O’Donnell-Allen (2015) argue that students need to practice a participatory culture of civic writing connected to online and digital writing and spaces. Writing, they argue, is dialogue and encouraging constant dialogue is part of civic communication. Teachers can encourage students to think about online social movements and how to use their voices and writing in online spaces.

There are countless examples of activism that involve writing. Activist scholar Gene Sharp (2012) wrote about 198 ways of nonviolent action. Many of these involve writing directly, like letters of opposition and declarations of indictments. Other examples involve more creative communication, like banners and leaflets, while still others require writing skills and communication, like strikes and boycotts. Instead of frustration or despair, students participating in activism through reading and writing discover hope. They can write and share personal narratives or poetry that focus on joy. This dissertation will discuss various kinds of writing and many of them can be used to spread hope.

**Social Action Projects**

One way to implement a justice-oriented education that emphasizes critical media literacy, reading strategies, and writing is through social action projects. Boyd (2017) writes that “social action involves addressing events, people, or actions that students deem to be discriminatory or antidemocratic to attempt to affect the trajectory of those people, events, or actions” (p. 96). Social action projects, Boyd (2017) argues, begin with students listing the issues they see, then teachers guide students in selecting a project. Students research problems and determine action steps, develop a plan, and implement the plan (Boyd, 2017). She also explains
that this is a spectrum of action and that students may take action by raising awareness, organizing demonstrations, and many actions in between.

Students can research issues by drawing on a framework called Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). YPAR can be defined as “an opportunity for youth and adults to address, question, theorize, and take action against social and institutional injustice, specifically in schools” (Scorza et al., 2017, p. 139). Mirra et al. (2015) write about their experiences using YPAR and explain that “The YPAR process helps students learn reading and writing skills that they could gain from traditional research projects, but with critical consciousness” (p. 51). Mirra et al. (2015) write about agency and how it promotes action, which is a key piece of YPAR, and that YPAR encourages students to use “classroom inquiry” to “push toward real-world change” (p. 53). Finally, the scholars also argue that “the most revolutionary part of YPAR [is] this envisioning of the capabilities and power of students” (Mirra et al., 2015, p. 54). As we shall see, there are a variety of ways to approach and implement social action projects, but student voice, agency, and power are central to them all.

Celia Oyler (2011) writes that “Social action projects, then, involve some sort of creation that involves connecting to other people” and “social action is never possible in isolation” (p. 3). This collaboration that social action projects rely on is a key to social justice teaching. Oyler (2011) goes on to write that social action projects rely on “an understanding of civic agency as requiring active involvement in local decision-making” (pp. 6-7) and goes beyond an emphasis on voting. She argues that students need to see how their well-being is related to the well-being of others and that students need to think about how all community members are impacted when discussing action (Oyer, 2011). Action projects therefore focus on community needs and benefit everyone in the community.
Shira Eve Epstein (2009) writes about using social action literacy projects to help students imagine and act for a better world. She writes that “Before imagining how the world could be better, students should be supported to critically analyze the world as it is” (p. 65) and then research the social problems they see and experience in order to propose action plans to create change. In Epstein’s (2009) study, students read about examples of activism and activists, including historical, local, and present day. Students used this information to “communicate their learning to a broad audience” and “The expectation that students speak to real people requires them to clarify their visions and proposed action steps” (Epstein, 2009, p. 65). After students identified issues that mattered to them and imagined possible ways to make change, they had to share their ideas with real people, which allowed them to promote change.

**Examples of Activists**

Bringing in the stories and experiences of activists can help students imagine how they might get involved themselves in activism. In her book *Lead from the Outside*, Stacey Abrams (2018) writes about the importance of “knowing what is going on both around you and inside you, staying open to opportunities to authentically express what you believe and who you are” (p. 19). Abrams writes about several occasions where she made bold moves in order to fight for something she believed in and to stand up for what mattered to her. She paid attention to what was going on around her in order to seize those opportunities, then pursued them to speak up for her beliefs. Abrams’ organization, Fair Fight, works to promote fair voting rights. This has been highlighted recently as Georgia passed laws that create voter suppression. Teachers can direct students to the work Abrams has done, the organization she created, who she works to represent and why, and the change she seeks to make. This example will allow students to see what it
might look like to pay attention to what’s going on around and inside you in order to find opportunities to make a change in something that matters to them.

Another example teachers might bring in is the work of John Lewis. In his book *Across that Bridge*, Lewis (2017) wrote that, while working for change, an important lesson he learned was that “the true work of social transformation starts within. It begins inside your own heart and mind, because the battleground of human transformation is really, more than any other thing, the struggle within the human consciousness to believe and accept what is true” (p. 15). This work was implemented by him and other activists not accepting the idea “the hatred they experienced was not based on any truth, but was actually an illusion in the minds of those who hated [them]” and they relied on their faith and beliefs to move society forward (Lewis, 2017, p. 25). From Lewis and other civil rights activists, students can see examples of what it looks like to take action based on your beliefs. It doesn’t take a title or a position of power to make a difference. Students can see that they have the agency within them to make a difference in what matters to them.

Teachers could also bring in examples of younger and more recent activists, like Greta Thunberg and Parkland students who started the #NeverAgain movement. Greta Thunberg began protesting climate change when she was 15 years old by going on a school strike on Fridays to sit in front of the Swedish parliament building with a sign that read “school strike for climate” (Kraemer, 2021). More and more students around the world began doing the same. Thunberg has since then begun traveling the world to discuss the importance of combating climate change. She has spoken at many world meetings and challenged political leaders, including United States presidents. She also speaks out on having autism (Thunberg, 2019). Thunberg is a powerful example of showing students that they, too, have agency, ways of using their voice, and ways of
using social media to get involved in activism. There is a book collecting her writing, as well as several books about her, including a children’s book. The students at Marjory Douglas High School in Parkland also used social media to organize #NeverAgain, a movement against gun violence. They organized marches, protests, and met with politicians. Seeing examples of people their age taking part in powerful change making is empowering to students and helps them to see ways they might be part of activism.

**Conclusion**

These strategies for social action projects will be returned to throughout the dissertation in the context of specific novels and literary works taught in secondary English classrooms. Each chapter will provide research based and theoretical backing for incorporating specific teaching ideas as well as social organizing content. The dissertation begins with a chapter detailing how teachers might use *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton to encourage students to ask important questions about social class. This commonly taught text can be used to promote critical inquiry and disrupt the status quo. After establishing the importance of asking questions, the next chapter is about using *Night* by Elie Wiesel and how teachers might pair it with a public narrative writing assignment to help students share their voices and create a call to action. The next chapter highlights the power of pairing texts and uses the example of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Marrow Thieves* to encourage students to ask questions about perspective and representation.

After learning about a variety of specific examples, readers will have learned of approaches that can be applied to many other texts and contexts.
CHAPTER II

READING THE OUTSIDERS THROUGH A SOCIAL CLASS LENS: USING CRITICAL INQUIRY TO INVESTIGATE CAUSES OF SOCIAL CLASS INEQUALITY

*It wasn’t fair for the Socs to have everything. We were as good as they were; it wasn’t our fault we were greasers.* -Ponyboy in *The Outsiders*

One of the social issues students will be most aware of, but talk the least about, is that of class inequality. Before going on to discuss addressing social class in the classroom, it is helpful to have common terms and background on the topic. Perhaps most simply, social class refers to a system of economic hierarchy in which people with more wealth are at the top and people with less wealth are at the bottom. How much one needs to be at the top or the bottom is debatable, although aspects like the poverty line and tax brackets create some defining numbers for these groups. However it is determined, the social class in which people are born into can impact many areas of life. People in higher social classes having more wealth, opportunities, privileges, better access and support for education, health care, and social networks facilitating employment and career success. People in lower social classes struggle to find stability, housing, childcare, health care, employment, and so on. These fundamental injustices, the source of class conflict, are often papered over by education, politicians, and the media by blaming the poor and applauding the wealthy, resulting in mental health issues and conflicts, as people blame themselves for systemic inequalities.

The Daily Conversation produced a YouTube video (2013) that explains the wealth gap in America. In the video, graphs show how the top 1% of America’s population has 40% of all the country’s wealth while 80% of the population has only 7% (The Daily Conversation, 2013). Globally, the gap is even wider. “The richest 2% have more wealth than half of the rest of the
world” and “the richest 300 people on earth have the same wealth as the poorest 3 billion people” (The Daily Conversation, 2013). Rich countries do give money to poorer countries, but they also create rules regarding things like tax and labor, that allow them to make much more money off these poor countries (“Global Wealth Inequality—What You Never Knew You Never Knew”). Information about wealth inequality can be a starting point for critical inquiry, and foster deeper understanding about the norms, practices, laws, rules and policies that establish and maintain class inequality. Students hear terms like “grit” and “perseverance” and phrases like “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” and the idea that hard work will make you successful but in reality social class mobility is very difficult with those having the most wealth are often born into it. Schooling, standardized testing, and traditional curriculum and instruction rather than challenging inequality typically reproduce, even increase, it. Failing to address inequality in schools only fosters the false ideology that class inequality has always existed, remains the same, and can’t be altered or changed.

Teachers might consider having students explore social class issues through the lens of Marxism, the oldest, most established, and most diverse school of thought critiquing capitalism and its reproduction of social classes. Marxism has had much influence on social thought and literary analysis. Teachers might start by introducing students to terms of class analysis such as proletariat and bourgeoisie. In her book Marxist Literary Criticism Today, Barbara Foley (2019) explains that “When Marx and Engler write… that the “history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” they point to the fundamentally antagonistic relationship between those who labor and those who live off the social surplus” (p. 14). She goes on to explain that “This antagonism is denoted by the term “class struggle,” which describes not only those
moments when social conflicts burst out in the open, as in a strike, a riot, a rebellion, or a revolution, but also the daily struggle…” (Foley, 2019, p. 14).

Foley (2019) goes on to explain one way that social class inequality is perpetuated. She writes that “ruling classes have always preferred to exercise social control through systems of ideas and beliefs that, possessing the aura of common sense, discipline the producers to remain on the treadmill of daily life…” (Foley, 2019, p. 21). Students might begin by thinking about the word “democracy” and how it squares, or doesn’t square, with the level of economic inequality in our country and world. Students can come to better understand social class inequalities by asking questions about how people in higher social classes live, how they acquire wealth, and how they are positioned to use the tools of power to maintain their social position while people in lower social classes face more challenging lives, suffer challenges and discrimination, and face obstacles to change both individually and as a social group.

Society tends to avoid or deny the issue of social class inequality and class oppression. Doing so certainly serves the interests of those who benefit most from keeping the system as it is. As literature depicts life, almost all literary works have economic and social class dimensions, and this literature can be one powerful starting point for discussion and inquiry into social class inequality. This chapter will particularly focus on the frequently taught and iconic young adult novel The Outsiders, but there are many other texts that students could also use to promote critical inquiry and investigate why social class inequality happens, what its consequences are, and what might be done to address it.

**Imaginative Literature and Social Class Analysis**

A Marxist lens can be a useful tool for students to ask questions about social class by seeing issues of class in the texts they are reading. Appleman (2015) writes that “Secondary
teachers can use the lens of social class to help bring greater visibility to the issues of power, class, ideology, and resistance that are embedded in the texts they read with their students” (p. 58). Using the term “Marxist” may seem problematic, but doesn’t have to be. Appleman (2015) writes that “Some schools may confuse the introduction of Marxist literary theory with the practice or indoctrination of Communism” and that “discussing the differences between Marxism and Marxist literary theory is a difficult but necessary element to introducing students to this critical lens” (p. 52). However, she also writes that this lens can also be called the social class lens (p. 53). Foley (2019) writes that “whether they know it or not, the majority of people in a capitalist society are members of the proletariat or working class” (p. 15) and that the idea most people in the United States are in the middle class is false. If this is the case, then it is essential that students read literature through a social class lens in order to better understand the class system in which they live. Foley (2019) also writes that a “Marxist lens allows a reflection of historical pressures and limits, a site of ideological reproduction, a space of political struggle” (p. 157). By reading through a social class lens, students can be encouraged to look at the historical nature of social classes, how they are reproduced, and the struggle that comes with them.

To implement this lens, Appleman (2015) suggests some of the following questions while reading a text:

1. Who has the power/money? Who does not? What happens as a result?
2. Is having so much power good for human nature?
3. Does power mean you can do anything, even if it's illegal?
4. Are all people created equal?
5. Why should society be based on rank? Are you a better person because you have power and/or money? (pp. 162-165)
Appleman (2015) also writes that an essential question of the social class lens is asking “how does the text comment on or represent class conflict?” She suggests that students and teachers:

1. Explore the way different economic classes are represented in the text
2. Determine the ideological stance of the text
3. Link the text to the social class of its author
4. Consider how the text itself is a commodity that reproduces certain beliefs and behaviors.
5. What is the effect of the work as a means of control? (p. 168).

In order to better understand a text, it is essential to historicize it. Foley (2019) writes “...how historically driven ideological contradictions work themselves out in individual literary works: why “always historicize” is a necessary imperative if we wish to understand what a text is saying to us” (p. 159). By “historicize” she means to try to understand the historical and social context that impacts the lives of characters. Appleman (2015) also emphasizes the importance of understanding the context when she suggests that students learn about the author’s stance and social class.

Boyd and Darragh (2019) provide suggestions for teachers to implement as pre-reading activities that might help students better understand social inequalities in books that feature social class inequality. They suggest students learn more about poverty itself by researching how much things cost, spending, income, and Federal Poverty Guidelines (Boyd & Darragh, 2019). Teachers can provide this information to students or students could do the research themselves, which might be more eye-opening and empowering. Contextualizing the reading of literature with background information on poverty and social class differences will prepare students to
better understand and interrogate what the characters are experiencing, what it looks like in real life, and the causes of poverty so they might think about how they can take action against it.

Teachers might also incorporate other literature that foregrounds issues of poverty and social class. Students could learn about class from the short story “The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara, about a college educated woman taking a group of African American children from Harlem to an expensive toy store where they are confused and angered by the cost of toys and the profound differences in life opportunities the toys and store reveal. Once they enter the toy store, the children are silenced, perhaps because they feel ashamed. They ask questions about how much toys cost in comparison to how much it takes to feed their own family.

Another text teachers might use is chapter 76 of The Ministry for the Future by Kim Stanley Robinson. The chapter is a short four pages and provides a narrative of someone who served in the Navy and learned admirals are paid $200,000 per year compared to the $25,000 than the lowest paid entry level seaman, 8 times more. The author argues that this is actually a good example of pay differential and that in many other fields, like major corporations, CEO’s make more than 350 times more than the average employee salary.

Boyd and Darragh (2019) also suggest students examine common stereotypes and myths about people labeled poor, such as they abuse the welfare system, don’t value education, and are lazy. These stereotypes can be disrupted while reading and discussing. Students should learn that social and economic classes are part of a system that fosters, perpetuates, and increases inequality, and where some are exploited for the benefit of others. Literature is a powerful tool for analysis because it can depersonalize the discussion, facilitate questioning and hypothetical thinking, and provide a common text or story that can be analyzed from multiple, even conflicting, perspectives.
Although even young children are aware of class differences, students may not think much about their own class position until they encounter others of different classes and feel like an outsider. Rather than brushing such differences aside or accepting myths that someone in a higher class must have worked really hard or that someone in a lower class is just lazy, students can be encouraged to let encounters and discomfort generate questions about why class differences exist. Literature can be a good space for students to encounter and examine class differences from a safe space of the classroom. Literature students can also talk through their thoughts with peers and the teacher as they begin to ask critical questions such as how class impacts the behavior and opportunities characters have, how power is distributed, and how language and identity is reflected in specific class systems.

*The Outsiders*

*The Outsiders*, published in 1967, is recognized as one of the first young adult novels and social class is a key issue in the work. The book is told from the perspective of Ponyboy, a fourteen-year-old boy who does well in school and is close with his older brothers, Darry and Soda. The boys live on their own, having lost both parents. They and their good friends, Johnny, Dally, and Two-Bit, are known as greasers. Also in the book are the Socs, portrayed as wealthy, and snobby, high schoolers. The book traces Ponyboy’s experiences with his friends as they face social class differences and conflicts.

While reading *The Outsiders*, students can experiment with trying to use a Marxist or social class lens. Rather than simply accepting different and unequal social classes as they are, a class-oriented reading will lead students to questions why things are “rough all over,” as Ponyboy states, why the characters face the issues they do, and how their lives might be different in different circumstances.
Before they read, students might do some research into S.E. Hinton’s life. This knowledge will help students better understand the novel and put it in conversation with today's society and, maybe most important, will help them to ask questions. When students look into Hinton’s life, they will find that Hinton wrote the book while she was a high school student in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and witnessed how gangs clashed in her school. In an interview at the end of the book, she says that she had good friends and didn’t realize they were “greasers” until they were called that name and realized then that they were “hoods.”

Looking more historically, students might do some research to see what Tulsa and other areas around it in Oklahoma were like in the 60’s. There was racial segregation and that impacted Hinton’s writing. Recognizing this will help students to see the bigger picture of the text, to be able to locate it in the time and place in which it was written. Appleman (2015) writes:

> For students to be able to understand themselves and each other, they need to be able to contextualize their knowledge in terms of larger than themselves; in other words, they need to be able to place their own particular situations and the texts they read into a larger system or set of beliefs” (p. 55).

Learning more about the time and place the text was written will help students to see the larger system of social class inequality working.

Appleman (2015) suggests students examine how literary works reproduce beliefs and behaviors. Ponyboy often reflects on the hardships that the Greasers face and the lack of hardships for the Socs, but he doesn't seem to question these differences or want to fight back. He reflects that with Socs, “you can’t win against them no matter how hard you try, because they’ve got all the breaks and even whipping them isn’t going to change that fact” (Hinton, 1967, p. 11). Later, he says that it wasn’t fair that Greasers have all the rough breaks, that “Things were
rough all over, all right. All over the East Side. It didn’t seem right to me” (Hinton, 1967, p. 43). Ponyboy is aware of the unfairness between the Socs and the Greasers, but seems to accept that nothing can change the facts.

Teachers might use these as examples, but also ask students how they see the text working. Students might consider what are some of the behaviors and beliefs that the book seems to encourage and reinforce? How does this text work to keep social classes in place? How do the representations of social groups compare and contrast with their own school? How do issues of economic and social class impact the formation of these social groups? What are the social and economic dimensions of the social groups in the students’ own school? Since The Outsiders is one of the first in the YA genre, how has it impacted the future of YA? These questions will help students to look at the text, and hopefully other texts, with a critical eye toward how texts work to represent and, at times, reinforce social classes.

Social class inequalities are a central issue in so many of the literary works and authors most often read in secondary schools. The Great Gatsby (1925) portrays enormous wealth and Of Mice and Men (1937) centers on homeless, migrant workers. To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) centers on a middle class family in a Southern town divided by race and class. In Dubious Battle, by John Steinbeck (1936), is about organizing workers’ attempts to fight for fair wages. Many of Shakespeare’s plays provide an opportunity to discuss social class. In Romeo and Juliet, both of the title characters come from upper class families, but readers see other social classes represented in other plays such as the craftsmen who put on the play in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The Color Purple (1982) explores the intersection of race and class by telling the story of Celie, a Black woman living in southern Georgia. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) also highlights social class by contrasting families such as the Grangerfords with Huck’s own
family. *A Separate Peace* (1959) takes place at an elite boarding school where sons of wealthy families are educated. In *1984* (1949), the Proles are in the lowest social class but Winston claims they have the most freedom. These, and many other texts, can be used to help students discuss the topic of social class inequality and to develop more awareness of its causes and consequences.

**Teaching Strategies for Discussing Social Class**

When teaching an issue like class, teachers must be mindful of the language they use. This is an important step because many people in the United States don’t talk about class. Yeskel (2015) writes that “We have no shared language about class. We have been taught from childhood myths and misconceptions around class mobility and the American dream” (p. 1). Not having a shared language on class and not talking about it makes it a tough issue to address in the secondary classroom, but also provides an opportunity to change the narrative on classism. Some terms teachers might need to consider are the phrase social class itself as well as rich, poor, upper class, middle class, lower class, poverty, and wealth.

Class Action is a nonprofit organization that seeks to address the issue of classism, in part by creating space for an encouraging dialogue across classes. They provide some definitions that might help teachers as they learn more about common language. On their website, “class” is defined as “relative social rank in terms of income, wealth, education, status and/or power” (Class Action, 2022, para. 9). They write that “the most commonly used class identities are: upper class (or owning class), middle class, working class, and poor” (Class Action, 2022, para. 11). The organization stresses the nuances of discussing class and how it can be related to power or money or jobs. They do, however, emphasize the very real oppression that occurs because of
classism and how people are treated differently and believe certain myths about themselves and others.

There are a number of teaching strategies to teach about class. Bramesfeld (2018) writes that discussing social class can be uncomfortable, but she encourages students to embrace the discomfort by having them reflect on questions like “why does talking about social class make you feel uncomfortable? What social norms does it violate? Why do those social norms exist? Who do these social norms benefit?” (para. 3). Another teaching strategy Bramesfeld (2018) offers is to teach class from an intersectional perspective, so to also bring up how identities such as class, race, and gender all intersect to impact people. One last strategy she writes about is having teachers reflect on their own biases.

Teaching strategies may look different depending on the socioeconomic makeup of the classroom. Sam Osherson (2017) writes that students from wealthy backgrounds live in a “wealth bubble” and may not see social inequality as an issue. Osherson suggests talking with these students about how their class background has created certain expectations, such as achieving or gaining material items, and how those expectations impact their emotional well being. He also writes that it is important that students from lower class backgrounds are encouraged to question the system and not accept the way things are as fair. In any classroom, Osherson suggests the importance of students asking the questions and reflecting on their own experiences and beliefs.

Talking about social class can include talking with parents, too. Mark Stanek (2012) writes about a school that had meetings with parents to hear their concerns on how social class was being discussed in the school and how these conversations helped the school re-evaluate
their practices. This process can help teachers consider how schools sometimes work to perpetuate social class inequality and how it might be used to disrupt those inequalities.

Teachers must be aware and respectful of their students’ identities and incorporate them in the classroom. Students come to the classroom with several identities, and seeing themselves in the classroom is important. Gholdy Muhammad (2020) writes that “Our identities (both cultural identities and others) are continually being (re)defined and revised while we consider who we are within our sociocultural and sociopolitical environment” (p. 67) and that youth need time in school to consider their own identities as well as learn about the identities of those who are different than them. They may have a variety of feelings and emotions when it comes to their social class identity and teachers need to be aware and prepared to facilitate discussions that welcome various opinions, ideas, and feelings. If students identify as a lower social class, they might feel sad, bad, or angry when reading a text that highlights the hardships associated with a lower social class. If a student identifies as a higher social class, they may be unaware or defensive when talking about social class.

When discussing social class and social inequality, these are identities, like others, that aren’t easily identified without really knowing a person. Therefore, this is a great opportunity for teachers to discuss the importance of not assuming students know everything about another person just based on looks. This discussion fits well with The Outsiders because the Greasers are often judged by their appearances, as are the Socs, but neither group really knows how the other identifies. Students can examine the social groups in their own schools as a way to consider this idea of appearances and not assume they know everything about others based on their looks. Teachers, too, can think about this as they might not always know the identities of their students.
right away. Being aware of their own identities and the identities of others will help students be able to better work with other people. This can help to begin important conversations.

Teachers might also investigate the intersections of class with other identities, including race and gender. Stephanie Jones (2006) writes that using critical literacy helps to understand the connection between language, power, and identity. She uses the lens to teach social class to college students, but a similar approach can be applied to any level of classroom. She writes that books “use language to pull us into worlds where lived realities are not told but felt” (Jones, 2006, p. 295) and although she recognizes that living through something is the only way to truly experience oppression, a goal of her class is to help her students better understand class oppression so they can do something about it. Her students read texts by Dorothy Allison, but similar strategies can be applied to any text. She encourages students to analyze their position as a reader and their experiences that impact them as they read the text. She found that students who were willing to take the most risks, to be vulnerable, and to be uncomfortable were the ones who grew in their critical perspective of class. This approach can be taken with any topic, but it is beneficial for the topic of class and class oppression because it may be something that students don’t often think about but is happening all around them.

In his book *How to be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi (2019) writes that “whoever creates the norm creates the hierarchy and positions their own race-class at the top of the hierarchy” (p. 153). People who are privileged with their race and class are the ones who usually get to make the decisions in society and make decisions that place their race and class at the top, which perpetuates the status quo and makes it difficult for anyone to move out of their class position. Kendi (2019) also argues that in order to be antiracist, one must reject the hierarchy of race-genders as well, or the systems that privilege certain genders and races. These discussions on
intersectionality can help students become more aware of class oppression and how it intersects with other identities.

Teachers might begin these important discussions by reflecting on their own class identity and encouraging students to do the same. Teachers can use the following questions to reflect on their class identity. What social class do you consider yourself to be part of? What factors determine your social class? Have you always been in this same social class? If not, how did you move to this social class? When you say someone is poor, what do you mean? When you say someone is rich, what do you mean? What privileges and barriers have come with your social class? Teachers might share their reflections with their students and describe how their identity has shaped their understanding of class issues. Students might be encouraged to do similar reflections in the privacy of a journal.

**Using Inquiry and Imagination to Create a Better World**

Perhaps if Ponyboy was encouraged to name the issues and ask questions about the social injustices he was seeing, he would have used his agency to make a change, not just keep fighting with the Socs. Through a class-conscious reading of *The Outsiders*, students can recognize Ponyboy’s situation and the limitations of his understanding. One question Ponyboy asks is, “What kind of world is it where all I have to be proud of is a reputation for being a hood, and greasy hair?... Why should I be proud of it? Why should I even pretend to be proud of it?” (Hinton, 1967, p. 132). This quotation demonstrates that Pony does question what society values and how he fits into those expectations. He realizes that society has set a reputation for various social classes.

Ponyboy asking these important questions could be a model for students to help them ask questions about social class inequality. Students could begin by creating more questions that
characters in the novel could be asking of their situation and what they might do about it. For example, when Cherry, Marcia, and Ponyboy are talking at the movies, Marcia asks why they don’t see Ponyboy’s brother, Soda, at school. Ponyboy admits Soda is a dropout and silently reflects that the stereotypes that go with the term dropout don’t accurately reflect Soda. This could be an opportunity for Ponyboy to go back to Johnny and Dally, who went to the movie with him, and begin to ask questions to better understand their situation. Dally also dropped out of school, so these characters would benefit from asking questions to better understand their situations. They might ask why they, young people, had to be the ones supporting their families. They might also ask why it was important to get a high school diploma and if so important, how schools could better support them.

Students could also create a dialogue between the characters about what a better world might look like and how they could get there. For example, following the interaction at the movie might be a time when Ponyboy could then have a discussion with Johnny about how the Greasers don’t have equal opportunities in education because they are forced to work to provide for their families. They might begin to imagine how life might be better if they were supported in attending school and not have to worry about how they would feed their families. They might imagine a school system that supports working students or employers that support students as they attempt to juggle both work and school. Students can write out a dialogue that expands on how they might imagine a better situation for these characters.

These activities could help students use literature to imagine what a better world might look like for characters who face social class inequalities. This practice can be translated to students’ own lives in order to gain a deeper understanding of and take action in the issue of social class inequality.
Reading with Critical Inquiry from Various Perspectives

When reading *The Outsiders*, teachers might encourage students to read from all perspectives and lenses, even though the book is only told from Ponyboy’s perspective. For example, students might be encouraged to think about the perspective of some of the female characters like Marcia and Cherry. The author, S. E. Hinton, is female, so having students ask questions about this may lead to discussions about gender portrayal. This investigation can help students think about how social class intersects with gender. Jones (2006) writes that “Attending to social class and the ways in which it intersects with gender, race, sexuality, religion and other subject locations” can help people think about “the material, emotional, embodied and lived implications of social class” (p. 302) as well as work to cause disruptions in their implications.

While reading *The Outsiders*, students will see that Dally is very rude to the girls at the movies and Cherry throws her pop on him, but later says that she might love a guy like that. Students might ask questions about why Hinton chose to portray a female character in this way. Two-Bit’s mom is portrayed as a single mom working hard to raise her son. Sandy, Soda Pop’s girlfriend, is pregnant with another young man’s child and moves to Florida to be with him. These women, some of them not even present in the book, just mentioned, all portray aspects that students can interrogate to think about how women are portrayed and why, especially written from a female author's perspective.

Students might also be encouraged to think about the teacher’s perspective in *The Outsiders*. Ponyboy calls his English teacher at the end of the book, making it seem like they have a good relationship. Students might think about how teachers can influence students going through hardships or how they are too often not aware of what students are experiencing. This relates to the silence and sometimes ignorance surrounding the topic of social class. It is often an
unseen issue and the narrative surrounding social class inequalities can be emphasized. Students might also think about how writing his story may have helped Ponyboy to share this narrative and how powerful telling one’s story can be when addressing inequalities.

These discussions might lead students to think about intersections of class and gender in social issues that are still present today. They can use critical inquiry to ask questions like how are the women in lower social classes portrayed in comparison to women in high social classes? Then they can examine how the portrayals are stereotypes and why they exist. They might ask what is the impact of these portrayals? Students might also ask questions about educational institutions and the role of teachers. This questioning will take care on the teacher’s part as this topic might make students feel strong emotions if they connect strongly, perhaps going through similar situations. Encouraging students to ask these questions and discuss their ideas helps to break the silence on social class inequality while at the same time raising awareness of different perspectives and experiences of the social class gap.

**Reading Documents**

When discussing social class, being able to read related documents can be empowering for students. Documents related to taxes might be very challenging but important to read in the context of social class. Students might often hear about tax breaks and tax laws and codes in the news, but may be unaware of how they impact them or how to understand them. High school students might look into the IRS’s information on helping college students file taxes to learn more about how that might impact them soon (IRS, 2022). They might also compare tax plans of recent presidential candidates, like Bernie Sanders (https://www.bernietax.com/) and Ted Cruz (https://taxfoundation.org/details-and-analysis-senator-ted-cruz-s-tax-plan/). They might also look into what happens when taxes are cut and how that impacts things like the funding that goes
to schools and higher education. Students could pick one kind of tax or one aspect of tax and ask questions about it and seek those answers on the Internet, such as on government sites. Knowing where to look for answers can be empowering for students as they get ready to vote, apply for college and jobs, and make decisions with their money.

Students may not become tax experts, but they might at least become more aware of how tax cuts actually work, who they benefit, and how. Many Americans are in support of raising the taxes on the wealthy and corporations and Congress has the power to make changes in tax policies. Hanlon and Hendricks (2021) suggest that tax codes have been flawed for years, specifically when it comes to taxing the wealthy, including these three reasons:

1. The failure of the tax system to tax income from wealth comparably to income from work—and most fundamentally, the fact that huge amounts of income from wealth escape tax altogether; 2. The erosion of corporate taxes during an era of surging corporate profits; 3. The weakening of tax enforcement, especially with regard to wealthy individuals and corporations, which has drained hundreds of billions from the U.S. Treasury (para. 13).

Students could investigate these claims and find specific numbers to support them. They could also look at elements of Biden’s Build Back Better plan that aim to address these flaws in the tax policies.

To model looking at the impacts of tax laws, teachers might use the Tax Cuts and Job Act that Trump signed into law in December 2017 (“Tax Cuts and Jobs Act,” n.d.). Although the tax code was flawed before, this act did more to favor the wealthy. The law made it so people received more money back from taxes, so many people thought it was a positive choice. But upon looking closer, students might see that it impacts the taxes on colleges and universities,
which impact the cost of higher education (“Tax Cuts and Jobs Act,” n.d.). All of this has a ripple effect on the economy and people’s lives and students might investigate it by asking questions and looking into how this (complex) document looks in real life and with real people and what potential social issues are impacted.

**Critical Media Literacy**

*The Outsiders* is about teenagers before the modern notions of social media, but the characters had stereotypes to fight back against and contemporary readers can examine how youth at the time the book was written were being impacted by various media and make connections to today. Teachers might bring in advertisements from the 1960’s that were aimed towards teenagers. The ads might generate discussion about gender portrayal and expectations, such as women being expected to cook dinner, stay home, and look a certain way. The representation of social class and the relative absence of portrayals of racial groups other than White are also areas students could research.

Students might also investigate the portrayal of smoking in the 1960’s and compare it to today. Advertisements like Joe Cool Camel and others targeted young people, some too young to even be able to smoke, decades ago. Then, more recently, there were ad campaigns that targeted this health issue, trying to get young people not to smoke. It seems like there are fewer young people that smoke today. Vaping is now an issue and students might look at anti-vaping advertisements. Because the ads come from a different time period, they will be easier for students to analyze, and then students can apply their analytical tools and process to current advertising on the Internet and elsewhere. Students can be encouraged to think about how they, as young people, are being targeted, how the media constructs them, and how they might use the media to resist negative messages.
As students look at the portrayal of social class in today’s media, they might consider things like how clothes companies target young people and want them to spend money on clothes or other teen products, though, of course, not all young people have “disposable income.” Students might also look into the idea of consumerism and how corporate advertising fosters a consumerist lifestyle. Advertisements often try to persuade people to think they need more and buy more. Students can be encouraged to see how this creates tensions between people of different social classes. Students could also be encouraged to choose a related topic and do further research. They might look at issues of bullying, mental health, environmental degradation, and climate change, among others, in order to think about the range of implications consumerism has.

**Understanding Poverty and Social Class and Dispelling Myths**

In the Curtis household in *The Outsiders*, Darry and Soda each have to work in order to keep the brothers together as a family. They are showing enough grit to be successful. But, if looked at from a critical inquiry stance, one might ask why three young men should have to work this hard at menial jobs, and should they have to give up goals of college or other careers? The brothers, based on their grit and hard work, should be able to live in a really nice house, go to college, get any job they want— not barely get by. They value education and aren’t lazy, aspects that are both related to common myths about social class. So what is going on that prevents them from climbing the social class ladder?

Bell hooks (2000) writes that it’s easier and easier to see the widening class gap when observing society (p. 1). She argues that most Americans don’t talk about class and are becoming less and less empathetic with the issues that people in poverty face (hooks, 2000). In addition to having less empathy, society isn’t always told the whole story on wealth and success. Sam
Pizzigati (2012) writes that when *Forbes* publishes a list of celebrated billionaires, it doesn’t provide an explanation of where these “successful” people are getting their wealth. Pizzigati (2012) shows that most people don’t realize the enormous economic and social privileges the richest members of society started out with. If you don’t know that, then it is easier to accept the idea that they are somehow self-creators of their own “American Dream” story and that others who don’t have the same opportunities should somehow simply “try harder.”

*The Outsiders*, and many other commonly taught books, can be taught as part of inquiry into class inequalities, and the damaging ideologies that justify them. When students read the tragic outcomes of Dally and Johnny, they might be encouraged to consider class gaps, question the myths about social class, and consider what social inequality really means for people in their everyday lives.

In order to begin to examine the issue of poverty and social class gaps, students must begin to understand the root causes of these issues. This information will likely come in the form of informational reading as students learn about the policies, politicians, culture, and social norms that work to maintain the social class status quo. For example, students might look into how things like minimum wage and unemployment lead to poverty. Students also might look at the overall idea of a consumer economy and how big companies are treated.

Students might also look at how these policies impact systems, like education, courts, and criminal justice. Giroux (2013) writes “The rich and corporate elite control the system” and that “breeds civic indifference… as more citizens are denied basic rights” (p.111). He goes on to argue that “Social investments like education are abandoned in the name of market efficiency” and that governing takes place “largely through courts, criminal justice system, prisons” (Giroux, 2013, p. 111). Students can see how education suffers from social class inequalities and policies
and how the courts and criminal justice systems are impacted. Students might investigate how rich people get richer because they are rich and have power, not because of their hard work.

When reading *The Outsiders*, students see that Dally gets “hauled in” to the police station every time there is an issue in their neighborhood. Tragically, he ends up getting shot by the police, too, after Johnny dies. It might be argued that living in poverty led to Johnny killing the Soc, which led to him dying, which later led to Dally dying. Students can connect those dots to see the impacts of social class inequalities. Carey-Webb (2001) writes that there is a connection between the root causes of violence how a breakdown in community can lead to violence. Students need to think critically about violence and its causes, and find ways to become active working against it (Carey-Webb, 2001). “It is time to stop blaming young people for the violence in their lives. Indeed, it is not so much that we have a youth violence problem in this country, but that throughout our society we have endemic problems of family and community breakdown, of increasing inequality…” (Carey-Webb, 2001, p. 70). Students can see one of the impacts of social class inequality is often an increase in violence.

By using critical inquiry, students can question what many people attempt to deny or try to avoid-- the idea of class. Aronwitz (2003) writes that most people deny class and believe that if you try hard enough or get lucky, you can get rich. Aronwitz (2003) goes on to say that history has painted this picture of a mainly middle-class society, but doesn’t often look at how during the Revolution and during the 19th century that there was a large number of “propertyless wage workers” and that America wasn’t the “nation of independent land owners” that history books often portray (p. 15). This incomplete picture of history and failure to adequately address class issues in education is part of why most students and teachers don’t investigate class themes when reading texts like *The Outsiders*. They may simply accept Ponyboy’s reflections that things are
“rough all over” as applying to everyone, and, because the Curtis brothers all work so hard, students somehow assume the family is successful and will be just fine.

Many students are taught that they need a good education and they will be successful, but even an education comes with hierarchies corresponding to economic and social hierarchies of the larger society. Public schools that enroll substantial numbers of upper middle class students are typically better funded, have better buildings, smaller class sizes, and better prepared teachers than schools serving poor and working class students. Aronwitz (2003) comments that credentials from different colleges mean different things, even if the educations are similar and that not all high school students have the same likelihood of being accepted into the colleges with “better” credentials (p. 16-17). The rise of private education has benefited the wealthiest and reduced rapport for and undermined public education (Aronowitz, 2003). Weiler (1988) writes that, in schools, the upper class students look smart because they already know the content because the curriculum privileges what they already know. Education typically reproduces inequality. Students can inquire into ways schools exacerbate, maintain, or reduce class inequality.

In the United States the opportunity to attend college is correlated with income. Students reading The Outsiders can see that Darry and Soda have to work to support their family, causing Soda to drop out of school. Even though Darry still managed to graduate with good grades, there was no opportunity for a higher education that would have allowed him to get a decent job to support his family.

Students can use The Outsiders to become more aware of the systems that keep individuals in certain social classes. Ponyboy and his brothers are constantly afraid that the family will be split up and that Pony will be put in a boys’ home. The idea of splitting families
up and having to impress an institution in order to prove they can stay together is something youth in higher social classes are unlikely to worry about. The police take Dally into the police station and question him every time something happens in their neighborhood. The police presence and role throughout the book is something that probably looks different in the Socs neighborhood and students might use examples from the book to think about what police do and how it differs depending on the demographics of a community, a topic we have learned about from the Black Lives Matter movement.

**Social Class and Activism**

When they are learning about and critiquing social class inequality, students might also ask who can- and how they can- change the system? At least in schools, the answer often intersects with social class. Research shows that in schools more civic-based opportunities are given to higher socio-economic, White, students than to poor students and students of color (Teitelbaum, 2011). Students might draw on critical inquiry to examine how social class, and the intersectionality of race and gender, can foster, or make more difficult, becoming an activist. Using Ponyboy as an example, students could imagine how he might have acted differently if he would have been encouraged to interrogate society, that things were rougher for some than others, rather than simply “rough all over.” He knew the Socs had all the breaks, but he didn’t envision anything he, or others, could do about it. What opportunities were available to him? He seemed to have a teacher that cared. He definitely had a support group of friends. But how many more opportunities might the Socs have had? Their parents had money and connections.

Students might reflect on how a person’s social class can create opportunities or barriers to get involved in making change. It can be a great idea to organize, or even attend, a march in a big city, but it takes money to get to that big city. It takes time to organize social movements. If
students are working, taking care of their siblings, trying to survive, can they take part in movements? They certainly should be able to. Of course, marches are certainly not the only way to take part in activism, and maybe not even a preferred way. But students might see more and more young people participating in marches or demonstrations and feel like they can’t take action because they don’t have the resources to get to a march. Teachers might encourage their students to use critical inquiry and think about the inequity that some communities face, yet perhaps aren’t given the space to speak out, while other communities use their resources to make a space to speak out. Students can also consider other ways of taking action that are not marches, because there are many.

By looking at movements organized by poor people, students can see that even people with very limited means and opportunities can resist. Teachers might introduce students to the idea of food riots in which people organized in response to food being scarce or too expensive. Taylor (1996) explains how, during World War Two, French women organized in order to resist the “food or fuel shortages, the inadequacy of the rations allotted, or perceived injustices in the allocation of rations” and that protestors “collected in front of the mayor's office (who was responsible locally for the rationing and distribution system). The protestors were generally successful in a limited way, gaining relief in the form of an extra distribution of food or a temporary soup kitchen” (pp. 485-486). There have been other food riots in France, Britain, New York City, Toronto, Egypt, and many other places across the world and throughout time, including in recent decades. Students might identify one of these and research the causes and outcomes to see effective examples of how poor people very much have the power to resist, protest, and make change.
Teachers might use this as an opportunity to encourage students to think about benefits and consequences of a charity approach to addressing social issues and inequalities. Donating doesn’t often get at the root cause of social class issues and may perpetuate the system of what people call the “rich” helping the “poor.” Bob Breecher (2017) writes that charities aren’t helpful because they don’t address the needs people feel they have, only what needs have been determined for them. He also argues that people should not depend on the generosity of others for their basic needs (Breecher, 2017). Donating to charities might not work to create any substantial change in society and it cannot be guaranteed that the people who need the help the most are going to get it. Students might, in fact, critique the system of charity and ask why it exists, who it helps, who it doesn’t help, and why.

Many schools support canned food drives, and that is fine, but students could be encouraged to ask questions to explore the root causes of issues that lead to activities like canned food drives. Students might ask and research basic questions such as why are people hungry and others have all they need? What is a living wage and who receives it? Why can some pay thousands of dollars for a bottle of wine and others can’t afford basic food supplies? What is a “food desert” and why do they exist? These questions will help students be able to at least better understand the inequalities that lead people to conduct charity events like food drives.

However, there are times when donating can be beneficial. Supporters of donating may argue that if the major changes needed to address inequalities aren’t happening, then people can look around and do something to address the needs they see. To encourage students to think about when it might be appropriate, they might do a role play in which they analyze if donating would be the best course of action. Students might work in small groups and determine an issue and research its root causes. They can then determine if they can realistically do something to
address the root cause, or if it would make more sense to donate to a charity that is addressing immediate needs. Groups can then act these scenarios out and the class and debrief, possibly providing other viewpoints or questions that can help students think through options.

Teaching Social Organizing

When teaching a text that addresses social class inequality and using it to encourage students to take action, teachers might bring in examples of movements that addressed the same issue. Students need to learn about efforts to create social and economic justice and this vital topic for preparing citizens receives far too little attention in school. One recent example is the Occupy Wall Street Movement. The Movement started in 2011 and focused on class differences. One of the outcomes of the movement was that people were talking about the issue of the wealth gap, about the need for a better life for the 99%:

By naming the issue, the movement has changed the political discourse. No longer can the interests of the 99% be ignored. The movement has unleashed the political power of millions and issued an open invitation to everyone to be part of creating a new world. Historians may look back at September 2011 as the time when the 99% awoke, named our crisis, and faced the reality that none of our leaders are going to solve it. This is the moment when we realized we would have to act for ourselves (Van Gelder, 2011, p. 11).

By bringing in information on the Occupy Movement, teachers can highlight the importance of naming issues and speaking up about them.

Before incorporating information on the Occupy Movement, teachers might consider some background information on the movement that could bring in new perspectives. Teachers might begin by using the short story “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” by Herman
Melville. This story was frequently read aloud during Occupy protests, and certainly describes a worker who refuses to cooperate with authority.

Teachers can also incorporate historical background. The Occupy Movement was in part inspired by the Indignados Movement in Spain. Ismael et al. (2014) write about Spanish politics and the Internet, focusing specifically on the Indignados Movement. The movement relied heavily on Twitter and the Internet, which can have important connections to the secondary English classroom! Technology has the potential to allow for more political participation and encourages more in person political participation, which is really interesting and important for secondary students.

The Indignados Movement began when people camped in Puerta de Sol on May 15, 2011. Activists were focused on democracy for everyone and used the tool of an unstructured base with several smaller groups working together. There is evidence to suggest that more people voted in the general election in the following November as a result of the organizing, so the movement was likely successful. The movement was speaking out against political parties and against labor unions (Ismael et al., 2014).

The 15M movement relied heavily on social media to get started, but the in-person organizing grew as well. There was no one leader and people gathered in large cities. The collective identity kept them together, making the movement grow (Ismael et al., 2014). This idea of collective identity is a factor that teachers might incorporate into their unit on The Outsiders or other related text. They might have students consider their identities and communities and elements that bring them together. This can help strengthen any kind of organizing on any topic, but fits well with the issue of social class inequality.
Barbas and Postill (2017) wrote that the movement also accused mainstream media of favoring the wealthy and not giving any attention to the poverty going on, making it seem invisible. Eventually they caused the end of a monopoly over mainstream media and allowed new outlets for news (Barbas & Postill, 2017). The movement worked to empower citizens through new communicative practices and citizen media. For example, Barbas and Postill (2017) found that the activists held a workshop in a small community on how to create and use a community radio station. This is a great example of how activists use different technology and communication to spread ideas, and students can do something similar. Perhaps instead of a radio, students create a podcast. By learning about what other activists did, students will imagine new possibilities.

The 15M movement also sought to address all areas of life and focused on the need for political education and importance of direct action and communication (Barbas & Postill, 2017). General assemblies were used to help teach participants about politics. The assemblies focused more on the thought process of issues, not always reaching solutions. The movement also used “hacktivism” or hacking and activism (Barbas & Postill, 2017). Including this in the classroom would help students to see how technology, communication, politics, and activism all overlap and might allow students to imagine ways that they might participate in activism using technology. Students can also see the power of educating others on a topic and consider that as a form of activism. When addressing the issue of social class, even being educated on the root causes of inequality can be powerful for a person.

Using the social organizing content of the Indignados Movement in the secondary English classroom can provide for many learning opportunities that will meet the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), be a great background for the Occupy Movement, and connect with
novels like *The Outsiders*. First, the movement had a big focus on media, what is being presented in the news, and how news outlets manipulate the news. Students can be encouraged to compare this to how news sources manipulate the news in their areas, what issues get more attention than others, and how students themselves are impacted by this—what they are learning or being kept from. Another topic is communication and social media. Students are likely very familiar with social media and can think about how they might use it for effective and productive communication. The CCSS require students to write for certain audiences, write to support a claim, and write using technology to collaborate with others. All of these can be achieved by having students use their writing and sharing ideas on social media, much like the Indignados activists.

The CCSS require students to come to discussions prepared and to talk through ideas with group members and this can be connected to how general assemblies focused on thought processes and talking through ideas, not always rushing right to solutions. This could be practiced in the classroom by group members bringing issues to the group meeting and talking through them in ways that are supported by their research and in respectful ways. This is also helpful in contributing toward a democracy. Being able to talk through ideas with others and figure out the problems and eventually a solution is an important part of being a social justice oriented citizen.

The Occupy Movement in the United States was somewhat modeled after the 15M movement and began when a group of people gathered together to talk about how to change the world. Andy Kroll (2011) writes that the group included “artists, activists, writers, students, and organizers” (p. 20) who had been involved in activism across the world and locally. They gathered in early summer of 2011. It was suggested that they begin to use the idea of a general
assembly, in which everyone is equal and has a voice. People liked the idea. On August 2, 2011, a deadline in which President Obama and Republicans had to come to an agreement on a debt ceiling, a general assembly gathered in Bowling Green Park, just a few blocks away from Wall Street. It wasn't an assembly until someone from the crowd took over the microphone and began talking, then others joined the conversation. The concept of a general assembly took hold and began to spread. Around the same time, the magazine *Adbuster* was advertising September 17 as the day of action against class oppression. It’s advertisement was a ballerina on Wall Street’s bull, police behind her. People were encouraged to bring tents. On September 17, people showed up and occupied for a month, thus beginning the Occupy Movement (Kroll, 2011).

The Occupy Movement wanted to address the issue of class oppression. One of the goals was to begin speaking up for the 99% whose interests and voices were often silenced by the rich and powerful. “Today’s economy redistributes wealth from the poor and middle class to those at the top. The income of the top 1% grew 275 percent between 1979 and 2007, according to the Congressional Budget Office. For those in the bottom 20 percent, income grew just 18 percent during those twenty-eight years” (Van Gelder, 2011, p. 11). The movement sought to fight for everyone who was impacted. They didn’t create a list of demands, just simply wanted to create a better life for all the people who fell into that 99%. They felt a list of demands would make it too easy to divide the movement and because the list was simply too long (Van Gelder, 2011).

Giroux (2013) writes that the movement:

opened the conversation to discussing the statistics mentioned earlier and all the related policies that produce such grievous social costs- costs that not only stagger the mind but are completely at odds with any viable notion of what a democracy should look like… (p. 115).
The movement worked to shed light on the truth of class oppression and open dialogue about it.

“The Occupy movement in part has combined civil disobedience with political disobedience as part of a broader effort to create open spaces for dialogue, communities of mutual support, and new modes of solidarity...” (Giroux, 2013, p. 118). The government was only working for the top 1%, making tax breaks and policies that helped them get richer. The rest of the 99% felt the government didn’t work for them. The idea of dialogue and giving everyone of the 99% a voice was crucial to the movement.

One way everyone was given a voice was by not having any one leader. Instead, everyone had leadership rights. This was also part of the strategy of the movement:

There is no single leader who could be co-opted or assassinated. Instead, leadership is broadly shared, and leadership skills are being taught and learned constantly. What’s more, the autonomous groups within the movement that plan and carry out direct actions of all sorts are extremely difficult to contain (Van Gelder, 2011, p. 15).

The movement spread leadership skills and depended on many leaders. In addition to not having any one leader, the movement also relied on decisions made by consensus. Everyone in the movement had the chance to explain why they approve or to suggest changes. There is a huge focus on community and living with others. Occupiers built a community where everyone was heard and people supported each other. They risked being jailed and experienced these risks together, as a community (Van Gelder, 2011, p. 14).

This focus on dialogue, leadership, and teamwork fits in the secondary English classroom, too. Students can look at the Occupy Movement to learn ways to seek out and listen to different ideas and opinions. They can see the value of shared leadership and how to work
with others. Students might ask specific questions about these topics, then research the Occupy Movement to find examples that answer their questions. They might find specific leaders of the Movement and explore how they conveyed these traits.

One strategy the Occupy Movement used was the people’s microphone. Van Gelder (2011) explains:

The use of the people’s microphone is a central feature of the general assemblies. To use the people’s mic, a person first grabs the attention of the crowd by shouting, “Mic check!” Then, he or she begins to speak, saying a few words at a time, so that others can shout the words on to those behind them in the crowd. Originally developed as a way to circumvent bans on amplification at many occupation sites, the people’s mic has developed into much more than that. It encourages deeper listening because audience members must actively repeat the language of the speaker. It encourages consensus because hearing oneself repeat a point of view one doesn’t agree with has a way of opening one’s mind. And it provides a great example of how community organizing works best when it’s people-powered and resilient. This technique allows crowds of thousands to communicate, and also allows groups involved in direct street action to make democratic (p. 14).

This strategy is important to learning more about the movement as it shows how they worked to foster communication and how they valued listening to each other’s voices with an open mind. Practicing active listening was also essential to getting the message to everyone at gatherings during the Occupy Movement. Students can study this skill and think about how they use active
listening in their own lives and how they might use it in their own activism. Listening to what people need and what people are really saying is important.

Naomi Klein (2011) writes about how she gave a speech during the Occupy Movement. She wrote out a much longer version of the speech and then realized that since everyone was going to be repeating it, she would have to make it shorter. There were some powerful phrases in the speech that when repeated over and over, were incredibly impactful on the participants. She needed to be very aware of her word choice. This communication skill is something students can see used in the Occupy Movement. Students could look at other speeches given during the Movement and think about the powerful word choice speakers used and how it impacted the audience.

Learning the history and context of Occupy Wall Street is relevant to The Outsiders. Van Gelder (2011) writes that:

The Occupy Wall Street movement is not just demanding change. It is also transforming how we, the 99%, see ourselves. The shame many of us felt when we couldn’t find a job, pay down our debts, or keep our home is being replaced by a political awakening. Millions now recognize that we are not to blame for a weak economy, for a subprime mortgage meltdown, or for a tax system that favors the wealthy but bankrupts the government (p. 11).

If a grown Ponyboy were to encounter this movement, he might be likely to join. Being able to see himself differently would be very empowering. In the book, he doesn’t seem to consider why things are the way they are and certainly doesn’t seem to consider how they might be different. But if he were to realize that he isn’t to blame for a society that favors the Socs, nor can he, alone, work hard enough to change it, he might be encouraged to see himself and his brothers
differently. This is the same for so many people today. They might be down on themselves and
their situations because they can’t afford rent or can’t afford college, but to see themselves
differently and look into the cause of the issue, see that it isn’t their fault, would be
empowering.

Students may also be encouraged to learn how to evaluate movements based on certain
criteria. Critics and scholars of social movements have different perspectives on if Occupy was
successful or not. Students can explore what the goals were in order to determine if it was
successful. Engler and Engler (2016) write that:

Momentum-driven organizing distinguishes itself from unstructured mass protest
in that it seeks to be deliberate in harnessing and sustaining the power of
disruptive outbreaks. Its goal is to allow mobilizations to endure thorough and
multiple waves of activity. Occupy fell short in this regard (162).

According to these criteria, the Occupy movement wasn’t successful because it didn’t use the
momentum it had to keep escalating, which is an essential element of a movement, according to
Engler and Engler (2016).

Students can also explore why Occupy was considered successful by other critics and
criteria. Engler and Engler (2016) also write that “despite its lack of institutional backing, it
accomplished precisely what far more muscular organizations had tried, and failed, to do in the
years before…” (p. 163) and that the “most profound impact was in shifting the national debate,
prompting a change that had important ramifications in the realms of policy and electoral
politics” (p. 165). These criteria might be more encouraging to students. The Occupy Movement
got people talking, including politicians, which led to some small policy changes.
People joined the cause all over the world and started talking about how important the idea of class inequality is. Just starting and spreading a conversation about inequality is important to getting involved in activism. Students can look at these criteria and see that Occupy was successful by looking at the hundreds of Occupy events that spread all over the world. They can also investigate the policies that were impacted by the movement. This will provide opportunities for students to do research, read information texts, and use evidence to support their claims (if the movement was successful or not). If time allows, students might also create presentations or hold debates about the effectiveness of the movement.

The information about Occupy can be used to help students evaluate the successes and failures of other movements they know of and to think about how they might implement the criteria in their own activism. Students can think about the goals they have for wanting to get involved in or start a movement and consider what it might look like to disrupt, sacrifice, and escalate in different scenarios (Engler & Engler, 2016). Incorporating the social organizing content also gives students a chance to think about what victory or success would look like. This kind of imagining encourages critical inquiry and thinking in many areas, such as imagining what a better life might look like, a more just society might look like, a more inclusive school, or whatever issue students want to address.

**Classroom Activities that Incorporate Social Organizing Content**

There is a lot of information regarding the Occupy Movement and related movements. To implement some of the content, teachers might consider one of the following activities. One beneficial resource is the book *The Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement* (2011) by Sarah Van Gelder and the staff of Yes! Magazine. The book is composed of
chapters that individuals wrote, so teachers can incorporate stand alone chapters. Reading the book also provides teachers with beneficial background knowledge on the movement.

One approach might be the teacher presenting the information in interesting and engaging ways, perhaps including short readings for groups to complete or video clips. Teachers might consider this approach if they have limited time to implement the material and would probably focus on the context, goals, and outcomes of the movement. More ideally, teachers would encourage students to take a critical inquiry approach and learn more about the movement through research. Teachers might briefly introduce the movement, but then model how to create questions in order to learn more about a movement. This could be an opportunity to teach students how to consider engaging in present day movements. Teachers might model questions like what were the goals of the movement, who started it, what strategies did they use? Students could develop their own questions and research the answers to these questions and present them to the class.

In this way, the class can learn about the Occupy Movement through student led critical inquiry. But they are also learning about how to evaluate a movement in order to determine if they should get involved. This approach might take as little as two days, perhaps one day to ask questions and one day to conduct research. But in order to really practice strategies like asking questions and researching, a longer time frame would likely work best.

To practice evaluating movements, students might look at ways that poor and working class people have taken effective collective action. One powerful example that students might investigate is the Poor People’s Movement Campaign organized by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). According to Britannica (n.d.), the Campaign sought to address economic inequalities such as employment and housing. The plan
was for protestors coming from various races and backgrounds, including poor African Americans, Whites, Native Americans and Hispanic Americans, to organize in Washing DC for several weeks leading up to a massive march where protestors would demand an Economic Bill that would support those unable to work, ensure jobs for those who could work, and stop housing discrimination. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in the midst of planning the Campaign, but it still went on although on a smaller scale. The Campaign demonstrated how people could work together for interracial class issues and towards economic equality (Britannica). Students could determine how this made societal progress while not achieving the original goals. Students can then choose other movements and approaches to explore that interest them. They can research others that they may connect with or have strong feelings towards which will be motivating and relevant for them.

**Students Taking Action**

When looking at an issue as big as social class inequality, students might feel unsure of where to start or if they can even make a difference. While they may not make huge policy changes right away, they can learn important skills that can help them make a difference. To get involved in activism, students can practice critical media skills and investigate the root cause of issues. Students can also examine previous social movements, such as those organized by poor and working class people. These skills can help students start, join, or change the conversation on social class inequality.

Students might begin by using the advocacy hourglass framework from Generation Citizen (n.d.).
Figure 1. Advocacy Hourglass Framework

This framework helps students to think about a broad issue, like social class inequality, narrow it down to a local issue, like a lack of affordable housing in their community, and then explore the root causes of that issue, maybe the way local politicians voted on housing. Once they establish the root cause, they make decisions about the goals, target, and audience for their work. By investigating the root causes of an issue, students can be empowered to take action in a number of ways.

In addition to investigating root causes of social issues, students might decide to take direct action against poverty and issues caused by it. To do this, they might use the idea of power mapping (edjustice). With this strategy, students have a clearly defined goal, then set out to determine who they need to work with in order to achieve their goals. They also identify people who might not agree with their goals and how to address that (edjustice). Investigating the root cause of issues is helpful when doing this because students will be better informed and prepared to seek out people and institutions who will support them and be prepared to defend their goals against people and institutions who may not agree.
Another skill related to activism is being able to know what the media is saying, and what it’s not. To practice critical media skills, students might analyze Tweets and websites by young activists involved in issues that students are interested in. Students can research issues and activists, or use websites to identify activists to follow on social media. Pimentel et al. (2021) created a list of young activists that students might use as a starting point to identify activists to study further. Students can then critically read posts and content created by these activists to determine ways they are using their voice to create change. In most cases, students will also be able to see how others are responding as well through elements such as Twitter feeds. Students can use this opportunity to research the claims and suggestions being made in order to learn more about the issue and what is being done about it. They can also see how others are responding and if responses demonstrate an awareness of the issue or not. Finally, this can prepare students to enter the conversation, adding their own informed voice.

One example of an activist who uses social media regularly is politician Bernie Sanders, a major proponent of raising the minimum wage. On his Twitter page, Sanders (2021) addresses some common arguments against raising the minimum wage. Students can analyze this rhetoric and learn how to make similar speeches that address the opposing viewpoint. They can make similar speeches to appropriate audiences about poverty or other issues that they are choosing to address. Students can also use Bernie Sanders’ website to see how he plans to pay for some of his plans that address injustices, like canceling student loan debt. Students can read these policies and practice informational reading skills to better understand his argument. Knowing and understanding policies can be incredibly powerful because it will help students ask more informed questions and take informed action. Being able to locate, read, and make decisions based on actual policies that politicians create are important skills for all citizens to have. It
seems many people read information on a friend’s social media page and they make their decisions based on that. But making decisions based on actual policies, laws, and politicians' statements is empowering.

If students select to research an activist that uses Twitter, looking at their tweets also presents opportunities for critical media literacy. Students might think about whose voices are being represented in the tweets, whose are not, and what the intended effect is on the audience. Students might consider why activists chose specific platforms to convey a message, who is the intended audience, why do they only need 280 characters to share this message? Who is Twitter's population? Students can explore who is agreeing and who is disagreeing with the tweets in order to explore other perspectives and possibly determine if the other perspectives are misinformed.

When developing their own opinions, it is important that students read a variety of perspectives on issues. In the case of minimum wage, students might look at arguments made by Donald Trump when he was president. During a 2020 presidential debate with Joe Biden, Trump argued that raising the minimum wage would force small businesses to fire some of their workers because they wouldn’t be able to afford paying them all the higher wages. In the same debate, Biden argued that people deserve to make a wage that allows them to live above the poverty line (Rosenberg, 2021). Students can be encouraged to seek out what other politicians have said about the minimum wage, especially local politicians who make choices that directly impact students’ day-to-day lives. Students can read the claims politicians make and then investigate them to seek out the facts behind them.

Students might do some research on the people doing the tweeting or sharing their ideas on other platforms, especially high profile people who are easy to get information on. They
might consider whose voices are being represented and whose aren’t and why that is. In this case, the high profile people are probably in higher social classes, but using their platform to speak out about social class. Students might discuss how effective this can be. At the 2021 Met Gala, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wore a dress that said “Tax the Rich” to the very event that cost thousands of dollars to attend (Hills, 2021). The message was widely spread, but was it effective? Students can discuss this form of activism, how messages are spread, whose voices should be heard, and the audience who might need to hear the message.

Figure 2. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s “Tax The Rich” Dress

This would also be a great opportunity for students to think about how their own lived experiences interact with the media. High school students in some areas of the United States will likely have some kind of job or maybe know the hardships of low minimum wage. They can consider how the media portrays their experience. Many high school students have experienced the hardships of social class oppression and can be encouraged to join the conversation on the injustice.
Students could collaborate with other students across high schools and colleges that are seeking better wages. They could practice personal writing, interviews, and create public narratives that speak to their experiences and demonstrate the call to action for fair wages. A key way to fight for fair wages is by unions, which is another powerful element that students can become aware of as a form of activism. Students could research how Starbucks in the United States are working to unionize and the (Logan, 2022). Many of the unionized workers are young people and much can be learned from their actions. Students might also look at unions at local universities and perhaps interview university students to learn more about what unions do and how students can get involved in them in various ways.

Diamond (n.d.) lists numerous resources teachers can use to teach about this important topic. Teachers might introduce students to the history of certain unions or labor. They might use a book of poems from industrial workers, such as *Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life* (1991) by Peter Oresick, or information on specific labor movements, such as the clerical and technical worker’s strike at Yale University. Students can read about it in Toni Gilpin’s *On Strike for Respect: The Clerical and Technical Workers’ Strike at Yale University, 1985-85* (1994). Students can also do research on other injustices that movements sought to address, perhaps researching one of their favorite products or activities. They might look into how workers at various levels have been involved in unions and how they fight for fair wages and good health care.

Students can also bring in their own experiences when thinking about how they might present their arguments using social media. They can ask questions about media consumption and what they want their audience to take away. They are part of the audience in the example of Twitter and they make meaning through the lens of their own experiences as Twitter users. They
can use their own experience and apply it to critical literary skills to think about the implications of these messages.

Based on some of the policies Bernie Sanders presents, students could learn more about issues that have become controversial, like climate change, but shouldn’t be controversial because they tend to help all people. Climate change also has a direct relation to social class. Students can ask how it will impact the poor differently from the rich? Those who do the least to contribute to climate change will suffer the worst of its consequences. Studies have shown that in the United States, racial and ethnic groups that do the least to add to air pollution suffer more health problems than those who contribute more to air pollution. The burning of fossil fuels creates awful health issues like heart attacks and repository disorders. Students can research this intersection of race, class, and climate justice (Tessum et al., 2019). They can consider the importance of raising awareness to this important topic.

By better understanding policies, students can learn who supports which policies and why. They can also see how policies related to issues like taxes have connections to global issues like the climate crisis. This will inform their future voting, but also their current conversations with peers and family. It may also raise their awareness and concern enough to prompt them to ask further questions and look into systemic issues.

After reading *The Outsiders*, students can be asked to imagine what a better world might look like for youth who face poverty. They may determine that one issue related to poverty is hunger and students who face poverty not having enough food. This impacts their health, school performance, and behavior. To respond to this, students might raise awareness about the issue of hunger by starting a food pantry or volunteering at one. Students could begin by clearly stating their goal, which will be something like ensuring students aren’t hungry in school, or perhaps
have access to affordable groceries. They will then have to determine who makes the decisions in regards to their goals. Students can create a Community Connections Committee to begin to determine who in their community they need to reach out to and their influence. This will require using resources that a community offers, such as websites or brochures, to communicate with those who have influence. Once they have the information, students can begin to research what it would require to create a food pantry. Or, if they learn one is already in their community or nearby, they could raise awareness of this resource to their school community and encourage students to volunteer at it.

Students also might petition their school to provide snacks for students throughout the day and write a grant to get the money to do so. This would require students to set up meetings with the appropriate administration to find out if this would be a possibility. Then, once getting permission, they would have to learn about finding grant opportunities and writing grants to get the money to purchase the food. While neither of these examples of activism will end childhood hunger, it will allow students to learn more about the issue and its consequences and help them to realize they have agency to make a difference in their communities. These examples are only a few of many others that students can identify. It is essential that students pick the issues they want to work towards and that they are working with others to try to address the issues. This will empower students to see that they have agency and will foster their self-awareness and social responsibility.

**Key Strategies from This Chapter**

- Students can read the introduction of *This Changes Everything* and identify why activists wanted to create change and discuss how they wanted to move beyond feelings of
hopelessness and make changes. How might this impact Ponyboy and help him move beyond feelings of hopelessness?

- Students might read chapter 8 of *This Changes Everything* and discuss communication and speeches. What strategies and skills were used in the Occupy speeches? (listening, powerful word choice, being brief). Students can practice writing and giving speeches in this way about a topic they choose.

- Students can compare Occupy Strategies with strategies from other well known movements (civil rights, Salt March, others). Teachers might provide students with information on the Occupy Movement and have students research other movements, focusing on student choice and helping them to use critical inquiry.

- Students can create research questions about poverty/social classes/class gaps. What are the causes of these? How did Occupy try to address these? How did the 1% get to be at the top?

- Students could investigate unions and the work they do to fight for fair wages. Students can also explore student unions at universities and how getting involved in a union can be a powerful way to take action.

- Throughout a unit, students can reflect on their own perceptions and beliefs about social class and its implications.

- While reading, students might create dialogue and questions characters in novels might have about their social classes. This can lead to the characters imagining what a better situation might look like for them and what they might do about it.

- Students can research labor movements in their area or in a career field of their choice.
Teaching Resources and Materials

Information on the Occupy Movement and Social Class

• *The Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement* (2011) by Sarah Van Gelder and the staff of Yes! Magazine. This is a very approachable text for the teacher or students to gain information on the Movement.

• Judy Lubin’s article “The ‘Occupy’ Movement: Emerging Protest Forms and Contested Urban Spaces” (2012) provides information background information on the movement as well as strategies it used.

Information on Activism


• Pimentel et al. (2021) article in Complex Magazine about young activists can provide students with examples of contemporary activists addressing current social issues: [https://www.complex.com/life/young-activists-who-are-changing-the-world/](https://www.complex.com/life/young-activists-who-are-changing-the-world/)

• Generation Citizen’s (n.d.) Hour Glass Framework for Action can help students create a visual of action: [https://generationcitizen.org/our-approach/framework-for-action/](https://generationcitizen.org/our-approach/framework-for-action/)

• Power Mapping (edjustice) can help students consider the steps they might take in order to take appropriate and relevant action: [https://neaedjustice.org/power-mapping-101/](https://neaedjustice.org/power-mapping-101/)

• Diamond’s (n.d.) resources on labor history provides other examples for students to refer to: [https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/teaching-students-who-built-america-resources-on-labor-history/](https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/teaching-students-who-built-america-resources-on-labor-history/)

• Hills’ (2021) article on and image of AOC’s Tax The Rich dress can help students

**Resources for Discussing Social Class with Students**

- Bramesfeld (2018) article called “Teaching about social class within the discipline of psychology: Challenges and lessons learned” provides teachers with specific strategies for talking about social class with students:
  - https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/indicator/2018/07/social-class-
- Osherson’s (2017) blog post called “When Students Talk About Wealth and Class” provides teachers with ideas on include parents in the discussion on social class: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/listen/201712/when-students-talk-about-wealth-and-class

**Social media to analyze**

- Bernie Sanders’ (n.d.) website “How Does Bernie Pay for His Major Plans?” with policy ideas gives students information on one tax policy: https://berniesanders.com/issues/how-does-bernie-pay-his-major-plans/
- Bernie Sanders’ (2021) tweet about the richest 50 people in the world is an example of how politicians use their platform: https://twitter.com/BernieSanders/status/1375126581752963073
- Bernie Sanders’ (2021) tweet about living paycheck to paycheck provides a perspective on social class inequality in social media:
  - https://twitter.com/BernieSanders/status/1375055110682775552
• Cooper’s (2019) article on raising minimum wage gives background information on this issue: https://www.epi.org/publication/minimum-wage-15-by-2025/

Discussion Questions

1. As a classroom teacher, what are some ways to encourage respectful discussion on the topic of social class?

2. How have you personally thought about social class? How might reflecting on this help you bring insight to your classroom when reading a book that highlights social class?

3. Consider your own education background. Was social class ever discussed in your education? How might you bring it up in your future classroom?

4. What are some other texts that you might use to discuss the topic of social class inequality?
CHAPTER III

*NIGHT, NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, I AM MALALA, AND THE POWER OF THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE*

“I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer- or my life, period- would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory”

*Elie Wiesel, Night*

**Public Narratives**

Public narratives offer a powerful opportunity to use one’s story to call others to action. A public narrative is a personal story or testimony, in extended version memoir or autobiography, that captures a collective or group experience and is told to support a cause, educate about an event, foster awareness or action and make a public case. Marshall Ganz (2011) adds about public narratives that they are “a leadership practice of translating values into action. It is based on the fact that values are experienced emotionally” and writes that they connect “the three elements of self, us, and now: why I am called, why we are called, and why we are called to act now” (Ganz, 2011, p. 290). He goes on to explain each of these elements. The Story of Self is “a way to share the values that define who you are— not as abstract principles, but as lived experience” (Ganz, 2011, p. 301). This is when a person tells their individual story of a challenge and the choices they made. The story may include pain, but also includes hope, and is a way of communicating values. The Story of Us is “points of intersection become the focus of a shared story— the way we link individual threads into a common weave” (Ganz, 2011, p. 302). This is how the story of self intersects with others and creates shared experiences. It will
highlight the shared values of a community and set apart a group of people with these values, a group identity. Finally:

Stories of Now articulate the challenges we face now, the choices we are called upon to make, and the meaning of making the right choice. Stories of Now are set in the past, present, and future. The challenge is now (Ganz, 2011, p. 303).

This element of the narrative calls listeners to a specific action in regards to a specific challenge and describes an urgent challenge that demands action.

The public narrative is also a road to historical and media literacy. A public narrative invites students to better understand its historical context. It creates openings for research, additional reading, inclusion of historical essays or documents, and reports to the class. When they write their own public narratives, students consider their own historical context and how their potential readers understand that context in order to tell their stories. Similarly, media literacy is a key point in public narratives because public narratives are constantly told and retold through various forms of media and students need media literacy skills in order to analyze the narratives being told, understand who is telling them, whose voices are included and excluded, and how narratives create impact. And students also need media literacy skills to effectively tell their own story, and to consider its distribution and audience. Knowledge of historical context and media savvy- as we will see in this chapter- these elements can come together to both call for and facilitate taking action.

Public narratives are an important part of the broader category of public writing from which students can develop their knowledge of issues and engage with as their own form of social action. Many of the elements of the public narrative are present in texts read in the classroom and students can imitate them while writing their own public narratives. Teachers can
use texts such as *Night, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* and *I am Malala* to highlight elements of a public narrative and use them as models as students write their own public narratives as a way to call others to action.

Public narratives illustrate for students the importance of the stories and, potentially, their own story. Students have experiences that aren’t always highlighted in school and that may be difficult to talk about. By writing a public narrative, students are given an opportunity to have their stories heard and see that they matter.

Public narratives draw on both the emotions of the writer and the reader or listener to encourage action. Ganz (2011) explains that:

Organized collective action to challenge the status quo, as opposed to the occasional outburst of resentment, does not “just happen,” and “Mobilizing others to achieve purpose under conditions of uncertainty— what leaders do— challenges the hands, the head, and the heart (p. 289).

For Ganz (2011), the hands refer to the action, the head to the strategy, and the heart to motivation to act urgently. Ganz (2011) writes that our values lead us to our emotions, which in turn lead us to take action.

In order to effectively encourage readers or listeners to take action, writers can reflect on their experiences and consider how to tell the story. They can also consider the connections between their experiences, the experiences of others, and how those experiences can lead to action. Below are two graphics Ganz (2011) uses to illustrate these connections and how they can lead to a call to action:
Secondary students are typically engrossed in their own lives and social environment. They might find it difficult to care and become engaged in historical events or even current events whether nearby or in other parts of the world. Yet, when students read public narratives illustrating in a personal way historical or current events, they can become more connected and concerned, are increasingly likely to become more interested in and able to think critically about events far away in time or place. As their interest and knowledge grow, they may become
motivated to undertake supportive or community based projects. Caring about and for others is intrinsic to public narratives because the personal stories they tell draws on values, emotions, and human connection.

A high school public narrative that I witnessed engage students is *Night* by Elie Wiesel. When I taught the memoir to 10th graders, students were profoundly moved by Wiesel’s portrayal of the inhumanity of concentration camps because they imagined the experience through the telling of 15-year-old Elie. Even though the book was written, from my students’ perspectives at least, about a time long ago and far away, this public narrative written in personal and powerful terms, captured their minds and hearts. Certainly, at times my students found it difficult to connect to Elie’s experiences, but they were certainly moved by what they were reading.

These connections to the author were established because of the first person narration of the public narrative, the simple, direct language that recounts terrifying moments and images. *Night* takes its readers into one of the most horrific moments of human history, the Nazi genocide of the Jews, as seen through the eyes of a 15-year-old boy. Through a non-fiction memoir, the violence and suffering portrayed is on the scale of nightmare, hard to take in but unforgettable. Often taught as a stand-alone text between literary works, this public narrative’s powerful personal story is often dropped on students with the larger historical context and potential relevance to our own time barely explored.

Yet, *Night*, or any other public narrative, can be a starting point for an examination of both historical and present-day contexts. As philosopher George Santayana has explained, “Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it.” Historical context is an important factor of the public narrative. Ganz (2011) writes that “When we tell a story, we enable the
listener to enter its time and place with us, see what we see, hear what we hear, feel what we feel” (p. 301). Even though it is from a time and place quite different than the readers’, the narrative brings readers to the feelings and experiences of the storyteller. *Night* can be used as a platform to learn about Nazism, anti-Semitism, racism, and other genocides, including ongoing present day genocides. This chapter will explore using *Night*, and other public narratives, to help students develop meaningful connections across time and places of the world, and to better understand injustice, including injustices they may face. We will see students writing, finding their own voice and developing agency as they address important global issues and their own lives and experiences.

**Reading and Thinking about Emotions and Values**

Before reading *Night*, students can begin to develop their personal story by reflecting on their own values. Many students will likely identify with the theme of faith or religious communities and this can be used to encourage students to connect their values. *Night* is often the only Jewish text taught in the classroom and while discussing religion in the classroom can be an issue, it can be an opportunity to help students connect to the text. Robert Kunzman (2011) argues that the reasons people support specific laws and policies are often related to religion and that schools should be more open to this kind of discussion. The topic of faith also provides an opportunity to highlight elements of a public narrative. Ganz (2011) writes that:

> A source of hope for many people is in their faith tradition, grounded in spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions, and moral understandings. Many of the great social movements— Gandhi, civil rights, and Solidarity— drew strength from religious traditions, and much of today’s organizing is grounded in faith communities (p. 295).
Teachers can help students understand the connection of beliefs and social movements by thinking with them about how beliefs and traditions in *Night* impact Wiesel. Although he wasn't exactly involved in a movement, he was persecuted because of his religion, considered by the Nazis a racial difference. Wiesel then shared his story to broaden public understanding of the consequences of racial and religious persecution, a goal of his public narrative.

Teachers can ask students to think about, perhaps write about, their own ethical frameworks (Juzwik, 2013) as well as their traditions and beliefs. Ganz (2011) writes that “our values, moral traditions, and sense of personal dignity function as critical sources of the motivation to act. This is one reason that organizing is so deeply rooted in moral traditions” (p. 295). Students might be asked to talk to their families or someone they identify as family, maybe conduct an interview, about their religion, family values, and traditions. Hearing these stories will help students experience the impact of a personal story. If a student is unable to interview a family member, they might identify a close friend or adult in their life. A personal interview is an impactful connection, in some ways similar to, to reading a memoir. As interviews are connected with writing their own narrative, students can begin to directly appreciate the importance of storytelling. Gathering stories doesn’t have to be a long assignment and can be more creative, perhaps including images or digital recordings. By starting a unit in this way, students will be prepared to keep drawing back to their own ethical frameworks and values as they read *Night*.

Before reading a book about a global issue, teachers should incorporate any necessary historical, political, or social context. This can also be an opportunity for students to take the lead to help the class gain important information. Students might generate ideas by first sharing their prior knowledge about the Holocaust as well as questions they have. Students can then create research questions and work together to find the answers and present that information to the
class. When teaching *Night* specifically, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (n.d.) suggests starting with defining the Holocaust and using time cards (provided on their website) to learn about the specific events that were going on during the time Wiesel was writing. As they read, students can refer to these timecards or perhaps even do further research on these specific events.

When applying these teaching strategies to other public narratives, teachers might begin with some research to determine what students most need to know in order to understand what is going on in the book and what the characters or individuals are experiencing. Teaching the historical context of a text helps students to understand what Ganz (2011) calls the Story of Now in a public narrative. In *Night*, Wiesel wrote his story of now, the challenges he faced, the importance of not forgetting, and the call to make choices that encourage others to remember the horrific events of the Holocaust.

Before and while reading and while students are creating their personal story, teachers might consider how they ask students to make connections with the book. Lewis (2000) explains that the “common use of reader-response theory… is misguided in its emphasis on personal response and identification” (p. 253). She goes on to say that “when a text is about a character whose culture and life world are different from the reader’s, disrupting the reader’s inclination to identify with the text can heighten the reader’s self-consciousness and text consciousness” (p. 253). When teaching *Night*, this might mean that teachers do not ask students to make personal connections with Wiesel. For example, Wiesel explains that he and his community were allowed to each bring a backpack and some personal belongings when they were forced from their homes (Wiesel, 1958, p. 14). Asking students what they might bring if they had to leave their homes is not impactful because students truly can’t relate with the experiences of the author. It can also
trivialize what the author experienced because students may think they understand being forced to leave their house and having to pack a single bag. Instead, not asking students to connect with the character can provide opportunities for students to consider a more critical approach. For example, students could write about why it might be hard to fully understand what Wiesel and his family were going through.

A more critical approach will allow students to think more analytically about their own values and ethical frameworks as well as how Wiesel uses images, events, moments, and perspectives to share his story and call others to remember. Students can write about their emotional responses to these parts of the text as a way to raise questions, generate inquiry and greater understanding.

**Gaining Historical Understanding**

Incorporating historical context can make the text more engaging for students as they learn more about what was going on at the time, and learning about contemporary related issues is also powerful and necessary.

The Holocaust happened 80 years ago and students may feel more connected if they learn about the people and events going on at the time. Historical context will also help students consider the causes of genocides. Students might wonder how something like the Holocaust could have happened and why no one stopped it, questions that can be asked about many injustices in history and today. Students will likely see that many of the racist and dangerous ideas that Hitler and the Nazis promoted can be compared to the racist and dangerous ideas in the air even in the United States in present time.

*Night* was written about a time when the German people’s thoughts and beliefs were being influenced, even controlled by the Nazis. Propaganda was used to give distorted
information to people about the world and all areas of their lives. The concept of how information is spread, how people get their information, and how that information impacts understanding is still relevant today and could be addressed by bringing in media literacy to a unit on *Night*. Teachers might include in the unit an introduction into propaganda, news, and media, they could encourage students to consider those topics throughout the book and after as students begin their own activism projects. By including important historical information, teachers can lead students to analyze how the Holocaust wasn’t unique but took place in a certain kind of context and that context can be recreated. This analysis can help students understand the importance of reading *Night*, how it applies to them, and help them consider how it connects to activism.

One important historical aspect of the Holocaust was the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party. By learning about the Third Reich, students can get a better understanding of how people started following Hitler, even though he seems completely evil looking back today. William Shirer (1960), an American journalist living in Germany, reported that one way Hitler spread his ideas was through controlling and manipulating culture. Book burnings were used to destroy all previous culture that didn’t support the Nazi agenda. Only literature, art, radio, etc. could be published if it served propaganda purposes (Shirer, 1960, p. 242). The Nazis even controlled the theatre. The news was determined by the Propaganda Ministry and each morning they were told “what news to print and suppress, how to write the news and headline it, what campaigns to call off or institute and what editorials were desired for the day” (Shirer, 1960, p. 245). The Chamber of Radio broadcasted whatever it wanted and had a monopoly over all radio (Shirer, 1960, p. 247). As a result, all plays, newspapers, movies, and radios were so boring that no one wanted to watch or listen.
Shirer (1960) experienced how easily it was to be taken by the lying and censored press. He had to learn the truth elsewhere and was always given false information and distortions and that impacted him. He writes that “No one who has lived for years in a totalitarian land can possibly conceive how difficult it is to escape the dread consequences of a regime’s calculated and incessant propaganda” (Shirer, 1960, p. 248). He heard the most ridiculous claims from people who seemed educated and it seemed they were just repeating “nonsense” they heard from the radio, their minds warped (Shirer, 1960, p. 248).

The idea of distorting information and how people get news is an important one for students to think about today. Many contemporary politicians use social media as a platform and can say whatever they want. One exception may be that Facebook banned Trump after he encouraged violence at the United States capitol on January 6, 2021. But, aside from that, most politicians spread whatever messages they want with few limitations. By including this historical information on Nazis, teachers can also initiate conversations about fake news, distorted information, and how some people only learn about events from certain sources. This has led to a dangerous polarization and a lot of confusion, even about who won the 2020 United States presidential election.

Another way Nazi Germany controlled and manipulated information was through the education system. Hitler’s idea of education was for youth to be trained to physically serve the state. Shirer (1960) explains that professors had to attend a 6-week camp where they were watched for their beliefs. Public schools had textbooks that portrayed Germans as the master race and Jewish as the cause of everything bad. Before this, conservative professors wanted a return to conservative Germany and thus college students supported Hitler (Shirer, 1960). All children were trained for life in the Third Reich. Every aspect of teaching and learning was controlled by
the Nazis. History, science, English, and every other subject was distorted to include propaganda that supported the Nazi party. Children knew only these "facts."

The idea of education being used to perpetuate certain information continues today. The New York Times investigated a textbook company that publishes two different versions of the same textbook for two different states, Texas and California. For example, when discussing Reconstruction and housing discrimination, the California edition states that “Southern whites resisted Reconstruction, according to a McGraw-Hill textbook, because they “did not want African-Americans to have more rights” (Goldstein, 2020). But the Texas edition offers an additional reason: Reforms cost money, and that meant higher taxes” (Goldstein, 2020). Another example, in a section on immigration, is the California textbook offers an excerpt from a novel about a Dominican-American family and in the same place in the Texas textbook, a Border Patrol agent shares his story. There were also differences in how the textbooks portrayed gun control, the Harlem Renaissance, and popular culture (Goldstein, 2020). Students in different states across the country are getting different messages from the history being emphasized, and this impacts their thinking and actions. They grow up with these ideas, distorted or not the whole truth, and that impacts their future beliefs and values. Using this textbook example offers students the opportunity to think about how facts are portrayed and to read with critical inquiry, to ask whose voices are being presented and whose aren’t. Students can also think about how the portrayal of information impacts their beliefs and values, which are an important aspect in the public narrative. This use of information is similar to what the Nazis were doing with education in Germany.

Hitler also focused on creating jobs and helping to solve Germany’s unemployment problem and getting the country out of the depression from the Great War. His plan was timely
because Germans wanted someone to help the economy improve. Hitler did address employment, but it was by increasing weapon production (Facing History). Germany’s economy wasn’t in a good place and people needed jobs. Hitler used that to manipulate people to support him. Students can think about these reasons as to explain why people would follow such an evil person. They can look at what the economic situation was like and why Hitler’s speeches sounded convincing. People wanted someone who would help their economy and way of life.

Political leaders blaming targeted groups of people in order to cause division and win support continues today. During the COVID pandemic, many people, including former President Trump, called the virus the China virus, thus creating division between people. At that time the president continually made racist comments and caused many more people in the country to say things and act in ways that reflected this racism, which led to an increase in hate words and hate crimes (Cabral, 2021). In March of 2021, a White man killed eight Asian Americans. This, and other, racist violence and murder are the outcomes of targeting Asian Americans during the COVID pandemic, although hate and violence towards Asian Americans has been going on for a long time. This violence is only one example of present-day racism and being aware that it is happening helps students see how their words and actions impact others and how all humans are connected and impacted by violence. They can also see that they can use their words and actions to help disrupt this racism, potentially an important part of students developing their collective story in a public narrative.

Students could look back over recent events and see how the words used to blame certain groups of people for a pandemic led to an increase in hate speech, and how that speech led to violence and murder. This might be compared to how Jewish people were blamed for Germany’s economic issues after WWI. Politicians and citizens began using words to blame Jewish people,
then violence escalated. This comparison can help students to see how the atrocities happened and the importance of language, leaders, and the real dangers of racism. They can see that the horrors of a global atrocity, like the Holocaust, involve practices that happen in the present and could have violent, even horrific, consequences. Even in a global atrocity, there is community to be found and connections among people, which are elements of the public narrative. They could think about how they might be encouraged to share their stories in order to stop atrocities from happening, even at a local level.

There were examples of people who fought back against Hitler and it is important that students learn about these examples so they know that people did try to fight back and stop the atrocities. The examples of resistance, big and small, show the agency that people have. Wiesel briefly describes some examples in Night. The prisoner who suggested Wiesel and his father lie about their ages was an example of resistance. Wiesel also talks about a German Jewish man being his block’s leader and how the man organized extra rations of food. These small acts were resistance against what Hitler wanted for the entire Jewish population. There were many other examples of people who tried to stop Hitler or resist Nazis. Students could research these examples of resistance and share them with the class.

When students are being encouraged to get involved in activism today, examples from Nazi Germany and the Holocaust framed in today’s context can help them think about the importance of multiple viewpoints, of seeking the truth, the importance of diversity, and of how political leaders manipulate and why people follow them. This process of reading, asking questions, seeking answers, making connections, and writing about what they are learning are important English skills that can help students develop critical thinking and eventually activism.
By using this historical context and comparing it to today, students might create an informational campaign where they urge other students to consider where they are getting their news and the kinds of language their news source uses, who it might discriminate against. Students can point to the dangers of not having diverse voices and of reading racist news by using examples both from history and from today. Elie Wiesel’s Night is an example of where both of these injustices can lead. Students can also pick specific issues like anti-Asian racism and violence, police violence, or the corrupt prison system. Students can look for groups that are addressing the issue they pick and find ways to become involved. These are all examples that are part of the collective story that call for urgent change and students might use public narratives to call the audience to action regarding these issues.

Reading from Multiple Perspectives and Gaining Social Understanding

A public narrative is a type of memoir, but many memoirs are not public narratives. Memoirs portray the first-hand experiences of a person. In order to be a public narrative, it must also be a collective story and work to raise awareness or a call to action. When reading a memoir, students might only consider the perspective of the author. But students might get a better understanding of the emotional response and social issues being represented if they consider other perspectives. Doing so helps students to see the community identity involved and the range of experiences caused by social injustice. For example, students reading Night might consider the perspectives of other inmates. On page 30, an inmate was questioning new prisoners and told Wiesel to say he was 18 and told his dad to say he was 40 (Wiesel, 1958). This inmate, also a prisoner, was using his position to help others the best he could. Students might consider this perspective and think about the risk that it took and also how many people he likely helped just with that seemingly small gesture.
Another perspective, on pages 39-40, is that of Gypsies (Wiesel, 1958) (if a teacher were to incorporate the perspective of Gypsies, they might consider teaching students a brief history of Gypsies, including their Northern India heritage and misunderstanding by the Europeans in order to more fully give their story). The Nazis targeted several groups of people during the Holocaust, although the Jewish suffered the most and are probably most commonly thought of when discussing the Holocaust. But by looking at the perspective of the Gypsies, or other people Wiesel talks about, students might be encouraged to learn more about why they were targeted and how they were impacted by the Nazis. Other groups included Communists, union leaders, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, people with disabilities and Black people. Another perspective that might be looked at is religious people. How did they keep their faith and how did it help them? Wiesel talks about faith and students might look at other perspectives besides Wiesel and consider how other people seemed to rely on their faith, or not.

Students can also ask about voices not in the text- an important question to ask when reading any text. Students can develop questions about missing voices and work to find the answers. Of course, Night is a memoir and written only from Wiesel’s perspective and he might not have had any interactions with anyone from groups not mentioned in the book. Doubtful this was an intentional omission, but other writers of both fiction and informational texts do intentionally and unintentionally leave out the voices of people and this has an impact on readers. In order to help prevent the dangers of a single story (Adichie, 2009), students should always consider other voices and experiences. For example, students might realize that Night doesn’t include the voices of many (if any) Communists, union leaders, gypsies, or homosexuals.

In order to help students think about the voices not emphasized in Night and the importance of thinking about those missing voices, they might read the poem “First They
Came...” The poem is written by a German pastor, Martin Niemöller, and addresses how certain groups of people, including clergy and intellectuals, didn’t do anything when the Nazis began to target groups of people ("First They Came- by Pastor Martin Niemöller"). Teachers might use the poem when teaching Night to talk about persecution- who was being targeted and why? And also personal responsibility- just because you aren’t being targeted doesn't mean you should stand around and do nothing. These important ideas and perspectives might help students to become more aware of other stories, which might increase their awareness of social issues in the book and in other times and places in the world. It also establishes a collective story because students can see how groups have similar values and experience something together, creating a community and connection.

In order to help students see the perspectives of those voices not in Night, teachers might incorporate stories of different groups that the Nazis persecuted. Ina Friedman (1995) has collected the narratives of those targeted. She explains that the Nazis sought to exterminate two groups of people: Jewish and Gypsies. Gypsies was the European name given to descendants of tribes from Northern India (Europeans didn’t understand their history or culture, just like they misunderstood many other groups in history, which is why it is so important to listen to people’s story) and Hitler deemed them socially inferior and should be killed. Friedman (1995) then turns to the story of Bubili, a young Roma girl during the Holocaust. In her own words, she tells how the Germans took away her humanity. She explains that because she couldn’t read, she was not aware of Hitler and the Nazis until they came to her own city. She describes how she survived on the run as well as in concentration camps. She writes that she wanted to survive in order to bear testimony, and she did (Friedman, 1995).
Another narrative in Friedman’s book is that of Elisabeth, a Jehovah’s Witness. She explains how her parents were taken away from Elisabeth and her 10 siblings because they refused to denounce their religion. Although the family was reunited, they continued to face persecution. Elisabeth and two of her young siblings were removed from their home for refusing to salute Hitler and eventually taken to a Nazi training school (Friedman, 1995). The entire family was sent to different places, some in camps, some in prison. Elisabeth explains that she was kept by the Nazis for six years, and then the war was over, so was released, but had no idea where her family was. Eventually, much of the family was reunited, but with many scars and emotional trauma (Friedman, 1995).

Including these, and other, narratives helps students to see that people were being persecuted for many reasons by the Nazis and may help them make more connections to injustices going on today.

**Contemporary Genocides and Public Violence**

There are other genocides going on today students should know about and can address. At the time of this writing in the spring of 2021, the situation in Myanmar has received a lot of attention on the news and students may even have noticed hashtags trending on Twitter that relate to the conflict, but genocide warning signs have been happening there for years. According to Genocide Watch (2022):

the Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority of one million people that has lived in Rakhine state for centuries, but they face systematic religious and ethnic discrimination there… During 2012, violence increased against Rohingya and other Muslims in the Rakhine State, and the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting said the Rohingya as have become one of the most oppressed ethnic groups in the
Myanmar became independent from the British in 1948, not that long ago, and it’s borders, like many other colonized places, were made by outsiders and the people of the country haven’t been listened to.

The shift to a democratic nation has been bumpy since its independence. The recent conflict and violence has been spurred by a military officer, General Hlaing, taking control after National League for Democracy (NDL) party leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, won a general election in February (“Myanmar: What’s been happening there since the 2021 coup?”). There have been protests and violence from many groups of people since, including a silent strike after a 6 year old was killed (“Myanmar coup: More than 40 children killed by military, rights group says”). Both General Hlaing and Aung San Suu Kyi have been accused of treating Rohingya people with hostility and violence and genocide. Aung San Suu Kyi won a Nobel Peace award for her work promoting democracy, but was also involved in the genocide against Rohingya in 2017 when thousands died (“Myanmar: What’s been happening there since the 2021 coup?”). Her role and reputation as a fighter for peace has changed dramatically with the treatment of Rohingya people and could be compared to other leaders who claim they want to unite people but target certain groups, leading to violence.

This issue has been ongoing and escalating. Azeem Ibrahim (2016) writes that one issue was that:

Buddhist extremists are becoming more influential, not least by offering basic education and social services for the poor of Myanmar. Many people will accept their version of Buddhist teachings, and their emphasis on the incompatibility of allowing Muslims to be part of the country, simply due to a lack of alternative
sources of information” (p. 100).

This control of information and taking advantage of lack of resources very closely resembles what other governments and leaders have done over time to initiate genocide. Making sure everyone believes a “truth” and aligning people against a specific group of people is extremely dangerous. This idea of truth is important in a public narrative because students need to share their truths, but also work to learn the truth of what is going on around them.

Genocide Watch provides ten stages of genocide. Stage three is discrimination and one example is when people have their citizenship rights stripped. This happened in Nazi Germany when Jewish people were no longer citizens and it is happening in Myanmar to the Rohingya people as they also are not recognized as citizens. Stage six is polarization. This is when “Extremists drive the groups apart. Hate groups broadcast polarizing propaganda. Laws may forbid intermarriage or social interaction” (Stanton, 1996). The use of propaganda to separate people is extremely frightening and can be seen in many examples in history as well as today. Hitler used propaganda to isolate Jewish people, to turn everyone against them. Propaganda is used in Myanmar right now, too. Ibrahim (2016) found that “it became clear that this period saw a sustained campaign of propaganda and lies aimed at the Rohingya to convince the rest of the population that this Muslim minority group” (p. 8) shouldn’t be in the same country. When a leader has a platform from which to promote certain ideas, those ideas can be very dangerous when they target a group of people.

Genocide Watch suggests that in order to prevent this use polarization “National government leaders should denounce polarizing hate speech. Educators should teach tolerance” (Stanton, 1996). Teachers teaching Night and other texts about global issues have an opportunity to teach tolerance in the context of both historical and contemporary genocides, helping students
to see what causes them, how seemingly simple and everyday words or actions can build up and lead to intolerance and hate. Students can also evaluate how government leaders are denouncing, or not, hate speech and the implications those choices have on people.

The events going on in the world today need attention from secondary English students. Too often, students (and lots of adults) aren’t aware of what is going on across the world. They may see a headline on the news for a day or two, but then it is replaced by something else. Students likely aren’t aware of what is going on in Myanmar right now, or in many other places where people are being killed due to their identities. They likely aren’t aware of how leaders are using things like propaganda to fuel the hate that leads to violence. English classrooms with units examining genocide provide opportunities for teachers to encourage students to investigate what is going on in the world and find out why. Students can be asked to simply look through recent headlines from across the world and will, sadly, likely have little trouble finding evidence of a genocide or genocidal trends. Then, with modeling from a teacher, students can be encouraged to look into how those actions have escalated and will probably see how hate speech, polarization, propaganda, and other aspects have contributed to this. This fits well with a public narrative as students work to consider how issues impact a community of people as well as explaining the urgent need going on right now to encourage people to take action.

As students look into these issues, they can research a genocide and possible ways to respond to it. They could seek news sources that report on it. Then, students could look into organizations that address the genocide and ways to support those organizations. Students could also research appropriate responses America could make and how those actions might take place. Students could also be encouraged to expand to other injustices, not strictly genocides. A similar process could be applied if students wanted to research situations where people are being
persecuted, caught in conflict, facing natural disasters, or forced to become refugees. These and many more situations could be examined from Haiti to the Congo, from Guatemala to Sudan. Doing this research would help students to become more informed on issues going on as well as what kinds of action is being taken to address the issues and help the people being impacted.

Students Writing Their Own Public Narratives

After beginning with their own story and then considering the historical and social context of Night, students can move to writing their own public narratives. While reading Night and thinking about public narratives, students could be asked to think about how storytellers draw on emotions while detailing the challenges they went through to stir action. One way Wiesel wrote about his emotions was in regards to his father. There were also examples of other sons who suffered with their family members because of the conditions of the concentration camps. Reading these examples might cause strong emotions of anger or sadness in students. Ganz (2011) writes “one way to counter apathy is with anger— not rage, but outrage or indignation with injustice. Anger often grows out of experience of a contrast between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be, how we feel when our moral order has been violated (Alinsky 1971),” (p. 295). Students might consider how Wiesel’s examples demonstrate that his world was not as it should be and how his moral order was violated. Sharing similar examples in public narratives can call others to action because the audience will want to do something about the violation and injustice.

Teachers can select several examples from the text that can encourage students to write about their values to convey emotions. Wiesel’s inner monologues portray his values, can connect to students’ values, and be evaluated to see how they evoke an emotional response. On page 37, he reflects that he had become a different person after one single night (Wiesel, 1958).
On page 32, he asks how it was that “men, women, and children were being burned and the world kept silent?” (Wiesel, 1958). On page 54, he watched his father being beaten and didn’t do anything, reflecting that “that was what life in the concentration camps had made him” (Wiesel, 1958). These powerful examples can be used to discuss writing about values and drawing on emotions.

This skill of evaluating emotional writing can be applied to other texts and students can imitate these strategies when writing their own narratives. The atrocities that Wiesel experienced show how the immense, emotional toll the Holocaust had on victims and that it was extremely difficult to do anything to stop the violence that was going on. Students could look at some of the many ways that Jews did resist including creating resistance movements, creating underground networks, leading the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and documenting their experiences. Wiesel makes it clear that the emotional events changed him and those around him. Students can be encouraged to ask ethical questions like what is going on in today’s world that takes an emotional toll on people and why those events are happening and what can be done about it.

Another way Wiesel’s writing evokes strong emotion is by powerful word choice. For example, he repeats the phrase “Never shall I forget” on page 34 when talking about his first night in camp (Wiesel, 1958). The things he won’t forget are heartbreaking, unimaginable, and horrific. The repetition drives home these feelings. This also highlights a writing style that students could use as a model for their own writing in a public narrative. Ganz (2011) writes that “the moral of a successful story is felt understanding, not simply conceptual understanding” (p. 298) and “hope is not to be found in lying about the facts, but in the meaning we give to the facts” (p. 304). This excerpt is a way Wiesel’s writing works to create a felt understanding that draws on readers’ emotions. It also draws on the meaning given to the facts. Students likely learn
about the Holocaust in history class and those lessons focus on numbers and details of concentration camps, but these facts are given meaning through a public narrative.

Teachers might use a variety of strategies to have students think about emotions, some of the most effective might be journal writing and small group discussions. These approaches encourage students to think and talk about their initial feelings about what they read. The passages in *Night* that describe the violence caused by the concentration camp will likely draw powerful emotions from students and they can reflect privately about those emotions in their journals. This can lead to discussion. Teachers can ask students what makes them feel that way, why, what about the text causes those emotions. These approaches could be implemented for any text that draws strong emotions from students and can be used in any grade level as well. By focusing on and articulating ideas about emotions, students will be preparing to write public narratives that must draw on these emotions in strategic ways in order to call others to action.

**Reading a Document with Inquiry**

Another way to discuss a collective story is through pairing a full-length text with informational documents. Often informational documents, such as laws or policies, work to create shared experiences or a community because they have impact on a group of people. Ganz (2011) writes that “For a collection of people to become an “us” requires a storyteller, an interpreter of shared experience” (p. 303). A public narrative can be an opportunity for a storyteller to interpret documents in terms of human experiences and voices in order to encourage others to act. When teaching *Night*, teachers might use a variety of documents in order to help students read with inquiry. Students will read informational documents throughout their entire lives, not just in school, and need to know how to critically read them. Two possible documents in a unit on *Night* might be the United Nations (n.d.) Universal Declaration of Human
Rights or the 25 Points of the National Socialist German Party. The Florida Center for Instructional Technology (2005) created an assessable list of the Points.

The UN Declaration of Human Rights pertains to this unit because it was adopted after World War II, the time of the Holocaust. There was a lot of division during and after the war and the document helped to bring people from various political, religious, and cultural backgrounds together. Teachers might use the document and model reading strategies, like figuring out word meanings. The document has words like “dignity” and “inalienable” and other words that are important to citizens, but students may not be familiar with them or use them regularly. Students might discuss how specific words and phrases in the document, like rights, human family, or freedom work to create unity between people.

Students can also look at specific rights that are meant to be guaranteed and how those rights are denied today, even in the United States. Students will likely see some of these rights were denied during the Trump administration’s approach to the border and refugees. Article 14 of the declaration states that everyone shall have the right to seek and enjoy asylum in other countries. This right is often denied to those at the Mexico border who are trying to enter the United States. This is similar to the time of the Holocaust when America denied entry to Jewish people who applied for asylum, including Anne Frank’s family. Her family had applied to immigrate to the United States multiple times, but were refused. Jewish families facing persecution from the Nazis had a near impossible time getting the documents needed to apply for immigration. Anne Frank’s own family’s documents were destroyed in a bombing.

And it wasn’t just through a formal immigration process that the United States refused refugees. In 1939, Captain Gustav Schröder used his ocean liner, the Saint Louis, to try to help over 900 Jewish passengers escape Nazis. He sailed to the United States and Canada and asked
the countries to help the refugees. Both countries refused. The refugees were then taken to Europe and it is estimated that many of them ended up in concentration camps (Tikkanen). This devastating treatment of people trying to escape hardship and atrocities continues today and students can use the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights to discuss the rights that should be guaranteed to people. Teachers might also bring in the young adult novel *Refugee* by Alan Grantz (2017). The book follows the experiences of a refugee from Nazi Germany, 1990’s Cuba, and modern day Syria. The book would help students consider other refugee perspectives from other times and places.

Students might use the UN Declaration of Human Rights to generate ideas for their public narratives because the issues they want to take action against likely connect to the rights outlined in the Declaration. Students might use the document as evidence as to why other events going on in the world today are impeding upon human rights and why that is happening. Article 27 says that people have the right to enjoy the cultural life of their communities, yet students can probably think of many instances where people are criticized and sometimes face violence for their culture and how they celebrate it. Teachers might also introduce students to the United Nations Rights of the Child, which has been signed by every country except the United States (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2021). The United States is often portrayed to Americans as a country that saves others, that leads the way in human rights, that protects people. But there is more to the conversation, both historically and contemporary, that students should be encouraged to investigate.

The 25 Points of the National Socialist German Party is another document that offers ways to think about people’s perspective and voices. Teachers might use this document to model inquiry strategies that students might use when reading other documents. Whose voices are being
represented and why? Why was it so important that only Germans get these privileges? What was going on that made them blame all other people and why was life so hard for them at the time? Students should also be asked to think about which policies were appealing and why. Germans likely appreciated having rights set up and guaranteed, which made the document appealing to them. Understanding things like this will help students understand why this document was written and how people could go along with such hatred and discrimination and perhaps better understand when it happens today. Students might compare the document with current White nationalists who support building the wall at the border with Mexico and those who attacked the capital on January 6th, 2021. Students can think about how people, acting out of ignorance and fear, want to protect their rights and how this relates to racism and violence.

Reading this document might be a good jumping off point for students to think about social action, too, because it might help them to think differently about laws, policies, or acts that they are more familiar with in their worlds. They might look at how laws, policies, acts, and other documents leave out certain voices or privilege other voices. They might use the skills reading this document and asking questions about perspective and voices and apply those skills to other documents, maybe present day or in history, related to a specific issue to see how policies can help people or discriminate against them.

Teachers can use the Declaration of Human Rights when teaching a number of texts about global issues. They might also find government or other documents that reflect a group of people included in the text they are teaching. This might also be an opportunity to team up with a social studies department and create cross curricular materials. It is not, however, necessary to have a history or social studies teacher in the English classroom. Helping students to learn historical context or documents relating to an issue is the responsibility of English
teachers. Reading these documents also allows teachers to encourage students to read texts deeper and from a critical inquiry stance. It might seem that informational texts are simply informational and straightforward, but they have implications and shouldn’t just be taken at face value. When students learn to read informational texts and think about the perspectives offered or excluded, they will be more prepared to identify injustices in policies, acts, laws, and other documents and consider action they can take.

**Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and I am Malala**

When working to create a collective story for a public narrative, teachers can bring in other texts to show the intersection of challenges and as models for student writing. This can be an opportunity for teachers to introduce students to different activists and build on students’ work identifying their own values and ethical frameworks in the beginning of the unit. As students read examples of activists using their stories to make a difference, students can be looking for how the activists used their values to appeal to emotion and speak to their audience. Ganz (2011) says “How does the storyteller become part of this larger story? Learning to tell a story of us requires deciding who the “us” is— which values shape that identity and which are most relevant to the situation at hand” (p. 302) and that “a story of us expresses the values, the experiences, shared by the us we hope to evoke at the time” (p. 303). So while public narratives are not necessarily about activism, they use storytelling to create a group of people that want to address a situation, or call people to activism.

**Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass** can be used to look at how abolitionist worked to stop slavery and students can see how they were activists. At that time, abolition was a radical idea and abolitionists were considered to be the scum of the earth. This is evident even in other classical literature, such as when Huck Finn fears he will go to hell if he acts like an
abolitionist (Twain, 1885). To speak out against slavery was dangerous and abolitionists were often physically harmed or legally charged. Slave owners claimed that slavery was beneficial and was sanctioned by God. Advocates of slavery claimed that people who were enslaved were happy and used the Bible to support owning slaves. To be an abolitionist was to be an activist.

Similar to Night, most people will never have any idea what it is like to experience the atrocities Douglass writes about. Students can use the text, though, to identify ways Douglass shared his story as a way to persuade others to act for change. Like Wiesel, Douglass wrote with honesty and shared details about specific moments of his life that were impactful. It works as an example of a public narrative, too. Students will likely be mad about what happened to Douglass and not want that to happen to anyone else, which will call them to action in a present-day issue. Just a few of the injustices Douglass faced were being enslaved, not being able to keep what he earned, and the fight to read and write.

In the introduction of the 2001 edition of the narrative, John W. Blassingame refers to Reverend John Foster's comments about autobiographies and how they are used to truly know yourself and should show the writer’s real character. Blassingame traces the characteristics and history of autobiographies, explaining how Douglass was likely impacted by these characteristics when he wrote his own narrative (p. xi-xxv). By using this text as an example of social organizing content and as a public narrative, students can see how Douglass was honest about his experiences and portrayed his character through the events he shared. This was a call to action during the abolitionist movement.

If teachers want to use parts of Frederick Douglass in units on Night, they might consider Chapter Two. In that excerpt, Douglass talks about the songs sung by people who were enslaved. Douglass writes that “every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for
deliverance from chains” (Douglass, p. 20). Douglass says that these songs would convince anyone of the evils of slavery. Ganz (2011) writes that:

We can counter feelings of isolation with the experience of belovedness or solidarity. This is the role of mass meetings, singing, common dress, and shared language. This is why developing relationships with the people whom we hope to mobilize is important (p. 295).

Public narratives are used to mobilize people, and in order to do so, things like songs can bring people together.

The chapter also recounts an overseer beating a mother in front of her own children. These examples from Douglass’s own experiences show how he, an activist, used his own story to call others to action. He frequently told his story at public meetings to support the abolitionist movement. He writes with honesty and emotion that reveal the atrocities of slavery that persuaded others to work to end slavery. These examples are painful, but Douglass uses them to inspire hope, which is an element of a public narrative. Ganz (2011) writes “Social movements are often the “crucibles” within which participants learn to tell new stories of self as we interact with other participants…. this means that most participants have stories of both the world’s pain and the world’s hope” (p. 301). Teachers can use just one short excerpt to show the power of telling one’s story or even sharing a story when someone witnessed something but didn’t do anything. These stories may contain pain but can lead to hope and change.

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is not a global text, as it is about slavery in the United States, but can be used to make connections to global issues as well as encourage students to learn more about the anti-slavery movement and other African American movements like the civil rights movement and Black Lives Matter. Students can be guided to asking
questions about what they can to know about these movements and learn more, maybe share it with the class. This knowledge can empower students to become more passionate about human rights, the same passion that *Night* inspires, and help them to think about their involvement in activism. If they do this, they will likely see how well-known leaders of the civil rights movement, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., used elements of a public narrative in his speeches. They might learn about strategies that activists used in various movements or become more aware of how a contemporary movement, like Black Lives Matter, impacts them, too, and they might join a march. There are many opportunities for connections that students can make that can draw on student choice and critical inquiry.

*I am Malala* is another public narrative that can be used to see how someone more recently used her story to make a difference. Malala Yousafzai is a powerful activist example as she is younger and is currently fighting for education. These aspects may help students relate, which is important in a public narrative. As with *Night* and the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, most teachers and students will have no idea what it is like to experience the horrors Malala experienced and those should not be trivialized. To make the focus on values, emotions, and action, teachers can use questions like why is her story important? Why should we care about it? And what can we do about it? These questions can lead students to finding organizations in which they can get involved in. Malala Yousafzai has also created an organization (https://malala.org) that works for girls’ rights and education. Students can see what this group is doing on a global level to make change. Since Malala is an advocate for women, students might look into local organizations that support women, like a local shelter. Malala is also an advocate for education. Students might look at ways their own local school helps to provide a quality education.
Like Wiesel and Douglass, Yousafzai (2014) writes about her faith and describes how she “asked God for the strength and courage to make the world a better place” (p. 27). Throughout her story, she talks about the importance of not only her faith, but also her family. Her parents are both huge supporters and role models for her. Malala is an example of an activist who was strengthened by her values and was encouraged to speak out and make a difference. Ganz (2011) writes about the importance of faith for many activists and social movements. Students can see how Malala’s faith and traditions helped in her social organizing movement. When recounting how the Taliban was taking over her city, she asks how this could have happened, how one man was making such a negative difference. She uses her ethics and these reflective questions to trace her path to speaking out for girls’ rights and education.

Ganz (2011) uses the following illustration to show how a narrative can use character and plot to inspire action:

![Figure 5. Public Narrative Plot Structure](image)

He also writes “A plot consists of just three elements: a challenge, a choice, and an outcome” (Ganz, 2011, p. 297) and that “Although a story requires a plot, it works only if we can identify
with a character. Through our empathetic identification with a protagonist, we experience the emotional content of the story. That is how we learn what the story has to teach our hearts, not only our heads,” (Ganz, 2011, p. 298).

Students can read *I am Malala* and see these elements of the plot that contribute to the public narrative genre. Malala used her writing to overcome her unexpected challenges and focused on survival and activism. She uses powerful language to describe the challenges she went through, from being forbidden to go to school, her city being bombed, and finally having to leave her home. Readers can see that she responded to these challenges by speaking out against the injustices being committed. Students might see that a moral of this narrative is the importance of speaking out and they can be encouraged to speak out against injustices. Her reflection and portrayal of ethics are examples that students can follow as they write their own narratives and create a call to action.

If a teacher were to use excerpts of *I am Malala* in a unit on, they might consider using Chapters 11 and 12. The chapters are short and could be implemented as part of a larger unit on using narrative or memoir as activism. It would be necessary to give students a brief context of where Malala lived and that the Taliban had been destroying schools and dictating how people, especially women, should live. These chapters focus on Malala having a chance to speak out and being an activist. She writes about how her school had students write speeches and essays on how the girls’ schools were being destroyed by the Taliban. Her school organized a peace rally and while it was only meant to be a local event, a TV crew arrived at the school and interviewed students. Malala writes that she “was the voice of so many others who wanted to speak but couldn’t” (Yousafzai, 2014, p. 71). She goes on to say that she “didn’t stay silent” and that she “spoke out to anyone who would listen” (Yousafzai, 2014, p. 72). Chapter 12 details when
Malala was invited to write an anonymous blog about her experiences with school and the Taliban. These chapters show how she shared her story and wasn’t afraid to speak up and can help students imagine how they might, too, use their voice and share their stories to promote change.

These texts could be used in a variety of ways in the classroom. After reading Night, students might do book groups using these texts. Or teachers could share excerpts of the texts with the students. Students can also look at other texts, like newspapers, Douglass wrote and the foundation Yousefzai runs in order to get more ideas of activism if the whole texts can’t be read in class. There are also other public narratives that teachers could bring into the classroom in various ways.

**Other Public Narratives**

_I, Rigoberta Menchu_ (1983/2010) is a powerful example of telling a communal story through the experience of an individual. Rigoberta Menchu, a Quiche Indian, grew up working on plantations owned by Guatemalans of Spanish descent. The people who worked on the plantations experienced malnutrition, starvation, and being sprayed with pesticides while the land owners were wealthy and lived comfortable lives. Her father is killed when pleading for help at the Spanish embassy in Guatemala. As a teenager, Menchu works as a maid in Guatemala City and learns Spanish and comes to better understand the whole system of oppression in her country. Following in her father’s footsteps, she becomes an advocate for Indian’s rights and speaks out against the injustices and genocidal violence, Menchu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, the 500th year after Columbus’s voyage, and has devoted her life to human rights struggles in Guatemala and elsewhere.
Another powerful text is *The Jungle* (1905) by Upton Sinclair. The work is a novel with many public narrative dimensions. It documents a Lithuanian immigrant’s life in Chicago. Jurgis Lukoszaite believes in the American Dream and works hard to make a living, but corruption, back breaking labor, and manipulation make it nearly impossible. Injuries, sickness, and simply speaking out are causes for losing jobs, which make it even harder to get by. Jurgis loses his family and continues to face incredible hardships and betrayals. The Jungle is a novel, but one with many public narrative elements. The story Sinclair tells encapsulates the experience of many European immigrants. Sinclair was a “muckraker,” a journalist who worked to expose the negative effects of industrialization. While not exactly a public narrative, the text is an example of how telling a story of injustice can call others to action. Readers became more aware of the awful working conditions that immigrants faced and movements began to make changes.

Winnemucca (1994) uses the Native American tradition of drawing on personal appeal for understanding. She writes about traditions she grew up with and first experiences with White people. She also writes about wars and other events she experienced and heard about. This narrative might be used as a way to better portray the early history of the United States where White settlers are often portrayed as brave explorers but the history books don’t usually describe the traditions, customs, or people in the Indigenous communities that White settlers destroyed. This narrative might inspire students to learn more about the accurate history behind global or national issues and get involved in justice.

*Barrio Boy* (2011) by Ernesto Galarza is a public narrative about a Mexican immigrant’s journey and the discrimination he faced. Galarza was born in Mexico and worked for better education and for unions. His narrative is about his journey but he also sought to provide a voice for other Mexican immigrants at the time. This narrative might provide students a way of
thinking about how the issues at the border are impacting actual people on a personal level. Rather than just hearing one side of the news and believing it, they can be encouraged to learn more about individuals’ lives and stories, what caused them to move and the hardships they face.

Teachers might also bring in texts from other subjects and topics that relate to the “real world.” Baumann (2017) writes about the lack of women in leadership positions in the business world and how women’s power is constructed through narrative. She provides research supported examples of common narratives about why women don’t hold positions of power and how these work to uphold the status quo. She then provides counternarratives that create a more complete picture. Texts like this help students to see how narratives and the telling of one’s story is important in other areas outside of literature.

In his autobiography, Malcolm X talks about how he learned to read. In her book *Cultivating Genius*, Gholdy Muhammad (2020) uses this text as an example of a way to encourage students to share their stories. Her Historical Responsive Literacy framework isn’t specifically a public narrative, but her strategies for using *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* can be used in writing public narratives. She provides a sample lesson plan that focuses on the goal of having students tell their stories and she incorporates texts that writers produce to tell their stories. When students read these texts, they “learn about the powers and barriers that impede success, academic or otherwise, in communities of color” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 164).

These are just a few examples of many. In an English classroom, students might research other texts that are examples of public narratives or genocidal events. They can read the texts individually or in groups and then report to the class what they learned. Doing this will expose students to even more narratives and their impacts.
**Students Writing Public Narratives**

It is essential that students know their story is important. Writing public narratives is one way to help students see this. When taking action by writing public narratives, students first can determine the issue, audience, and how they want to write their story. Then share their story. Wiesel, Douglass, and Yousafzai all shared their stories in order to make a difference. Wiesel says that a witness needs to tell their story so the crimes of the enemy aren’t erased and that future generations need to know the past (Wiesel, 1968, p. viii, xv). Douglass wrote his autobiography to speak out against the evils of slavery, even though it put him at risk of being captured. Yousafzai wrote her story to help girls get the education they deserve. These three texts paint powerful pictures of inhumane atrocities that are unimaginable to most people. While they may not be as horrific, students do have important stories to tell.

Teachers should also be aware that when asking students to do this kind of writing, there is the possibility that students will write personal things. Depending on their comfort level, students may write tragic or even dangerous stories. Students can be guided to write only about things that they feel comfortable revealing. Teachers, of course, have the responsibility to report anything that is harmful to students or someone around them, and students should be made aware of that. Teachers also have the powerful opportunity to guide students to getting help, if that is the appropriate course of action.

Young adult author and National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, Jason Reynolds said in his Ambassador speech that “maybe it's that young people honestly just don't know yet what it feels like to know that their voices have power. Right. That their voices can move and change a room, can shift the temperature and the climate of a country and can literally
knock the world off its axis, maybe young people just don't know” (Reynolds, 2020). Writing a public narrative allows students to see that their voices have power.

A public narrative allows students to write about their experiences and focus on their values and emotions. Having students start a unit by reflecting on their own values will lend itself to writing a public narrative because they will be prepared to think about how their own values connect with the values of others. This awareness works to create a collective story and intersections of experiences. When students write narratives based on their own experiences, they are using their values and experiences to draw on emotion in order to persuade their audience to care, to think, to take action. A public narrative is an effective way of doing this “because stories allow us to express our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others” (“Public Narrative Participant Guide”).

Mathew Homrich-Knieling (2020) writes that public narratives can be an “activist-oriented form of personal storytelling, as a radical, healing, and community-building process” (p. 89). To begin writing a public narrative, Homrich-Knieling had his students think about experiences that have shaped their story, then they think about a change they want to make. Finally, students consider a challenge they are currently facing, a choice they could make to take action and what the outcome might be (Homrich-Knieling, 2020). This requires students to reflect on their own experiences and values, connect with others in a larger community, and imagine what a better world might look like. Students are reflecting on injustices they’ve experienced, better understanding how those injustices connect with others, looking into the root causes of the injustices, and speaking out about them. It may be a bit of a journey for young people to come to see their own or familiar experiences as “injustice” however they may be able to make connections with others in their community to explore a story to share.
Other institutions are also using the public narrative to encourage students to create change. Nies and Doty (2018) write about how University of California Merced has a diverse student population with many students being undocumented. It is in an area of California that faces healthcare inequalities and high rates of incarceration. In order to help students foster their leadership skills and community engagement, the college has students use public narratives as part of their mission to help students see their agency and how it is grounded in values. One specific project students participated in was telling their stories to local middle school students in order to help improve high school graduation rates. They used their personal values to motivate younger students to keep working hard with the goal of graduation. While this example is about college students, high school students could do similar projects with younger students at their schools.

When thinking about what they want to write about, students can recall Wiesel’s motivation to write his story. He wrote that it was important to not forget history, that future generations had the right to know what happened during the Holocaust. He also wrote that if the crimes of the enemy were erased, that would be a victory for them (Wiesel, 1958). Students could be encouraged to think about injustices going on today that impact them and those around them. Students can bear witness to these injustices so they are brought to the forefront of the public and changes can be made. Systems of oppression that connect to students’ identities like sexism, classism, racism, and others can be reflected on so people can be called to resist.

If students begin the unit by thinking about their values, making the connection to ways they are challenged or even oppressed and see how their experiences can make for a strong narrative. Students can draw on Wiesel’s example, as well as on those of Douglass and Malala, and write their stories with honesty and explore how their values have impacted their
experiences. When Homrich-Knieling’s (2020) students wrote public narratives, they wrote about issues like bullying, immigration injustices, witnessing violence, mental health, school struggles, animal abuse, environmental issues, school meal options, and others. All of these issues are examples of things that students experience personally but also connect to a larger community, making them opportunities for students to engage in activism to make a change. They are also things that aren't talked about enough and that need awareness brought to them so they can be disrupted.

Another approach might be for students to think about a time when they were a bystander to an injustice. This approach might work well if a student is having trouble thinking about a challenge he or she is facing. Teachers might use the poem “First They Came” as a way to help students think about why people don’t speak out and the consequences it can have. Students have likely witnessed injustice and can be encouraged to think about how they might have taken action to stop the injustice. The last line of the poem suggests that there was no one left to speak out on behalf of the writer. This can prompt students to create a collective story in a public narrative and think about the intersections of stories. Linda Christensen (2009) describes an activity she has her students do to “uncover those moments in their lives when they participated in an act of injustice, and then use those narratives to rehearse acting in solidarity with others to change the situation” (p. 85). She asks students to reflect on times when they were a target, an ally, a bystander, or a perpetrator. After thinking, reflecting, and sharing, students write a narrative about one of these times. After writing, Christensen has her students act out scenarios from students’ examples and, as a class, talk about ways for bystanders to intervene and become allies in specific situations. Christensen has found that when students practice taking action, they are more likely to take action when they see injustice in their daily lives.
Students can use examples from *Night, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *I am Malala* as ways of sharing one’s story to bring an issue to light and convince an audience to act for change. In the case of being a bystander or ally, students can write in ways that share their stories and convince listeners to act for justice when they find themselves in similar situations. By drawing on their own values, they will be able to better describe, in their narrative, why what they saw was an injustice and why they did act or feel that they should have acted based on values and emotions. Their values will also help to create emotion that will guide their trying to convince their audience to take action when in similar situations.

Students might begin this writing by recalling examples of bystanders and allies in *Night* and even excerpts of *Frederick Douglass* and *I am Malala*. In *Night*, students might remember that, before Wiesel and his family were forced from their town, a friend of his father’s tried to knock on a window and might have saved them (Wiesel, 1958). This man was an ally. When looking at activist examples from Frederick Douglass, students might see that David Ruggles was an ally to Frederick Douglass and helped him (Douglass, 2001). In *I am Malala*, students might see that her teacher, Madam, was an ally. While students might not have the opportunity to take action in situations like the Holocaust, slavery, and in what Malala was facing, they can discuss what the allies did and what made them allies rather than bystanders.

In addition to a public narrative, teachers might consider how diaries written by well known people were a form of public writing that inspired social change. Ralph L. Wahlstrom (2012) argues that while diary writers, such as Anne Frank, did not necessarily write to change the world, they certainly were hoping for a better world. Their writing was very personal, but Wahlstrom argues the writers demonstrated awareness that their words were meant to be read by others. He provides examples of the emotion and purpose from diaries, as well as how the writers
direct their words to an audience in a way that creates a collective response. He also provides activities he does with his students that encourage them to write freely and about their memories, which can be ways to begin the public narrative as well. Wahlstrom does not use the term public narrative and narratives do differ from diaries. However, the strategies and examples Wahlstrom uses make it clear that diaries can be a way of approaching the public narrative as well.

Another approach to a written public narrative might be a student created play that the class performs. Laura Beth Feffer (2009) writes about how she had her alternative high school students write plays about their lives. She explains that an ensemble plays “use multiple narratives” (p. 47) in them. She had her students read The House on Mango Street and respond to prompts about stereotypes. Students reflected on what outsiders think of them and who they actually are, focusing on truth. To build up to this activity, she had students bring in objects that had meaning to them, write about them on a notecard, and place them around the room. This created a museum in which students learned about one another. Another activity she did during this ensemble play unit was to have students write three sentence autobiographies. This helped students to focus on their identity, on the truth of who they were, and share that with others in the class. Snips of these autobiographies came out in the performed play. The play was a powerful experience where students spoke their truths, revealed who they were. The power of this truth and identity is an important part of public narratives.

In a similar way, Stephen O’Connor (1997) writes about having students perform plays in an inner city school in New York. He had students read pieces like monologues and poems. One student was assigned a role that required her to read about a father getting shot. After inquiring about her lack of enthusiasm for reading it, O’Connor learned that the student’s own father was shot and killed and she didn’t want to relive that (O'Connor, 1997). Reading the pieces allowed
for students to share their experiences. Feffer (2009) writes that after the play her students performed, “Parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were snapping pictures and hugging their kids as if they had just changed the world,” (p. 51). She concludes by saying that this ensemble play experience was a way for her students to say “I have a story to tell. Will you listen?” (p. 51). Performing a public narrative play would be a great and powerful alternative to writing out a public narrative and offer the audience a way to hear the voices and experiences of students.

All students will most likely have experienced or witnessed injustice. When students are asked to identify and take action against injustice, they will be taking part of what Paulo Freire (2000) calls a problem-posing education.

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation (Freire, 2000, p. 83).

When students write and share their narratives, they see that they do have agency to make a difference, that the world isn’t hopeless, but is in process. In this process, they can make change for good, to help others, to speak up and make a difference using their stories and experiences to call others to action.

**Critical Media Literacy**

As discussed above, one way violence escalates and genocides happen is through the control and manipulation of information. Many people today get their information from the media, whether that’s televised news, online news, or social media. It is very important that students be able to read the media with critical inquiry in order to see human rights being violated, seek the truth from multiple perspectives, and consider how they might take action to
disrupt injustice. It also helps to make issues that happened long ago or far away relevant and to help students see their agency by implementing critical media literacy skills in a unit on a global issue.

One current violation of humanity is currently taking place at America’s border with Mexico. This issue can be analyzed by looking at the media portrayal. Families are being separated and children are being treated inhumanely. Students likely hear various descriptions and information about what is happening at the border. Even the discourse politicians are using varies and creates division. Senator Ted Cruz refers to the events at the border as a “crisis”, which sparks fear, anger, and division among people (Cruz, 2021). President Biden and the White House refer to the events at the border as a “challenge” (Kolinovsky, 2021) or “situation” (Parker et al., 2021) using language that doesn’t spark fear.

This discourse is a great opportunity for students to apply their critical media literacy skills. Students might think about whose voices and experiences are being represented in these tweets and news articles and whose aren’t. They can think about the connotations that words being used in the media carry. What kinds of feelings does the word “crisis” carry compared to the feelings of the word “challenge”? They might be encouraged to look into the historical immigration and border policies to see how they’ve changed and how this historical lens helps them understand the conversation differently. They might also look into the political context, what politicians are saying and why. As students look into these social media messages, they can be encouraged to take a critical inquiry stance and ask questions to learn more. Having a better understanding of the messages being presented will help students to be more critical consumers of media and to help them evaluate the messages they are receiving and making meaning from and to use that information to make informed stances and possibly take action.
Students can follow the examples of current scholarship that analyzes modern politicians’ rhetoric. For example, scholars have been doing research on Trump’s use of propaganda. Cory Wimberly (2018) writes about the antiprofessionalism in Trump’s propaganda. Wimberly (2018) defines propaganda as “any kind of deceptive speech; it is a specific profession, with its own professional norms” (p. 182). Wimberly (2018) goes on to say that “Propaganda is one of the most important ways that elites mobilize the technical skills of professionals in order to regulate the conduct of the masses” (p. 188) to emphasize how Trump used his platform to influence the public. Students might investigate Trump’s, and other leaders, social media messages and ask questions like who is the targeted audience? What does the message portray about the speaker’s background? What might this message be assuming about society and how might society be impacted by this message? By being critical consumers of media, students can better participate in dialogue on important topics, which will likely come up in public narratives.

Trump’s Tweets about the democrat policy causing families to be separated reflects his constant use of social media to spread false, misleading, manipulative, and distorted information (Lind, 2018). His language and other politicians' language are examples of using news and media outlets to make the public believe something that isn’t true or not completely true. It caused confusion and division in immigration policies specifically. This use of language creates division between people and can increase racism, which leads to hate crimes and violence against specific groups of people, as evidenced in global issues like the Holocaust and the genocide in Myanmar. In contrast, other leaders use language that promotes inclusivity. As of April 2021, President Biden has ordered immigration agencies to not use the term “illegal alien” and instead use other, more appropriate terms, such as undocumented noncitizen (Rose, 2021). Students can be encouraged to think about the “news” being distributed, the language it uses, and how it impacts
the public’s beliefs. This will fit into their public narratives as they seek to convince their audience to see the urgent need of action towards an injustice. They can create activism that encourages others to learn the truth about what is going on.

Beach et al. (2017) explain that one conceptual understanding of critical media literacy is that media messages have a bias and support and/or challenge dominant power systems. To address this, they suggest asking the question of what values and ideologies were represented or missing from the message? Another concept mentioned is language and how a media message has specific semantics. To bring this up, a teacher might ask a question about how the text was constructed and delivered (Beach et al., 2017). Ligocki (2020) argues that students need the “language and skills to pick apart the narratives in a way that we can question and critique what is really being said” (p. 507). If teachers pose questions about language and the message to students, they can think about how the values in Trump’s and Cruz’s tweets tend to value people born in America and don’t value the lives of people from other countries. The language used in their tweets and news articles, words like crisis, may make people afraid and certainly make people not support immigration. On the other hand, Biden’s order to stop using the term illegal alien reflects his concern over humans being valued. Using the term illegal alien to describe a person is incredibly problematic and may make immigrants feel dehumanized and may make people born in America feel empowered simply because of where they were born, something they had nothing to do with.

Another benefit of using Twitter or other social media is that students can see how other people have responded in the replies and comments. They can see the immediate impact of the use of language and values being represented and therefore see how the media impacts how people think. They can also bring up their own ideas and how it impacts them and the importance
of thinking about the language a media message is using and the values and ideologies it is representing or missing.

The way the news is presented, whether on actual news channels and websites or on social media that politicians are using for platforms, is an opportunity to implement critical inquiry and that can lead to activism. Teachers can ask students to find examples of the news on social media and ask that they develop questions like whose viewpoint is being portrayed, what language is being used, what is the goal of the article. Teachers might also ask students to find an article from another source that seems to offer a different perspective. Having students seek out this information is an important skill in being informed, which can lead to more effective activism. When they establish an informed stance on a topic, they might be more encouraged to take action. They will likely see how being informed is empowering and how important it is because of how the media can so easily manipulate information.

The idea of media and messages society sends also lends itself to knowing history and accurate information. This is evidence of how public narratives offer a road to historical and media literacy. Teachers can introduce students to the history of the Mexican War and how America illegally launched a war against Mexico and used its army to take half the country. There is an abundance of information about the history of Mexico and America that is often omitted or changed when history is taught in schools. For instance, few Americans know about the Niños Héroes who lost their lives defending Mexico City during the Mexican-American War, but Mexicans know who they are and have a holiday to honor them.

In addition to specific people, historical documents can be used to help students better understand the issues at the border and America's role in them. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (The Center for Land Grant Studies, 2003) ended the Mexican American War and dealt with
citizenship and land rights. It was incredibly unfair towards Mexican citizens and took their land. The United States Congress took out parts of the treaty before it was signed. These border, land, and citizenship issues impact the area still today and teachers can introduce this information to students and have students ask questions to dig deeper into the history, making connections to what is happening today.

One final way teachers might implement media literacy skills is by encouraging students to think about how they read the news in general, not just Twitter, and how they can also create news. Facing History (2022) has information on journalism, students being consumers of news, and how they create news. To connect back to texts previously mentioned, teachers might bring in newspapers written by Frederick Douglass. Douglass used public writing during the abolitionist era as a form of activism. Two examples of his writing can be read in The Liberator and The North Star. Students can read these to learn more about how sharing stories was part of the larger movement and how it impacted readers and created change. Students can see how activists used the news media to share their stories and perhaps do further research to investigate the impact on the readers, the consumers of this news outlet. Malala created a blog to share her experiences with lack of access to education. Students might look at this and think about how an activist used a blog as a way to reach out, by creating media to share her story, raise awareness, and call people to action. After students write their public narratives, they might consider sharing them through the platform of a newspaper or a blog. This will continue to show students that their stories do matter and can have a big impact.

Using critical media skills to become more aware of the inhumane treatment of families at the border can also encourage students to learn about how they can help. They can use websites such as the one fwd.us (2021) has put together. Students can look into ways of helping
and spread that information. Many places ask for donations of money and students might consider raising money by doing a sale of some kind. However, many families don’t have money to give. Websites also suggest people can help by contacting their local politicians. This is important so students can learn more about their agency in their government. This can also be a place to implement a writing lesson in order to write to a local representative. Websites also say that people can donate items and time to local immigration organizations because after people are released from the border, these local organizations help them and know their needs.

**Applying These Ideas to Other Texts**

The approaches and ideas discussed in this chapter in relation to *Night* can be applied to other books that address global issues, horrific atrocities, and books that work well with a narrative writing component. Similar strategies could be used at the middle school level with books such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Devil’s Arithmetic*, or other Holocaust related texts. *I am Malala* is accessible for middle grades, so could be incorporated into lessons, or be the anchor text for an entire unit. The idea of genocides happening today could be used in the middle school classroom as well, perhaps with a different approach to such a sensitive topic, but it is still important that students are aware of what is going on in the world so they can do something about it.

High school teachers might apply similar approaches to teaching *The Kite Runner*. This text might allow students to learn more about conflict in the Middle East and better understand and raise awareness about the injustices people there experiences. Another text commonly taught at the high school level is *Things Fall Apart*. This book may be difficult for students to relate to because it is about a time long ago and far away, but it is still so deeply relevant. Teachers might encourage students to think about their own ethical values as well as the contemporary
consequences of colonization around the world, which might allow a different way of viewing the events and might help students understand the injustices of colonization in the book.

There are also many examples of young adult literature that focuses on immigrants that would be powerful in this unit. *The Sun is Also a Star* (2016) focuses on immigration. The main character’s father got a DUI and their family was forced to leave the United States, which has tragic consequences for the family. *Becoming Naomi Leon* (2004) is a middle grades text that is about immigration and how it impacted the personal life of a young girl. *The Poet X* (2018) by Elizabeth Acevedo is about the daughter of immigrants who is trying to find herself through the lens of her parents’ culture. *I am not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017) portrays the hardship a teenage girl goes through after a tragedy in the family. Written by a daughter of Mexican immigrants, the book is about tragedy through the lens of immigration. Finally, there are some young adult memoirs that might be implemented, such as *My Family Divided* (2018) by Diane Guerrero. The book is about her family being deported and her growing up without them. There are several other texts, too, that students will find very engaging and teachers can suggest to students in order to talk about these ideas.

**Take Action in Present Day Genocides**

Taking action in present day genocides, or other global issues, may seem difficult because of how far away genocides and other atrocities are happening, although injustices are definitely happening right around students. To begin the action, teachers can remind students that the steps leading up to a genocide can, and do, happen anywhere. They can begin the conversation by talking about how students might see the use of hate speech or polarization or discrimination in their own communities. Students can also be reminded that we are all humans and are connected, so these words and actions have consequences for us all. Even though the
genocides seem far away, students should care and can do something within their agency to make a difference. This would be a good place to again use the poem “First They Came” and also emphasize the importance of a collective story and the intersection of challenges people face.

Students can plan a project to raise awareness about a current genocide or mass atrocity happening right now. If students were to raise awareness about what is happening in Myanmar, the discrimination against Rohingya people, and how leaders are using tools to polarize and ignite hate speech and violence, they will help educate others on the ways that genocides happen and can play a role in preventing them from continuing to happen by taking part in prevention. When people see these actions happening around them, they can speak up to help stop them. Students might also plan a demonstration when they see examples of hate speech, violence, discrimination or polarization going on around them. This could be a local issue, such as bullying or limited book choices in their schools, or more widespread issues like police brutality and voting rights. By being encouraged to be on the lookout for these issues, students will be encouraged to investigate when discrimination and other injustices are being used and speak up to stop them. Demonstrations will require students to be educated on the topic and better understand how the injustice began and what it could possibly lead to by knowing more about the historical and contemporary context of similar issues and injustices.

Students can also find out more about other genocides as well as groups that work to support people involved in genocides. The organization Genocide Watch (n.d.) has put together a list of countries that are at risk of genocide. Students can use this list to investigate what is going on in those countries that puts them at risk for a genocide. Students can also search and find groups that work to support people in those countries. This list and the situations in those
countries might also prompt students to look at what is going on perhaps closer to home that might be similar and that they might want to take action against. They can learn from groups who are supporting genocide victims to see what kinds of activism they, too, might get involved in.

Another way students might take action in current genocides is to help people understand what is going on in terms of human lives. A middle school class in Whitwell, Tennessee was studying the Holocaust and to help students visualize the number of individuals who lost their lives in the Holocaust, teachers started a project to collect six million paperclips in order to help students better grasp the enormity of six million lives being lost. They chose paperclips because “The students’ research found that Norwegians wore paper clips as a silent protest and symbol of resistance against Nazi occupation during World War II” (“The Silent Protest”). This project is a great example of how student initiated research gave them the idea of what to collect to make meaning out of a difficult to understand event.

When teaching something difficult like a genocide, an important aspect can be awareness of individual lives and the paperclip project helped students to realize and better understand the human lives that were lost and impacted. Students could do something similar with the Rohingya people and the violence against them. After conducting research, students could determine a powerful way to help themselves and others better understand the impact on individual lives. This awareness may help students to become more sensitive towards and aware of other atrocities going on and not just scroll down when reading about it on the news or on social media.

Students might look at what other groups are doing to learn about and decide who and how to support. For example, the organization Oxfam offers opportunities for volunteers to help
fight poverty across the world ("Take Action. Change the World," 2022). They provide information on volunteering at farmers markets, concerts, and fundraisers. They also take volunteers who are willing to donate or use their music, art, or other creativity to raise money. Students can find on their website ways to hold events, like poetry slams, in order to raise money for the organization. This would be a great opportunity for an English classroom to bring in poetry and activism.

Another organization that helps support victims of genocide is Doctors Without Borders and their student chapters ("Join a Friends of MSF Chapter," n.d.). The student chapters are mainly colleges and universities, but middle and high school students can become more informed on the work they are doing and get involved, too. Doctors Without Borders also offers information on how people can host events and raise money for their organization. One opportunity that might appeal to middle and high school students is a video game marathon ("Fundraise for Us," n.d.). These organizations offer stories of people who need help or have been helped by the organization. These stories are powerful and help students to see the needs and hardships people face across the world. These are ways that students can see that they can help support people facing genocide even far away and see they have agency to make a difference.

**Key Strategies from This Chapter**

- Students **reflect** on their own values and stories by conducting **interviews** and using **journals** to write about their own experiences that have helped shape them into who they are today.

- As students reflect, encourage them to **name emotions and feelings** that are connected to their values. They can draw on these when writing public narratives.
• Students can analyze the **connotation of words**, such as words used on social media or in the news. They can use this to consider the word choice in their own writing.

• Students can use the **news and social media** to find examples of injustices going on in the world today and can write research questions about these situations in order to find out more information about them.

• Students can write a **public narrative** to identify an issue that matters to them and to tell a story about the issue as a way to call others to action

**Teaching Resources and Materials**

**Information about Myanmar**

• BBC’s article on the conflict in Myanmar provides context and background:
  


**Supplemental Texts**

• The “First They Came” (n.d.) poem is an example of the dangers of being a bystander and connects with texts on the Holocaust: [https://www.hmd.org.uk/resource/first-they-came-by-pastor-martin-niemoller/](https://www.hmd.org.uk/resource/first-they-came-by-pastor-martin-niemoller/)

• Adichie’s (2009) **Danger of a Single Story** TEDTalk is an engaging portrayal of why it’s important to consider various perspectives:
  
• The United Nations (n.d.) Declaration of Human Rights website provides students with a list of rights that people should have: https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

• Florida Center for Instructional Technology’s (2005) list of the 25 Points of the National Socialist German Party provides students’ with information on the German perspective: https://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/document/PROGRAM.htm

• Genocide Watch (n.d.) website listing the 10 stages of a genocide helps students to identify current genocidal trends: https://www.genicidewatch.com/tenstages

• The Center for Land Grant Studies’ (2003) website with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo provides students with the actual text of this document: http://www.southwestbooks.org/treaty.htm#articleix

• Malala’s blog (Malala Fund, 2022) provides supplemental information for incorporating Malala’s story as well as examples of activism: https://malala.org


**Teaching Ideas**

• Facing History’s (2022) teaching suggestions for journalism in the digital age provide teachers with resources on how media is used in journalism and how students might engage with it: https://www.facinghistory.org/journalism-digital-age

Websites for Taking Action

- Oxfam provides ideas on how to take action to address poverty (“Take Action. Change the World,” 2022) and students can get ideas from this website or get involved in the events advertised: [https://www.oxfamamerica.org/take-action/events/world-food-day/](https://www.oxfamamerica.org/take-action/events/world-food-day/)

- Doctors Without Borders (“Fundraise for Us,” n.d.) provides ideas for students to get involved or as examples of types of activism: [https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/fundraise](https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/fundraise)


Discussion Questions

1. What are some issues that students where you teach or hope to teach care about that could be addressed by using a public narrative?

2. Have you ever written or spoken about your personal experiences as a way to make change? If so, describe the process.

3. What other kinds of public writing might fit in with a unit on *Night* or one of the other texts mentioned in this chapter?

4. How could you involve students in the school or community with this type of unit?
CHAPTER IV

REPRESENTATION AND POWER: ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN AND THE MARROW THIEVES

“That’s a load of bull. I deserve to know my own history.” -RiRi in The Marrow Thieves

Critical Race Theory: It’s beginnings and Application to the English classroom

On October 8th, 2021, President Biden signed a proclamation that declared October 11th Indigenous People's Day (The White House). He recognized that the United States needs to do a better job of lifting up Indigenous people and recognize the contributions Indigenous communities have made to the country. The day meant to honor Indigenous people, October 11th, has, since 1943, been known as Columbus Day to honor Christopher Columbus. While this change has largely been accepted as positive, some people don’t see the change being necessary. Parents of children in a school in New Jersey protested the change because they claimed that the Italian heritage of the school isn’t being honored. The school removed all names from the calendar and now it is just a day off (Gomez, 2021).

Lifting up Indigenous voices is important because of how they were treated in the past, but also because of the consequences of that treatment persist today. Just recently, the barbaric treatment of Indigenous peoples was resurfaced when the remains of children were found at a former residential school in Canada (Paperny, 2021). Canada’s residential schools were cultural genocide and Canada formally apologized in 2008 but this discovery has refreshed the grief of the lives lost (Paperny, 2021). People might consider if an apology is enough or should there be more done to address this painful, indeed criminal, past. Encouraging schools to consider the lack of Indigenous representation and work to lift up Indigenous voices might be a step towards doing better to acknowledge the wrongdoings of the past as well as more modern history.
Conservative politicians and parents in different parts of the country have been speaking out against school curriculums that address issues of race and history. A hotly debated topic is Critical Race Theory (CRT). Though perhaps not with full understanding of what it means or involves, parents have protested Critical Race Theory at board meetings and schools have banned its use, even while teachers and districts deny that CRT structures their teaching or curriculum. Commentators have explained that Critical Race Theory is being used as a catchall phrase by conservative politicians to describe any teaching that involves race and American history (Smith, 2021).

Despite the public furor, the study of culture, race, history, and justice certainly belongs in English language arts. According to Sawchuk (2018), Critical Race Theory’s “core idea is that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies” (Just What is Critical Race Theory section, para. 1). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) recently created a position statement regarding antiracist teaching and teachers’ rights and responsibilities. In the statement, they write that “antiracist education… includes and emphasizes… clarification that critical race theory is one of many research-based theoretical frameworks” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2022). At its core, CRT is about looking at systems and policies and questioning how racism has been perpetuated over time. When looking at the history of the United States, racism is impossible to deny. In order to truly work for a more equitable future, people must question how racism has been embedded into the system and how it might be disrupted.

Although Critical Race Theory has roots in the legal field, it can certainly be applied to education. Ladson-Billings (1998) writes about the importance of understanding inequality and
the background of CRT and that “if we are serious about solving these problems in schools and classrooms, we have to be serious about intense study and careful rethinking of race and education. Adopting and adapting CRT as a framework for educational equity means that we will have to expose racism in education and propose radical solutions” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 22).

CRT can be used as a lens through which to view many aspects of society including history, policies, and institutions such as education, including curriculum in English language arts. When looking at an issue through this lens, a person will be asking questions about race and racism and its consequences as they attempt to learn more about the injustices that racism creates. English teachers may feel familiar with using lenses and diverse perspectives to read texts and encouraging students to ask questions about what they are reading. In order to feel more prepared and informed on CRT, however, Ladson-Billings (1998) suggests, it is essential to first understand the context in the legal field where it was first found, then move on to applying it to education in order to address racism and to create a more just society.

Delgado and Stefancic (2013) write that “Critical race theory sprang up in the mid-1970s with the early work of Derrick Bell (an African American) and Alan Freeman (a white), both of whom were deeply distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States” (p. 2). The early work focused mainly on legal policies and voting. Legal scholar Guinier (1991) writes about issues of representation in voting policies and that “it is illegitimate for an advantaged majority to exercise disproportionate power” (p. 1443). She explains how voting policies created an inequitable system and that African American voters were not being represented in elections. She went on to suggest that African Americans' votes should count for more in order to address
this inequitable representation of power in voting. CRT therefore began by legal scholars investigating representation, questioning the system of voting, and working for reform.

Scholars engaged in this work sought to create a more just voting system that better represented all people. Crenshaw (1988), a law professor, writes that critical legal studies (CLS) “present law as a series of ideological constructs that operate to support existing social arrangements by convincing people that things are both inevitable and basically fair” (p. 1350). Crenshaw (1988) goes on to say that after they:

exposed the inadequacies of legal doctrine, CLS scholars go on to examine the political character of the choices that were made in the doctrine's name. This inquiry exposes the ways in which legal ideology has helped create, support, and legitimate America's present class structure (p. 1350).

Critical legal studies encourages investigating policies and asking how the policies might uphold injustice and not adequately represent all people. This process of inquiry is an important idea in CRT. Ladson-Billings (1998) writes that CRT grew from these critical legal studies and “in favor of a form of law that spoke to the specificity of individuals and groups in social and cultural contexts” (p. 10). This lack of representation often perpetuates racism and classism, which often intersect.

Ladson-Billings (1998) writes “CRT begins with the notion that racism … is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture” and “the strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (p. 11). This explanation aligns with Crenshaw’s (1988) descriptions of CLS. The goal of both CRT and CLS is to investigate and explore injustice. CRT is therefore a lens through which to view an institution, a system, or a situation, such as curriculum and instruction.
CRT goes beyond “prejudice,” or the mental states or attitudes of people in the dominant culture, to examine the way that laws and social practices discriminate in practical, real-world contexts. Educators might be familiar with ideas investigating traditional policies and institutions in the context of schools and curriculum. Teaching that tries to change prejudiced attitudes is not CRT, but teaching that examines institutional racism is CRT. When CRT is used in education, teachers and students can ask questions about who is being represented in the curriculum and who is not? Whose voices are missing and whose are being emphasized? Whose perspectives are being heard? Are the various social systems that perpetuate inequality being examined or only attitudes and beliefs? Then, after exposing any issues with representation, teachers and students can ask how the system perpetuates injustices such as racism and classism.

CRT also employs storytelling and making room for voices that have traditionally been marginalized when looking into these questions. Deldago (2013) writes “stories can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo” (p. 72). Ladson-Billings (1998) explains that “CRT departs from mainstream legal scholarship by sometimes employing storytelling” (p. 11). Ladson-Billings (1998) also argues that:

Stories provide the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting. The ahistorical and contextual nature of much law and other “science” renders the voices of dispossessed and marginalized group members mute. In response, much of the scholarship of CRT focuses on the role of “voice” in bringing additional power to the legal discourses of racial justice (p. 13).

CRT, then, works to uplift voices that have been traditionally marginalized and uses them to investigate systems and disrupt the unjust status quo.
To address the issue of systemic racism, CRT encourages listening to and considering multiple voices and historical practices. Barnes (1990) writes about critical race scholarship and explains that “social-political reality can be understood only if a plurality of voices articulates different points of view; understanding suffers when some voices are silenced” (p. 1870). In order to have a more just society for everyone, it is essential that all voices are heard. Ladson-Billings (1998) explains that “critical race theorists are attempting to interject minority cultural viewpoints” (p. 13). Ladson-Billings (1998) goes on to say that “for the critical race theorist, social reality is constructed by the formulation and the exchange of stories about individual situations” (p. 13) and that “the “voice” component of CRT provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step in understanding the complexities of racism and beginning a process of judicial redress” (p. 14). CRT seeks to listen to and lift up voices that aren’t usually heard in order to remedy the legal and historical realities that have created current inequalities.

Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) write about using CRT in order to disrupt Whiteness in the literary classroom. They explain that CRT is a “tool English teachers can use—even with texts they are already teaching—to support students in reading these texts differently, with the ultimate goal of developing both literary analysis and racial literacy” (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 74). The authors pose questions that a reader using the lens of CRT might ask while reading. The overarching question they present is “How does this text represent race?” (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 74) but also list more specific questions such as “what are the racial dynamics of the setting? What messages about race and racism are conveyed through these themes? How does the racial perspective through which the story is told affect the
story?” (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 75). They suggest that CRT is a tool that teachers can use in order to develop and implement an antiracist approach to teaching literature.

Perhaps the biggest takeaways about CRT English educators can leave with is this: It is important to look for voices that are missing, seek out those voices, listen to those voices, and then do something to create a more just society based on the needs of everyone, including those who have been traditionally silenced. Those voices are vital to understanding how society has functioned to maintain dominance of some groups and oppression of others. In the classroom, this can mean teachers and students looking for these voices in the books they read. In the secondary English curriculum White male authors have predominated. For instance, the Common Core State Standards lists text exemplars for each grade level. Of the 43 works listed as exemplars for stories, dramas, poems, and informational texts in 9th-10th grade, 22 are written by White, Euro-American male authors. It would seem that there are voices and perspectives missing from this list.

Teachers might ask questions about how this lack of diverse authors in the curriculum might perpetuate issues with racism in the country and how issues of power and representation might be investigated in order to create a more diverse curriculum that encourages students to see books as mirrors and windows (Sims Bishop, 1990), but also as ways of questioning how power is distributed in society and what they might do about the inequalities they come to understand. This pedagogy is relevant to students of all backgrounds, and especially pertinent given that the majority of students in public schools in America are non-white. In 2018, 47% of students were White and that number is trending downward (National Center for Education Statistics). This chapter will explore how a commonly taught, though increasingly contentious, classic, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, can be critically read to disrupt racism. It will also
explore the possibilities of pairing classics with books from diverse perspectives, like *The Marrow Thieves*, and how it can develop critical and antiracist analysis, and how both texts can be used to encourage students to take action in addressing systemic issues of injustice.

**Texts as Reform Novels**

_The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn_ is written by a White male, a perspective that is well represented in the English classroom. The novel is one of the most frequently taught works in the secondary English curriculum. The book does provide ways that students might interrogate various injustices and be encouraged to take action, especially if read through a CRT lens. The book tries to create and preserve dialectal speech. The book does portray various social classes, including Huck who comes from poverty. If teachers choose to or are required to teach this text, there are opportunities to use it to encourage students to ask questions and disrupt the status quo.

Trites (2007) describes the criteria of a reform novel using _Adventures of Huckleberry Finn_ and _Little Women_ as examples of the first reform novels. In order to be a reform novel, texts must portray adolescent characters as transcending society and that the society he or she lives in is less ethical than he or she is. In these texts, it is obvious that society needs to “improve its values” (Trites, 2007, p. 143) and any growth the protagonist has reflects what society might do in order to improve. There is also a clear social agenda being promoted by the author. She writes that the reform novel relies on adolescents because they are in a stage of life that is temporary, that they are changing, and this symbolizes the possibility and need for society to change. She explains that “the characters whose personal growth is a metaphor for the author’s ideologies of social change” (Trites, 2007, p. 52). She also says that reform novel authors, like Twain, realize that youth have “more social power than early childhood, but less than adulthood, and they know
that growth to adulthood is a normal goal for most youth” (Trites, 2007, p. 33). As Clementine Beavuous (2015) writes, adults realize that as they get older, their time dwindles. Children, however, have their whole futures ahead of them and, as Flynn (2016) argues, have the agency to decide to take up social change. The reform novel encourages this social change.

Of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Trites argues that Huck grows in his moral development because he had to “confront racial injustice” (p. 39). She also argues that Huck is a “decent adolescent” used to “depict the flaws, not in the adolescent, but in the culture in which he lives” (Trites, 2007, p. 145). The time in which the novel is set, the early mid-19th century, was of course racist. There were 60,000 slaves in the Southern states, and the Supreme Court had decided in the Dred Scott Case (1857) that African Americans were not and could never be American citizens. Of course, violence against people of color is still a problem in society today, as we are powerfully reminded by the Black Lives Matter movement. Trites (2007) argues that Huck, despite the racist teaching he has received, was accepting of African Americans and the other characters he meets are not. The other characters represent people who were racist in society and Huck’s sincere recognition of Jim’s humanity represents the changes that needed to be made.

In order to understand *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a reform novel, it would be beneficial to have some understanding of the historical time period and of Twain’s life as well as the social and cultural context. One way to better understand the historical and social aspects as well as to bring in more voices, teachers can consider pairing the book with other texts. Webb (2001) describes how when teaching *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, he paired the text with other texts historical and contemporary works addressing slavery, written by Black perspectives including slave narratives by Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Linda Brent, Nat Turner,
and fiction addressing slavery by Langston Hughes, Ishmael Reed and Toni Morrison. Webb (2001) argues that pairing literary works with different perspectives helped his students to think critically about how slavery and Black experience were presented.

The importance of portraying multiple perspectives and being able to critically examine texts and thoughts is important when reading, maybe especially when reading texts written from a White perspective, like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. By presenting the text in its historical context and with other perspectives, teachers might be able to show students how it is a reform novel while also bringing in more voices and perspectives. This might offer more opportunities for students to think about activism.

*The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline is a work in the emerging genre of Indigenous futurism, set in a future North America dramatically and tragically impacted by climate change. While most people in the world have lost the ability to dream, only Indigenous people still have dreams. They are being hunted for their bone marrow to restore dreaming to White people. The young adult novel follows a group of Indigenous people as they seek to escape capture as they flee farther northward in central Canada. The group is ultimately able not to only survive, but prevail over the people hunting them. The book is told from the point of view of the main character, Frenchie, a 16-year-old Metis boy. Traveling with him are Chi-Boy, Tree, Zheegwon, Slopper, Wab and RiRi, all kids and teenagers. Also traveling with them are two Elders, Miig and Minerva. The group travels together, takes care of one another, and supports each other in maintaining their language, culture and beliefs.

*The Marrow Thieves* could also be considered a reform novel based on the criteria that Trites (2007) suggests. The main characters transcend society and are more moral than the society they live in. One of the biggest issues in the book is the climate crisis and the main
characters are portrayed as living with the consequences of other people not respecting land. Miig, one of the Elders, explains that the climate crisis was so extreme in part due to America’s consumerism and not listening when Indigenous people were warning of the consequences (Dimaline, 2017, p. 24). The younger members of the group understand the importance of taking care of the Earth.

Another issue in the book is violence towards Indigenous people. This topic is often ignored or under-represented in mainstream American and Canadian history, and the violence in The Marrow Thieves draws attention to that violence, inviting connections with the past, with history, and with the urgent necessity of hearing Indigenous perspectives and stories. Miig ensures that everyone in their group “tells their own story. That’s the rule. Everyone’s creation story is their own” (Dimaline, 2017, p. 79). The Native characters tell their stories which are respected and honored. In this way, the text works as a reform novel as it demonstrates how society needs to improve by valuing diverse perspectives and listening to other people’s stories (Trites, 2007).

The Marrow Thieves raises questions about representation of both the past and present, and how we treat other people and the Earth. This has special relevance since the history of how White settlers treated Indigenous people, including boarding schools and the way they violently stripped First Peoples of their culture and language, is often not taught, or taught well, in schools. Attitudes towards nature and the planet Earth-- and how the climate crisis is perpetuated-- are also critiqued. In order to adequately teach this novel as a reform novel and to teach its critique of past and present, teachers can include historical studies and materials, including other literary works, as Webb (2001) did with Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Teachers might use historical documents, like treaties (which will be discussed in a later section), or journals such as "Journal
of an Emigrating Party of Pottawatomie Indians, 1838" (n.d.) which horrifically show how a
government determined to take Native land and to support White settlement violated treaties and
brutally removed Indigenous peoples. Combining this document or others like it with The
Marrow Thieves enriches student understanding and opens to questions not only about the past
but also about the present, and how to support First Peoples. As Trites (2007) argues, youth in
the novels are metaphors for societal change so youth readers can think about what they might do
to make a difference.

Using the CRT Lens and the Power of Pairing Texts

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn centers a White perspective while trying to work
against slavery. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) write that characters like Huck
“typically are interpreted as heroes precisely because of their actions on behalf of Black
characters and on the side of racial equality” (p. 52). They go on to say that Huck and Jim’s
relationship portrays Jim’s reliance on Huck and “neglects the fact that it’s a story about racism
by a White person about White people and for White people, a story that makes Whites look- and
feel- good about our racial selves” (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 53). This centering
of White perspective means that the representation of Jim serves a White perspective rather than
representing anything like the authentic perspective of a marginalized and enslaved person.

Another problematic aspect of the text is the use of the “N” word. In her book So You
Want to Talk About Race, Ijeoma Oluo (2018) explains that the word has been “used almost
exclusively to express hatred. [The “N” word] was a word shouted at Black men, women, and
children by slave masters as they lashed their back with whips” (p. 138). She explains the word
“is a very powerful word with a very painful history” (Oluo, 2018, p. 138). Because of this
painful history, students and teachers should not read the word aloud and even seeing it on the
page can cause pain for students. This word, as well as the general language used to describe people of color, is an issue with the book. Teaching strategies to address this will be discussed in a later section.

Teaching *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through the lens of CRT can be done by pairing texts. Dyches and Thomas (2020) conducted a study with 11th graders reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* using CRT and using Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). Part of the unit involved small group discussions. The authors write that students investigated how the text centered a White perspective and “then extrapolated ideas of curricular Whiteness by examining national, local, and district-specific policies advancing mostly White curricula” (Dyches & Thomas, 2020, p. 41). Students were encouraged to take an inquiry approach and ask questions about the book and their social world through the CRT/CWS lens. The study found that students were successful in finding examples of CRT/CWS in the novel when antiracist pedagogy was used.

Dyches and Thomas (2020) also provide teaching ideas for the novel. They suggest that one way to use the text in antiracist teaching is to pair it with another text by an author of color so as to allow for other voices and perspectives besides the white perspective. Another suggestion is to use the book to promote dialogue on issues of power and injustice, to encourage students to explore different racial perspectives, including their own. Pairing the book can help with this goal. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) also wrote about how pairing texts can be beneficial. They explain the importance of bringing in stories other than stories of racism in order to “tell contemporary, empowering, and positive stories” (Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides, 2019, pp. 43-44). Pairing texts can bring in more voices and allow students to see
more perspectives, which can help them to better understand their social world and issues of injustice.

Pairing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with *The Marrow Thieves* offers powerful teaching opportunities. Besides the benefits of bringing in more perspectives and representation, there are also many common themes between *The Marrow Thieves* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Both novels are about a teenage male and their journey to escape abuse, and a social order that seeks to dominate or “civilize” them. Along their journeys, both male characters find other characters also on the run, and form bonds and community. Their journeys are through natural landscapes where encounters with civilization can be deceptive and dangerous.

While the books have many similarities, a striking difference is the historical setting and cultural and social issues. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was written in 1884, about 40 to 50 years after the events being described. *The Marrow Thieves* was written before the speculative events that it describes. Although these differences are profound, they also create an opportunity to compare historical and social elements between the novels as they have so many other themes in common.

There are valuable teaching opportunities that come with pairing these texts. Teaching *The Marrow Thieves* provides opportunities to talk about the role White characters usually play and compare it to stories that instead show characters of color as the heroes. The main characters in *The Marrow Thieves* are Indigenous and Metis people of North America and are trying to escape and fight against Whites trying to take their marrow. In their journey, they are very much capable of saving themselves against the villainous White people that so many books position as the traditional hero.
Another way pairing the texts and reading them through a CRT lens can be helpful is to investigate the historical context of the books. *The Marrow Thieves* addresses the topic of boarding schools used to strip Indigenous people of their culture and inculcate values of timeliness, industry, and hard work so they would, supposedly, fit into Euro-American culture, particularly at low-level laboring positions. In *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2015) says that during the Grant administration, the colonial institution of boarding schools was implemented and modeled after the Fort Marion prison. Later, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School became a model for militaristic federal boarding schools set up all over the country and with the goal of removing native culture and assimilation. Kids were taken, their hair was cut, and they were beaten for speaking their own languages, and failed to learn the skills of their communities (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Recent discoveries at boarding schools in Canada reveal that many Indigenous children died of disease, neglect, violence, and broken spirits in these schools and were buried on school grounds, their parents never informed.

This historic treatment of Native Americans is often neglected or avoided in public school curriculum, but can become the focus of attention through the richness of contemporary Native American literature in English. Pairing Indigenous and traditional texts opens dialogue, and new critical perspectives and creates opportunities to address CRT concerns about representation, racism, and the social order.

The texts can be used as a catalyst to discuss racism by looking at the use and power of language. A main character in *The Marrow Thieves*, Minerva, has retained her language and the others traveling with her see it as a great opportunity when she teaches them (Dimaline, 2017). The book emphasizes the power of Native languages and how people fight to keep that power.
This is especially important in Native communities where, significantly because of boarding schools, Native languages have been threatened or lost.

A similar discussion on words can be had when reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. While the book does try to create and preserve dialectal speech, one problem that arises when teaching, as was mentioned, is the use of the "N" word. This word has always been a racial slur. Students should be encouraged to ask questions about how language contributes to systemic racism. Oluo (2018) describes why White people can’t say the "N" word and Black people can. She explains in detail how the history of the word creates pain. “Words have power. Words are more than their dictionary definition. The history of a word matters as long as the effects of that history are still felt” (Oluo, 2018, p. 137). As a White woman who has taught in mainly White classrooms, this is the stance I take, that it is not okay to say. It can provide a space for a discussion with students about why White people can’t say the word and about its history.

Teachers might also choose to have a discussion about the time period in which the book was written and why Twain chose to use it. Teachers can also encourage their students to consider the dialect that was used and how that worked to represent diverse characters.

The language used in *Huckleberry Finn* can lead to difficult classroom conversations about race. Borsheim-Black and Sariganides (2019) write about the difficulties of race talk in the classroom. They also argue that “White people have learned to engage in White talk, a range of strategies for avoiding, subverting, and sidestepping race talk” (Borsheim-Black & Sariganides, 2019, p. 91). Teachers need to consider how they might think about race talk as they prepare to address the language in the book. Borsheim-Black and Sariganides (2019) detail a list of strategies that teachers might use when teaching a book with racist language. They begin
by suggesting that teachers do their own identity and reflective work before teaching the book in order to be as prepared as possible to talk about race.

Teachers might also encourage students to do this reflective work by asking them to think and write about any discriminatory slurs they have heard. These strategies for talking about race can help students to make connections to discrimination against other identities, too. Teachers might present information about historical and modern uses of the words to help students have a better understanding of the language. Recent scholarship on this topic, such as excerpts of So, You Want to Talk about Race or How to be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi, among others, might be helpful. These texts are information heavy and probably wouldn’t be taught in full, but teachers could select passages to share with students.

When teaching a text that could lead to discussions about racism, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) recommend that teachers create discussion norms with their students. These norms should be concrete and specific and referred to throughout lessons. No matter the preparation that goes into this teaching, difficult situations may arise and teachers can make choices in the moment to still have productive conversations about race. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) suggest identifying White talk and encouraging students, and teachers, to use any discomfort as an opportunity for growth. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) also recommend “expecting racism comments” and “acknowledging inappropriate remarks” (p. 101). Being transparent and asking questions can help guide some of these difficult questions. McWhorter (2022) writes about a current conversation revolving around saying the "N" word and referencing it and writes “that the problem isn’t just using the n-word as an insult, but uttering it in any context, including quoting someone else” (para. 10). He writes that even when White people refer to the word in a book, it can be problematic. These are elements that teachers
should consider before teaching the book and have an open conversation about with their students.

Words, and language, have power. When a person loses that power, it is oppressive. In *The Marrow Thieves*, Frenchie finds out that Minerva was teaching Rose their language and was angry that he was not also learning it. He felt he deserved this knowledge of his culture (Dimaline, 2017). Taking his language kept him from fully understanding his past, family, and culture. Later, Minerva sang in her language while at a school and it brought the school down. Frenchie notes that people saw “a broken system, torn down by the words of a dreaming old lady” (Dimaline, 2017, p. 173). Not having language made the characters in the novel feel like they were missing something, an important element that connected them with their identity. When they did have language, they had power. One way to disempower people is to control what language they use, prohibit them from using their language, or by telling them to speak only a certain language. When people use language to oppress others in this way, whether unknowingly or not, are perpetuating racism. By looking at history and these texts through a CRT lens, students might begin to question how language has not only historically, but still today, been used as a way to perpetuate racism and power injustice. For example, students could examine how Black English Vernacular, or other student home languages, are treated in schools and workplaces.

April Baker-Bell (2020) writes about anti-Black linguistic racism. She explains that “linguistic racism is any system or practice of discrimination, segregation, persecution, or mistreatment of language based on membership in a race or ethnic group” (p. 16). Baker-Bell (2020) explains the importance of looking at language through the lens of race and racism in order to understand linguistic discrimination and how it upholds White linguistic supremacy.
Words like “dominant” or “standard” English are racist because it implies that other languages are not dominant or standard. This is dehumanizing to people who use those other languages. Baker-Bell’s (2020) research revealed how, in anti-Black linguistic racism, students internalized the messages about their language. Students are taught to only value White language and to not value their own language. Similar linguistic discrimination happens to Latinx students, immigrant students, and working class students with dialects considered “non-standard.”

Narrative and Story- Whose Story is Being Told and How?

*Huckleberry Finn* is an adventure story told from the viewpoint of Huck Finn. To think about storytelling in this book, students might approach reading with inquiry and consider the perspective through which the story is told. Huck supports helping Jim to be free in a time when it was extremely unpopular and even dangerous to be an abolitionist, not to mention illegal to aid an escaped slave. However, there would be some benefits to hearing Jim’s story from his perspective, especially in an anti-slavery novel. For example, Jim is often depicted as relying on Huck to educate and help him. At one point, Huck thinks to himself that it won’t do any good to tell Jim that they weren’t real dukes and kings (Twain, 1884/1981), implying Jim wouldn’t understand. Later, after the doctors had gone to help Tom, Huck followed the men who had captured Jim again and told the reader what happened to Jim (Twain, 1884/1981). This would be an opportunity to hear Jim’s perspective. Because of the storytelling, Huck’s point of view is emphasized and the reader doesn’t hear Jim’s perspective, so the reader hears about slavery from a White perspective.

If using a CRT lens, students can consider how the lack of people being able to tell their own story doesn’t help to disrupt racism. Among all of the most taught texts in secondary English, Jim is the only depiction of a slave. The social structures of the publishing industry,
libraries, and schools have racial impacts relevant to CRT examination. Students might be asked to consider Jim’s story, or stories of other people who were enslaved. Students might read narratives, or portions of narratives, written by people who were enslaved, such as Frederick Douglass, Linda Brent, or Olaudah Equiano and make comparisons with Twain’s depictions of Jim. As they make these comparisons, the limitations of Twain’s depiction of Jim become obvious and students obtain a more complete story.

Storytelling in *The Marrow Thieves* is different than in *Huckleberry Finn*. The narrators in both novels, Huck and Frenchie, are both teenage boys, but the reader gets a sense from Frenchie’s storytelling that it is more self-consciously inclusive, that Frenchie is not just telling his story, but respectfully sharing the stories that other characters tell. First, it is important to recognize that Frenchie, an Indigenous character, in this novel written by a member of the Metis Nation, has agency to tell his own story, and is moving forward, leading friends and family into the future. When Frenchie describes Rose’s story, he tells the reader that it made them “feel surrounded on both ends—like we had a future and a past all bundled up” (Dimaline, 2017, p. 32). For example, Miig tells the group the story of how the world came to be the way it was, with climate change and the Indigenous people being hunted for their dreams, because it is important that they know their history and understand what brings them together. French tells the reader that they “need to remember Story. It was [Miig’s] job to set the memory to perpetuity” (Dimaline, 2017, p. 25). As narrator, Frenchie goes to great lengths to ensure the reader knows that each character is telling their own story while emphasizing the importance of their past and future.

Each member of the Indigenous group traveling together in *Marrow Thieves* tells their own story, too, and it is important that they have this right. Dubnar-Ortiz (2015) writes that
“origin narratives form the vital core of a people’s unifying identity and of the values that guide them” (p. 3). As they read the novel, students can be asked why these stories are important, and how the sharing of stories brings people together.

This might be compared with the character Injun Joe in *Tom Sawyer*, also written by Mark Twain. Injun Joe, a man who has Native American and White heritage, is the book’s villain and while the reader learns he has been treated poorly, he seeks revenge and is a criminal and thief. This character portrayal has been criticized by literary scholars. Harris (1957) writes that Twain’s portrays Native Americans are “as even more ludicrously degraded than the usual stereotype, disparaging them mostly for their poverty, diet and culture” (p. 496). Harris (1975) goes on to say that “Twain demonstrated the typical Indian's treachery, murderousness, cowardice and depravity” (p. 499). More recently, there was discussion of changing the word “Injun” to “Indian” in the novel. Debbie Reese, a scholar in Indigenous children’s literature, argues that this change wouldn’t help anything. Reese (2011) argues that “Removing the slur without changing the character doesn't alleviate anything derogatory... It absolutely pins wicked evil behavior on Indians” (para. 15). Teachers might bring in this example to further discuss the importance of storytelling and how it relates to the power of language.

**Speculative Fiction and Futurism in Storytelling**

*The Marrow Thieves* also presents an opportunity to discuss how Indigenous and afro-futuristic speculative fiction can disrupt the dominant narrative. Native Americans are seen as either vanishing, whose culture was in the past, or as a traumatized, marginal group suffering in the present. Speculative, futuristic fiction written by Native Americans asserts their ongoing, resurgent presence, and their importance in shaping our common future. James (2016) writes that “Indigenous futurism is a deliberate, intentional, and purpose-driven position that addresses not
only inclusion but intersectionality for its protagonists and themes” (p. 152). So often in young adult literature, specifically in dystopian novels, it is primary White characters who are seen leading the revolution into the future. It is primarily White characters seen as saving the world and making a future world for themselves. This makes readers wonder if there is space for people of color, for Indigenous people, in the future? History and traditional stories make it seem like White people found land, took the land, and continue to be the only ones on that land in the future. Indigenous futurism, like *The Marrow Thieves*, disrupts this narrative by portraying Indigenous characters as heroes, survivors, and in charge of their own story.

Womack (2013) explains that “Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (p. 9). She goes on to say that “Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (p. 9). Futurism provides an opportunity to reconsider the past. It also encourages the reader to think about the future through the lens of the past. For voices that have been traditionally marginalized, this writing encourages liberation and reimagining identities. Teachers might also bring in Chicano Futurism, such as the play now on YouTube *Los Vendidos* (Pochochicano, 1967/2015). The play on YouTube is about 20 minutes long and students can consider what the play is saying about historical treatment of people of Mexican descent and contemporary prejudice. If teachers are using a CRT lens, futurism might fit well because it encourages listening to other perspectives and seeing possible futures through their experiences.

Futurism provides powerful opportunities for students to approach storytelling with inquiry because it focuses on different perspectives as events are being told. The television show
*Black Lightning* (Schechter et al., 2018-2021) is an example of Afrofuturism, which would pair well with the Indigenous futurism in *The Marrow Thieves*. The main character of the show, based on a DC comic series, received superpowers during an experiment that used a vaccine to make people, primarily people of color, complicit and stop acting out against injustice. Students can investigate how *Black Lightning* centers an African American man, and later an African American woman, as the superheroes rather than a White man and how this might work to disrupt the narrative on superheroes. Students could think about how the fantasy genre usually shows White characters and how this television show works to disrupt that. Students can use it as an example of imagining a different and better future. The show takes on issues like drug use, police brutality, and gender inequality which students can critically examine in order to think about the societal message being sent and how racism is being investigated in these issues.

*Black Lightning* also provides an opportunity for students to talk about the way the media is portrayed. In various episodes, uprisings and protests occur and the media covers it in various ways, sometimes positive and other times negative. Students can compare this to media coverage of people taking action against racial injustice in the real world. It can prompt students to ask questions about how the news portrays groups of people depending on their skin color. Students might think about social movements today and how they are talked about differently by different groups of people. For example, an event might be called a riot, a protest, an uprising, or other terms depending on who is telling the story. Futurism often brings up topics that can encourage students to consider people’s stories and relevant issues that can also inspire them to learn more and take action.

James (2016) writes that the concept that Native American identities are created through stories is essential to make sense of the world and self. She explains that telling stories to young
people continues a cultural tradition and that “all stories serve the greater purpose of offering the opportunity for underrepresented groups to speak for themselves, to take part in ongoing conversations about otherness or representation that still occur too often without their inclusion” (James, 2016, p. 155). Native Americans have, for so long, had their stories told by others, by explorers, missionaries, government agents, anthropologists, historians, novelists, and “sympathetic” White people that the idea of representation and the importance of telling one’s own story takes on special importance. “Self-narration posits as fact the humanity and importance of such a survivor- narrator, and ensures that her concerns become central to any engagement the reader is expected to experience. It counteracts the kind of erasures” (James, 2016, pp.157-158).

This kind of storytelling is what CRT encourages. As mentioned before, Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that voice brings additional power to legal discussions of racial justice. When applied to the English classroom, this can be used to consider bringing multiple voices to the education discourse of racial justice and how storytelling allows for this voice. Delgado and Stefancic (2013) write that stories “can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power” (p. 72). CRT can be a helpful tool in the classroom because it brings in stories from people usually not heard in order to have a better understanding of society and address issues of injustice.

The fact that every character (and every person) also tells their story is essential. James (2016) writes that we can’t move forward until we understand the past and sharing and hearing stories is essential to understanding the past. Even dystopias have a connection to the past. Using futurism and storytelling can help young readers see how “narrative and ideological frames that
make current historical, environmental, political, and economic realities intelligible, that make sure they understand what role they already play as part of an active and ongoing history being made, chosen, and created every day” (James, 2016, p. 174). Young people can learn from the stories of others to see the past, the present, the future, and their role in making it better. This use of collective storytelling can help people work together when creating change.

**Reality of History and Connections to Today: Traditions and Education**

Pairing texts and focusing on storytelling can work towards investigating racist ideology. However, there is no denying that parts of history were awful and it can be difficult to look at it and move forward. The past is still impacting the present time. Teachers might consider including potentially difficult history by using a CRT lens to encourage students to ask questions about the past. In this way, the atrocities of the past are not glossed over, but investigated, and students can take a hopeful approach by imagining and working towards a better future.

Dunbar-Ortiz (2015) argues that people reading history don’t often ask questions that might disrupt the popular narrative and then she poses the question “how might acknowledging the reality of US history work to transform society?” (p. 2). Popular narrative often determines traditions and culture, like holidays or music, and need to be questioned in order for transformation to happen. Thanksgiving celebrations often portray Indigenous people giving to settlers, but this doesn’t convey the fact that the settlers were taking land, resources, and lives. Teachers might consider having students investigate holidays. Frederick Douglass wrote a powerful essay called “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” that could be used to help students hear other perspectives on this popular holiday. Students might also investigate MLK day and ask questions about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s social organizing strategies or perhaps read some of his other works besides the commonly read “I Have a Dream” speech. They might
also look at other Civil Rights leaders and inquire into their stories. For example, Rosa Parks was active in trying to make change before her refusal to move seats on the bus. These investigations might help students consider other perspectives and alternatives to popular narratives.

CRT encourages looking at policies and institutions and asking questions about how racism is perpetuated in these policies and institutions. Traditional schooling is resisted in both *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Marrow Thieves*. The original boarding schools created in the 1800’s were known for beating children who used their own languages and stripped people of their language and culture. The schools, created by the US Office of Indian Affairs, had the goal of assimilation (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015). Dunbar-Ortiz quotes a testimony of a child who attended the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. He says that “students were told to get civilized, which meant to be like white men. They were told old Indian ways were bad and began to believe it themselves, laughing at their own people” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015, p.212). Dunbar-Ortiz (2015) explains that there is a direct link between generations of these violent and unethical boarding schools and the poverty and family and social dysfunction found in Native communities today.

To begin this investigation into history, teachers might consider including lessons on boarding schools. Boarding schools are a huge part of Indigenous history and essential to understanding *The Marrow Thieves*. Teachers might use Gordon Henry’s (2003) short story “The Prisoner of Haiku” in a lesson on boarding schools. The story traces the experiences of a man who, as a child, was kept at a boarding school and was tied to a pole one winter night. The next day, he could no longer speak. The story tells about how he used art to speak out against wrongs done to his community. While in prison, he met an instructor who encouraged him to write dream songs. The author of the short story later asked him for his writings and they appear in the short story as a series of short poems that reflect some history of Indigenous people. Teachers
also might consider bringing in the historic fiction young adult novel *My Name is Not Easy* by Debby Dahl Edwardson (2011). The book is about children sent to a boarding school in Alaska and being forbidden to speak their language. It is based on the author’s husband’s experiences.

These texts provide ways of beginning to learn about boarding schools through literature. Other ways teachers might teach about boarding schools is by having students research the schools and the people there. The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (n.d.) created a reading list that has several first hand accounts. This might be a starting place for students to begin to investigate the history of the boarding schools. Students might do in-depth research on a particular person or school in order to be better informed about boarding schools and education that Indigenous children received at them.

The topic of education can also be addressed in teaching *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck Finn, an underclass outcast, resists traditional schooling and the “sivilizing” of Aunt Sally. It is no accident that Jim is illiterate, and sometimes mocked in the novel for his reference to folk knowledge and witchcraft. Students can investigate education during the 1830’s, the time of Huck Finn, through the lens of CRT in order to consider how issues like racism might come up. Students will discover how during this time period, it was illegal for slaves to learn to read or write. Coleman (2021) wrote created a History.com article provides information that teachers might use to introduce the topic to their students. Students will learn about major events happening in the early 1830’s such as Nat Turner’s rebellion and how the abolitionist movement was building momentum. Slave owners in the South wanted enslaved people to remain illiterate so they couldn’t communicate about rebellions and learn about resistance. States such as Virginia and Alabama made it illegal to teach enslaved people to read and write. Southern states were
seeking to hold on to slavery as an institution and saw controlling literacy and education as ways they could work towards this goal (Coleman, 2021).

In addition to the history of education of enslaved people, students might also research the history of public education during the time in which Huck Finn would have lived. Using CRT, they can ask questions about how racism may have been an issue in the education system. In the 1830’s, public schools were just beginning to exist. “1815-1850: Education: Overview” (n.d.) would provide students with information about how public education began and it’s original goals. During the 1830’s, America was transitioning to manufacturing, although most Americans still considered themselves farmers. The website states that at the time “much educational reform aimed at trying to instill uniform values and cultural norms to counteract the forces of social instability that were transforming a predominantly agricultural and relatively homogeneous nation” (“1815-1850: Education: Overview”). This was the goal of public schools being created at the time, although few children attended these public schools and of the ones that did, it likely wasn’t for a long time because they had to help at home on the farm. The website also addresses inequalities in education and how women and people of color were often not offered education. Students might research these early schools and ask questions about their goals and who was able to be educated and why.

CRT might also be used to look at education today and ask questions about how racism can be viewed. Students might research the most commonly taught books in middle and high school English classrooms and determine that they are mostly books by White male authors. They can consider the benefits of having books that represent doors and windows (Sims Bishop, 1990). They can also discuss how not having diverse books can perpetuate systemic racism. High school students could do research on the books their school has on it’s shelves and in the book
rooms. They might research the authors and come to some conclusions about the narrative that
portrays.

Another contemporary issue students might look at in education today is the increasing
use of standardized testing to measure student growth. Hagopian (2014) writes that “standardized
testing serves to reinforce the mythology of a meritocracy in which those on the top have
achieved their position rightfully” and that “wealthier, and predominantly whiter, districts score
better on tests” (p. 15). Standardized testing is used to show “gaps” that more often than not put
students of color at a disadvantage and the tests themselves are written to give White students an
advantage. Racial inequality and linguistic difference in schools is a historical injustice that has
implications still today.

**Reading Documents**

Pairing *Huckleberry Finn* with *The Marrow Thieves* would also provide an opportunity to
look at laws and policies, both historic and contemporary. There were multiple treaties and laws
regarding Indigenous people and their land. These laws were obviously very racist. Students
might also look at laws concerning slavery, emancipation, and voting laws that discriminated
against African Americans. Having a better understanding of the laws and policies, and being
able to read and interpret them, might help lead to less ignorance and less denial surrounding
more contemporary laws and policies that perpetuate injustices. These kinds of critical reading
can be supported when using a CRT lens.

Understanding historical laws and policies alongside narratives by people who actually
endured them, paired with young adult literature and canonical texts can be an empowering
opportunity for students to learn more so they do no perpetuate ignorant ideas that tend to also
perpetuate racism and discrimination. Two historical documents that teachers might use in the
classroom are the Indian Appropriations Act (1927/n.d.) from 1851 and the Dawes Act from 1887 (“Dawes Act (1887),” 2022). The Indian Appropriations document is too long to use in the classroom, but teachers might select certain passages, such as some of the executive orders in part three of the document. These describe reservations being established. The Act was created to provide funds to move Native Americans off their land. The Dawes Act allowed for the president to break up reservations. The Act actually protected certain groups from being moved, such as the Cherokees, Choctaws, Creeks, Chickasaws, and Seminoles. But, later,

Subsequent events, however, extended the act's provisions to these groups as well.

In 1893 President Grover Cleveland appointed the Dawes Commission to negotiate with the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles, who were known as the Five Civilized Tribes. As a result of these negotiations, several acts were passed that allotted a share of common property to members of the Five Civilized Tribes in exchange for abolishing their tribal governments and recognizing state and Federal laws (“Dawes Act (1887)").

Today, tribes have to apply to be federally recognized and students might read about that process here: https://www.bia.gov/asia/ofa. Students might do research to find out about Native communities in their own local areas, both historically and present day. This might help them to better understand how history has impacted today’s society.

Students might compare how people were treated because of these laws. They can find examples of this in the literature. For example, they might notice a comparison between the treaties or government acts mentioned in The Marrow Thieves and the treaties enacted in the 1800’s. Miig explains how they were “pushed off lands that were deemed “necessary” to that government, the same way they took reserve land during wartime” (Demaline, 2017, p. 88). Rose
explains how her family had to move when their reservation was merged with other land (Demaline, 2017). Reading the novel while examining historical documents can help students better imagine the actual consequences of the historical document.

Students can also look at historical and contemporary laws and policies that discriminate against African Americans. Students might look at the Three-Fifths clause in the Constitution or the slave codes to investigate the inhumane policies that enforced racism. They can look at Jim Crow laws and segregation that continued to perpetuate injustice. Even more recently students can look at voting laws being enacted and how they work to keep groups of people from voting. These are examples of the laws and policies that CRT seeks to investigate to ask questions about perspective and racism.

Reading these historical documents, or excerpts of them, while reading Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Marrow Thieves can create more awareness of how laws and policies can perpetuate racism and be a catalyst for discussing more recent laws and policies that also discriminate against groups of people. They can also be a way to help students investigate the painful and difficult parts of United States history that are often brushed over. These parts of history are essential to understanding the impacts today and taking action to make change.

**Imagining a Better Future and Taking Action**

CRT is used to investigate how systemic racism has been perpetuated in laws, policies, and institutions. Dixson (2017) writes that another important part of the theory is social change. She explains that, “CRT scholars in education typically engage CRT constructs to analyze an educational issue, policy, practice, or event to understand and/or theorize on why racialized educational inequities persist, the ultimate end, whether realized or not, is the fight for social change” (Dixson, 2017, p. 233). If teachers use a CRT lens to teach texts, then encouraging
social action is a natural move in their curriculum and instruction. Hawlina et al. (2020) write that social movements rely on remembering the past and imagining the future. They write that social movements happen when people are unhappy with the current situation and imagine how things were better at one time or could be better. It is very fitting, then, for students who read texts through the lens of CRT to then be asked to imagine a better future and then encouraged to take action.

Pairing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with *The Marrow Thieves* through the lens of CRT provides opportunities for students to begin to imagine what a more equitable future might look like in a variety of areas of society. Teachers could facilitate student discussions on representation, diversity, agency, perspective, issues like climate change, education, racism, and more. This imagining of a different future might begin with better understanding other perspectives and avoiding the dangers of denial and ignorance.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) writes that there is an imagination gap in young people today that has been “caused in part by the lack of diversity in childhood and teen life depicted in books, television, and film” (p. 6) and how this imagination gap leads them to be “confined to single stories about the world around them” (p. 6). The lack of diversity in secondary English classroom curriculum might also be leading to this imagination gap, one where young people are imagining only a White future and see only the White perspective being portrayed in stories. Children’s literature scholar Robin Bernstein (2011) writes about this in *Racial Innocence*. In it, she argues that books and toys shape the way kids play and imagine. One example she gives is how White girls were taught to be violent with their Black dolls, thus perpetuating racism. She says that imagining things can strengthen kids’ “powers of imagination, which could then be applied toward imaging and realizing great futures for their nation” (Bernstein, 2011, p. 185). By
reading more diverse books, students' imaginations are likely to be made stronger and address the imagination gap Thomas writes of.

White people are used to seeing stories about other White people which may lead them to feel that racism is not real anymore. Students in primarily White schools may not directly see people of color being impacted by racism so don’t feel that it exists. Students that identify as White may not want to talk about racism, maybe because they face injustices, too, and would rather talk about those. But if adolescents were encouraged to imagine differently, to see more stories, perhaps this would resist some of that ignorance and denial. They could also explore the intersection between racism and other injustices.

This imagination might help when students begin to take action because they are imagining more possibilities than stories commonly told from a White perspective. They are imagining more people’s stories, experiences, ideas, and beliefs and making connections to their own. Carey-Webb (2001) found that his students’ cultural background influenced their reaction to reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. After teaching the book in a variety of settings with a variety of students, he found several different reactions. Prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences impact how students think about the past, read a text, or imagine the future. These beliefs and experiences can be discussed and investigated in the classroom to help students enrich their understanding and imagine an even better future. Students might be asked to consider how their beliefs and experiences do, or do not, include stories and perspectives from other people, including those different from themselves, and how that impacts the way they understand the world.

One issue that students might choose to address is the climate crisis. In *The Marrow Thieves*, the Earth is described in ways that can provoke readers to want to take action. They will
not want Earth to burn, melt, fall apart the way it is described in the book. In the book, Miig explains that America didn’t “listen to what we were shouting” (Dimaline, 2017, p. 24). Students could decide to listen to the warnings about climate change and imagine what an Earth not impacted by climate change looks like. Students can research the climate related events in the book and better understand what events are happening in today’s world that are being caused by climate change. They can then do research to determine possible ways of preventing the events described in the book from happening and actions other young people are taking to protect their future.

Issues with the climate crisis often stem from corporate funded denial. One way to increase awareness and explore factual information is by investigating the media. Beach et al. (2017) provide information about the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of the climate crisis on the news and in the media. The authors present questions to ask of the media, such as what values or ideologies are being represented or are missing, and why the text was created and shared, among other important questions (Beach et al., 2017). This inquiry into representation is similar to what CRT suggests, but focuses on climate instead of racism. However, there are intersections between the two issues that students can research. Students can look through popular news sites and see what is being said, or not being said, about the climate crisis. The Marrow Thieves presents a futuristic view, but students can compare it to how the reality of the climate crisis is portrayed in the media today both about the present and about the future of a world impacted by changing climate. What is being portrayed in the news and how does it impact thinking and decision making? Who causes the climate crisis? Who is being impacted? Which voices are dominating the discussion and whose voices go unheard? Asking these
questions can help students be more informed of the climate crisis, and also more informed consumers of information.

Shira Eve Epstein (2009) writes about how teachers might use social action literacy projects to prioritize imagination and support students as they think of a better future. She argues that social action literacy projects can aid young people in viewing the world as potential activists and consider how they can get involved. Students can be encouraged to inquire into social issues in the English classroom, understand what is happening, and consider ways they might make a difference through teaching texts like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with *The Marrow Thieves*.

After reading *The Marrow Thieves* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, students might choose to take action on the topic of language. Students might research the languages students use, both at home and in school. If the school is diverse, there might be many languages. If the school is not diverse, that might be even more enlightening because students will become more aware of how White linguistic supremacy impacts language practices. Students might take this information and share it in a presentation to the school or use it as evidence in an argument that the curriculum needs to be more inclusive. Students might need guidance, but can be encouraged to see how society privileges White language and they will be more aware, which will hopefully lead to resisting the system of language oppression.

Students might interrogate media portrayals of stereotypes and how they perpetuate racism, or other injustices. McArthur et al. (2019) write about how they taught a writing class to a small group of Black girls. They began by discussing stereotypes and then had students write counterstories to address these stereotypes. They explain that counterstories are written from people in marginalized groups and work to disrupt dominant narratives. So while this means that
not every student can write a counterstory for just any perspective, it might mean that all students can think about how stereotypes are portrayed in the media and be aware that there are other perspectives and stories.

When students come across a message in the media that portrays a certain group of people in a certain way, students can use critical media literacy skills to interrogate the power of the language being used and how it is perpetuating stereotypes and how they are damaging people. Students can also use critical media skills to think about the institution that published the message and why they did that.

A similar process can be used in teaching a number of texts and bringing up different perspectives and question the narrative being provided. When teachers combine these strategies with encouraging students to develop their imagination, students can become change makers and truly make the world a better place.

**Examples of Activism**

To encourage activism with their students, teachers might bring in some examples of social organizing content related to the topics being discussed in class. Teachers could bring in the Indigenous rights movement in the late 1960’s and 1970’s:

https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/native-american-activism-1960s-to-present/. In 1969, Native Americans sailed to and occupied Alcatraz for 19 months for a demonstration. They said it was more than enough for a reservation according to White man’s standards for reasons such as it had no health care facility, no oil or minerals, and inadequate sanitation. In 1970, the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied Plymouth to speak out against the loss of language and culture. In 1972, Indigenous protesters occupied the Bureau of Indian Affairs office in DC. The protesters had a 20 point manifesto that began with “We seek a new American majority—a
majority that is not content merely to confirm itself by superiority in numbers, but which by conscience is committed toward prevailing upon the public will in ceasing wrongs and in doing right” (Cooper, 2016, para. 11). To learn more about these examples, students might read Lakota Woman by Mary Crow Dog (1990). In her memoir, Mary Crow Dog describes her childhood as well as her participation in resistance movements.

Another recent example involving Indigenous communities is changing school and college mascots. “In 1992, the National Coalition of Racism in Sports and Media (NCRSM) was established by Native leaders in order to organize against the use of Indian images and names for logos, symbols or mascots in professional and collegiate sports, marketing and the media” (Cooper, 2016, para. 16). This example may be especially relevant to students as they are likely familiar with professional, college, and high schools changing their mascot or having debates about it. One of the more recent examples at a national level is the Washington football team no longer using the racist term “redskins” as their team. Other national teams have made similar moves. Students can easily find information, conversations, and debates about this topic. It is likely that there is a school near them that has a racist mascot and students can inquire about it and seek to find out what the opinion and arguments are about it. Even not having any discussion about a racist mascot is telling because it shows that people might not know or care, or maybe they support it. This might help students to be more aware and critical of this issue.

Another example of Indigenous activism is at Mount Rushmore. The land on which Mount Rushmore was built is extremely important to the Sioux and belongs to them, but was taken when gold was discovered there. In 1972, the faces of American presidents were carved into the mountain. In response, a monument of Crazy Horse was carved into a mountain nearby. The battles that ensued over this land demonstrate the brutal actions of soldiers taking land
(“Native Americans and Mount Rushmore”). There have been many protests and examples of activism at this site and even today the name Custer State Park stands. Although some people have suggested changing the name to one with a less violent history, it doesn’t look like that change is happening too quickly. This conversation of historical landmarks and the names of places is still going on today as monuments of confederate leaders and being taken down, although with a lot of debate.

Another powerful example of activism is the protesting of the Dakota Access Pipeline. In 2016, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers designed a pipeline under the Missouri River. Later that year, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe sued the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers because they had not been involved in the decision making and because the pipeline violates previous agreements, such as ruining important sites. Protests and demonstrations were held at the site of the proposed pipeline and eventually the government agreed to halt construction (Hersher, 2017).

Students are likely very aware of the Black Lives Matter movement as well. Students can look at recent marches around the country and protesters occupying some major cities. They can look at the change these demonstrations have enacted, like the call to change police funding in some cities. They can also investigate how the media has portrayed the action being taken by the Black Lives Matter movement. By looking at this movement through a CRT lens, students can explore how systemic racism is perpetuated in policies as well as the media.

More recently and maybe very relatable for high school students is taking action against standardized testing. More Than a Score (2014) documents several examples of high school students, mainly in Portland, Seattle, Providence, Chicago, Newark, and Philadelphia, taking action against high-stakes testing. Students walked out of school, protested, rallied, visited school board meetings, and contacted the press. One student writes that “in every successful
social movement it is young people taking charge, leading the way, and sparking outrage within us all” (Goyal, 2014, p. 181). This is a powerful motivation for students to get involved in change making.

**Key Strategies from This Chapter**

- Students find **stories** from groups of people who have been **traditionally marginalized** and use them to consider how popular narratives are told.
- Students are asked to **imagine** a better future for an issue that matters to them.
- Students consider the **curriculum at their own school**. They might ask questions, respectfully, about why certain topics are taught and others are not. They might also look into testing practices and policies. Even if students cannot make change in an issue, **having a better understanding of their education is empowering**.
- Students can consider different **lenses through which to read a text** and how these different lenses help them to learn more about other perspectives and ask questions about topics.
- Teachers might model how a text can serve as a **reform novel** by highlighting characters that represent the traits that Trites (2007) identifies. Discussions can be had about how these texts and characters encourage students to think about changes society needs to make.
- Students can consider specific and doable ways that they can get involved in **activism** and think about the resources needed for that involvement.
Teaching Resources and Materials

Documents

- The Dawes Act (1887) (2022, February 8) transcript from the National Archives provides students with a document to analyze:


- The Indian Appropriations Act (1927/n.d.) and related laws and treaties provide students with accurate information on historical events and policies:

  https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y4_IN2_11-0952747a3176acc3dc6ba5e0a748c943/pdf/GOVPUB-Y4_IN2_11-0952747a3176acc3dc6ba5e0a748c943.pdf

Informational Materials:

- *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2015) provides historical information on events that impacted Indigenous people that are not often reflected in history books.

- *Teaching Climate Change to Adolescents* by Richard Beach, Jeff Share, and Allen Webb (2017) provides many specific teaching ideas on how to incorporate climate change in the classroom.

- A YouTube video of Gloria Ladson-Billings (The Brainwaves Video Anthology, 2021) provides teachers with information on Critical Race Theory:

  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufKusK6dQI8

- Coleman’s (2021) article provides students with information on how enslaved people were not allowed to read: https://www.history.com/news/nat-turner-rebellion-literacy-slavery
• This article on the history of school (1815-1850: Education: Overview. (n. d.) can help students think about the historical purposes of school and who has benefited from those purposes: https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/1815-1850-education-overview

• The U.S. Department of the Interior’s information land acknowledgment (“Office of Federal Acknowledgement,” n.d.) provides students and teachers with information on the steps required for groups to be considered Indian Tribes: https://www.bia.gov/as-ia/ofa

• The YouTube play Los Vendidos (Pochochicano 1967/2015) helps students to think about perspective and representation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvDmbc8V6Z8

• The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition’s (n.d.) reading list about boarding schools can provide teachers and students with further information: https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/resources/book-list-for-indigenous-peoples-day-2020/

Activism:

• Students can find information on Native American protest of Mount Rushmore Native Americans and Mount Rushmore (n.d.) to consider contemporary examples of activism: https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/rushmore-sioux/

• Students can read about several examples of recent Native American activism (Cooper, 2016) to better understand other perspectives and consider ways they, too, might engage in activism: https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/native-american-activism-1960s-to-present/
Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on the texts you read in high school and college. What were they about? Who wrote them? How might these perspectives impact your beliefs?

2. As a future teacher, how have you been prepared to bring in student identity and encourage students to seek out voices they aren’t as familiar with?

3. As a current teacher, how do you incorporate various stories and perspectives? Does your curriculum include stories from traditionally marginalized people? If it doesn’t, what strategies have you used to help students become more aware of other perspectives?
CHAPTER V
POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR NEW SOCIAL JUSTICE TEACHERS: GOALS AND CONCERNS OF PRESERVICE AND EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

Preservice and early career teachers may have many questions as they prepare for and begin to practice the kind of social justice teaching presented in this dissertation. Education policies today increasingly prioritize content standards and standardized test scores. The teaching practices teachers may feel pressured to use in order to teach to the test often contradict, or may appear to contradict, with the social justice teaching that teachers value and seek to implement. In addition to this dilemma, teachers can find themselves targeted if anything “controversial” comes up in their classroom. Some teachers are accused of pushing their views on their students, and literary works addressing issues of race are increasingly politicized. Yet, I strongly believe that social justice teaching doesn’t need to be or feel daunting and preservice and early career teachers can be supported as they prepare for and enter their own classrooms.

To try to better support beginning teachers in their endeavors to be social justice teachers, I conducted an HSIRB approved interview process with preservice and early career teachers about their preparation and ideas. I began to interview participants during their final course in their teacher preparation program, a course focused on social justice teaching in secondary English. I focused on six students and then followed up with two of them during their internship and again during their first-year teaching. In these interviews, I was able to identify a few major themes that are helpful in preparing to address both challenges and opportunities to implement the strategies discussed in this dissertation. This chapter will draw on these interviews to provide practical ways to support beginning teachers’ aspirations to do social justice teaching. The chapter will also include a section on how methods courses might foster a social justice approach
as well as a section on how inservice teachers can be supported in their social justice teaching practices.

**Beginning Teachers’ Goals and Concerns**

Defining their goals and beliefs about teaching helps new teachers prepare for their own classrooms. Finding their goals and beliefs supported could potentially help new teachers stay in the profession and feel successful despite the challenges they face. In order to work towards their goals, preservice and early career teachers might consider how they define what is important to their teaching. Beginning teachers who participated in the interviews defined social justice teaching in similar ways. Participants noted that, to them, social justice teaching meant helping students to be critical and reflective as well as to make curriculum relevant and bring up social issues, such as bullying and mental health. One preservice teacher noted it is “the framework that promotes activism within the classroom and compassion towards ideals that change the world” and called it “being a good person pedagogy” (student interview, April 23, 2019). In an interview with this same participant during her first year teaching, she noted that she hadn’t been able to encourage as much activism as she had hoped, but her students were doing an assignment that required them to research activism.

Another methods course student described the importance of social justice teachers “being aware of issues that are happening in the world as well as in your classroom and making that part of your curriculum... having them be aware of what’s going on in the world and how they can make an impact” (student interview, April 23, 2019). She went on to describe “social justice as a medium to better understand our students and better understand our world” (student interview, April 23, 2019). Another interview also emphasized the importance of understanding
others by describing social justice teaching as “important to bring in a wide variety of perspectives into your teaching” (student interview, November 18, 2019).

Methods course students were excited and passionate about their social justice teaching ideals. One participant said that she was “not worried about sticking to her ideas” and she was “pretty set in her ideas and not scared to do them” (student interview, April 23, 2019). This excitement and passion can be cultivated in the methods classroom as social justice teachers are being prepared.

The teaching ideas presented in this dissertation can be used to teach for these goals that the beginning teachers defined. If teachers use approaches such as critical inquiry and critical media literacy, students will be encouraged to reflect on their own experiences as well as critique systems and policies in society. They can be encouraged to be critical of these systems and ask questions in order to better understand root causes of issues. The dissertation also suggests allowing students to select texts and topics to pursue, especially social issues. This helps to bring in student choice, which allows teachers to encourage students to focus on issues they are passionate about. Student choice can also support bringing in multiple perspectives through diverse texts. Students can select issues such as mental health and bullying, which were issues that preservice teachers mentioned as possible issues they might use in social justice teaching. By having students select the issues, teachers are better able to understand their students and support students as they seek to make change.

Perhaps a common concern of teachers at any stage of their career is having the freedom and time to select texts and curriculum that they will teach and how they would enact their teaching ideals. In the interviews with preservice and early career teachers, this concern was repeated in each interview as they sought to find their own ways of being social justice teachers.
Beginning teachers are often uncertain about selecting content or feel responsibility to teach what is in the textbook or what a previous teacher taught. During an interview with a first-year teacher, she explained how her department had recently purchased an entire curriculum, so she had to be creative in having a say in what was being taught. She found ways to implement short readings and assignments that focused on her goals for social justice teaching. But, she also struggled with the time it took to enact her beliefs. She mentioned that “as a new teacher, designing a new course from the ground up while also learning” a new curriculum was very difficult (student interview, February 11 2021). She went on to say that she’s had freedom to pick texts, as long as she found them, but ran into obstacles when trying to “collaborate with someone who… isn’t as open to new ideas” (student interview, February 11 2021).

The process of beginning teachers developing their own style and approach while also trying to find ways to have a say in what is being taught can be supported by using texts that are commonly taught, or could be accessed and used in the classroom, as many chapters in this book suggest and model. Early career teachers might find they can use the resources listed in these chapters immediately. Many resources are short, such as the short story “The Lesson” referenced in Chapter Two, the poem “First They Came” referenced in Chapter Three, or the play or Los Vendidos referenced in Chapter Four. Many of the writing and speaking assignments suggested also naturally fit into what may be an existing curriculum. For example, the public narrative assignment described in Chapter Three might take the place of a more traditional narrative assignment. The research assignments suggested in this dissertation could also be implemented in the curriculum. For example, Chapter Two suggests that students research the cost of goods to better understand poverty and Chapter Five suggests students research the languages used in their own schools. These could serve as informational writing assignments that teachers might
implement anywhere in their curriculum. Drawing on texts already in the curriculum, using shorter works, modifying existing curriculum, developing informal assignments, all these suggestions help beginning teachers enact their social justice teaching approach.

A final theme that came up in interviews with preservice and early career teachers was concern about parent pushback. This may be a concern of many teachers today as even familiar, highly regarded, and often taught literary works are being banned and censored. There is a perception that parents don’t want their children to discuss controversial topics in school. Recently, there have been parent groups - sometimes fostered and funded by right wing individuals and groups - protesting the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in schools, as discussed in Chapter Four. These parent protests and the involvement of some politicians has led to some teachers feeling the need to be careful about how they talk about race in the classroom. White parents have been outspoken about not having their children feel guilty or uncomfortable, or in some way having the curriculum indicate that racism has been an important dimension of American history or society.

Of course, controversy and truthful inquiry are important starting points for meaningful learning in public schools responsible for preparing citizens in a diverse democracy. There is a long history of the stories and perspectives of people of color being ignored or marginalized, with harmful consequences for all students.

The teaching ideas in this dissertation may help teachers be prepared for or even appease parent concerns. One of the key concepts in this dissertation is the importance of students asking questions and picking topics to learn more about in order to take action. By the student taking the initiative and focusing on topics and issues that matter to them, parents will have a harder time arguing that the teacher is enforcing her or his idea on the students. One of the new teachers I
interviewed in his first-year teaching took advantage of students bringing up issues they were interested in. He described a class when they “ended the last 10 minutes discussing Black Lives matter and Blue Lives Matter because somehow the student made a connection into that and that wasn’t a conversation that I was gonna be like oh we aren’t gonna have” and went on to say that “there’s a responsibility as the teacher, ok, like, if the students are doing this, let’s run with it” (student interview, March 17 2021).

There are several examples of texts and issues presented in the chapters that teachers could use in their classrooms to center controversy even when there are community concerns. These might serve as opportunities to bring in diverse perspectives and demonstrate the importance of addressing the controversy. Teachers can also ask students for their ideas, as is suggested throughout the dissertation. Social justice teaching is about helping students to better understand social issues and take action on them. Parents might find that they are also interested in learning more about how to support their student as they learn about the issues they want to address.

Text Selection and Assignments in Methods Courses

This dissertation suggests several times when teachers might bring in social organizing content information for their secondary students. This might also be something that methods courses consider to address some of the challenges of preparing for social justice teaching. Having background information on examples of activism might help prepare preservice teachers to incorporate it in their own classrooms. It is possible that preservice teachers were not taught accurate or complete history of movements like the civil rights movement or the abolitionist movement. Preservice teachers might learn more about movements in other countries too, which might be even more neglected in most school curriculums. They might learn about contemporary
movements in Europe, Egypt, South Africa, Mexico, and other places. Additionally, they can learn about the role of young people in social movements. They might learn about Greta Thunberg’s involvement in the climate crisis, the young people who created #NeverAgain to address gun violence, Malala Yousafzai’s work to support girls in education, and activist poet Amanda Gorman, to name a few. By having more awareness of activists and activism, preservice teachers can be more prepared to bring this information to their future classrooms.

Preservice teachers might be encouraged to explore a movement of their choice and present information to the class about it. This activity would be similar to what they might ask their future students to do and they can reflect on the experience to better understand how to teach a similar assignment. A greater awareness of this content might encourage preservice teachers to imagine themselves as activists and imagine how they might encourage their future students to imagine ways of activism.

Methods courses might also read young adult novels and consider how the texts bring up issues of injustice and opportunities to take action. This might also help preservice teachers imagine how they would use similar texts in their own classrooms. For example, a preservice teacher might choose the book *I am Malala* to create a unit plan or lesson plans. Part of the assignment might be to teach a lesson on historical or political context. This might encourage preservice teachers to bring in the contemporary history of South Asia or the Middle East, perhaps the realities of the United States involvement, and the impact on schools and education in other countries. In a methods class I taught, one student did design a unit around this book and created a lesson that focused on the 5 pillars of Muslim faith. Another lesson focused on the importance of having a support system and education, topics that Malala writes about and that
students can connect with. These lessons would encourage secondary students to become more knowledgeable about the culture and traditions in Malala’s life as she sought to be an activist.

Teacher preparation courses might also read informational books about societal issues, like *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi or *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo, through the lens of education and teaching. This can lead to powerful discussions about teaching to address many social issues, not just racism. For example, *How to be an Antiracist* talks about how race and gender intersect. It also discusses how climate policy, or lack of, also impacts people of color. *So You Want to Talk About Race* brings up other issues of racism, including cultural appropriation. Preservice teachers can use these texts to learn more about systemic issues of oppression, reflect on their own privilege or experiences, and to think about how these important topics can be taught in classrooms. When using *How to be an Antiracist* in my methods class, preservice teachers discussed how the issues Kendi brought up made them think about the importance of power, policy, and the role teachers can play in activism. One student, for example, created a lesson that focused on the intersection of race and social class.

These texts can also be implemented into lessons and units that preservice teachers create. Both *How to be an Antiracist* and *So You Want to Talk About Race* incorporate information about historical and present day topics that create or perpetuate racism. Oluo talks about the "N" word, why White people can’t say it, and the power of language. Preservice teachers might create units about how texts use language, either in problematic or powerful ways, and how that can be taught in the classroom in ways that promote social justice. A preservice teacher in my methods course discussed how *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* uses language in problematic ways. A group of students in the same methods course created lessons on *The Poet X* and addressed the importance of bringing in other languages to show the power of
language and using one’s own language. Kendi talks about policies that have led to racism. Preservice teachers might create units on *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas to explore how housing policies have led to segregated neighborhoods. Preservice teachers can use the information these texts present and pair it with fiction texts in order to help middle and high school students see the issues and learn more about them. They can also help preservice teachers reflect on their own stances, biases, and what they need to know to teach these issues.

**Teaching and Assessing Standard VI of Teacher Preparation**

These teacher preparation ideas support Standard VI of the NCTE teacher preparation standards which states “Candidates demonstrate knowledge of how theories and research about social justice, diversity, equity, student identities, and schools as institutions can enhance students’ opportunities to learn in English Language Arts” (CAEP Standard VI). There are two elements of this standard:

- **Element 1:** Candidates plan and implement English language arts and literacy instruction that promotes social justice and critical engagement with complex issues related to maintaining a diverse, inclusive, equitable society.
- **Element 2:** Candidates use knowledge of theories and research to plan instruction responsive to students’ local, national and international histories, individual identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, spiritual belief, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and community environment), and languages/dialects as they affect students’ opportunities to learn in ELA (CAEP Standard VI).

The teaching strategies described in this dissertation could be explored by preservice teachers to help them meet CAEP and NCTE Standards.
This social justice standard is highly relevant to the public schools where new teachers will find employment. Alsup and Miller (2014) argue that in order to be successful, preservice teachers must be prepared for the diversity of students they will encounter and be comfortable modeling and encouraging fairness, equity, and respect, but this issue is becoming difficult to include due to the field being at risk of losing social justice as a focus. They say that although Standard VI has been implemented into teacher preparation, the dispositions and assessments are often unclear. When assessing the dispositions, they argue that it might be more beneficial to focus on the process preservice teachers take to teach for social justice. If methods courses focus only on final products, such as unit plans or reflection papers, it might be difficult to fully understand the social justice teaching journey preservice teachers are on. By having preservice teachers consider and practice the teaching ideas presented in this dissertation, methods course instructors might be able to assess the processes that preservice teachers are taking to understand social justice.

One way to provide scaffolding for preservice teachers is purposeful involvement and inquiry into the communities in which they are teaching. Haddix (2016) writes that many students don’t have teachers that look like them. Most teachers in the United States, around 80%, are White females. For White preservice teachers, Haddix (2016) argues that teaching in urban areas comes across as missionary work and teachers see students through a deficit view. To change this, she says that teachers need to be involved in the community. She says that teachers often aren’t aware of what students are facing and this disconnect doesn’t further social justice teaching.

Preservice teachers could practice some of the strategies described in this dissertation in order to better understand the communities in which they teach. This will help them to be more
effective social justice teachers. For example, preservice teachers might identify issues that teachers in the community face and write a public narrative about it. An essential element of the public narrative is connecting self to the community. Preservice teachers might interview students, parents, community members, as well as teachers. This would be a powerful opportunity for preservice teachers to become more involved in the community and better understand the students they are teaching.

This involvement with community is echoed by Thein et al. (2017). They write that preservice teachers need to consider the social and cultural aspects that construct students’ identities in order to plan instruction. One approach is ethnographic research. For example, if preservice teachers are more informed about the community, they will be better prepared to select texts or examples that will be relevant for students and encourage them to identify issues that matter locally. Thein et al. (2017) suggest preservice teachers observe and take notes in classrooms, hallways, after school, and local coffee shops. By interviewing students and observing in these contexts, preservice teachers will find out what matters to students. Teachers can use this information to plan instruction and seek out resources that reflect various perspectives, perhaps including teaching strategies presented in this dissertation. These different perspectives are essential to helping students imagine a better world to live in.

Pasternak et al. (2018) found that some teacher preparation programs have teacher candidates understand the context of the school as a whole, including the resources of the community and its socio-economic concerns. One way to understand school context is an assignment that Barnes (2016) describes as Community Inquiry Projects. Barnes (2016) writes that one of the goals of the project was to help her preservice teachers consider the ways that their pedagogical choices are and should be dependent upon the community. By conducting this
project in their communities, Barnes found that preservice teachers began to recalculate their understanding of others. One student in particular began to reflect on the ways her background allowed her to relate to her students and also how her experiences could separate her from her students (Barnes, 2016). This awareness is essential to social justice teaching because teachers need to be aware of their students’ backgrounds as well as how their own identities impact their teaching.

One final approach to implementing social justice teaching in methods courses is what Dyches and Boyd (2017) call Social Justice Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (SJPACK). SJPACK is a framework that promotes equity by connecting and combining content and pedagogy. It is based on the idea that no teaching is neutral and all is politically charged, so social justice knowledge is involved in all Pedagogical Content Knowledge. They argue that it requires knowledge of social justice theory and familiarity with any liberating pedagogies. It also involves translating content so that it is socially relevant or can be critiqued for the values it creates or maintains.

This knowledge and ability is necessary for scaffolding teacher candidates to be successful in meeting Standard VI because it provides preservice teachers knowledge of relevant theories and research and demonstrate it through the translation (Dyches & Boyd, 2017). When preservice teachers make a text socially relevant or critique it for the values it creates or maintains, they are demonstrating their knowledge of how theories and research about social justice can create learning opportunities in ELA.

**Inservice Teachers**

Once teachers are prepared to begin their teaching careers encouraging activism, they will likely find that they want professional contacts, development, and other learning
opportunities to support them in their social justice teaching pursuits. I’ve been part of a Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MCTE) subcommittee called Diversity, Inclusion, Justice, and Equity (DIJE). Beginning in the summer of 2020, we created and participated in a book and professional activism group that facilitated a virtual book group for teachers across the state.

When we first began meeting, we established the goals of our group. We agreed that “before working to facilitate learning for others, we wanted to start with a book club for ourselves that would help us with our own antiracist journeys and to develop community among our group. We agreed that we wanted a text that would support three kinds of work: work on self, work with students, and work outside our classrooms (with parents, colleagues, administrators, and community members,” (Spinner et al., 2021, p. 48). We decided to begin by reading *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. When we met, we reflected on our own experiences and journeys towards antiracism. The group slowly began talking about how this has impacted our teaching as well.

We continued to meet and read *Cultivating Genius* by Gholdy Muhammad as well as two young adult novels *Dear Martin* and *Dear Justyce* by Nic Stone. In effect, we created a professional learning community where teachers felt comfortable asking questions and sharing personal stories about what they were learning about racism and antiracist teaching. It was essential that we started out with self-reflection, which was important work to do individually before thinking about how we might change our teaching. This activity also created a community where people felt safe sharing questions, ideas, and experiences.

In-service teachers might do something similar. Cochran-Smith (2004) talks about inquiry as stance and the importance of asking questions. Teachers can create professional
learning communities with other teachers where they feel safe asking questions and reading new material that helps them reexamine their teaching. This kind of community can support continuing on the road of being a social justice teacher and a teacher that encourages activism. Members will likely see that their circle of impact grows as it impacts their students but also their colleagues and school.

As we know from the National Writing Project, teachers at any stage in their career can benefit from teacher-led professional development, including book groups and communities of inquiry. These will help to support teachers as they continue the ongoing process of learning more about teaching for social justice.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have attempted to provide applicable teaching resources and strategies for secondary English Language Arts teachers who want to do social justice teaching. Looking ahead, I hope to expand on these strategies and incorporate other commonly taught texts and writing assignments. I hope this will be a valuable resource for both preservice and inservice teachers.
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Appendix A

HSIRB Approval Letter
Date: January 17, 2019

To: Allen Webb, Principal Investigator
   Elisabeth Spinner, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 19-01-05

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Teaching Social Justice in English Methods” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., you must request a post-approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: January 16, 2020
Appendix B

National Council of Teachers of English Position Statement on Educators’ Rights and Responsibilities to Engage in Antiracist Teaching
Educators’ Right and Responsibilities to Engage in Antiracist Teaching

Date: March 7, 2022
Category: Censorship, Diversity, Instruction, Intellectual Freedom, Professional Concerns, Working Conditions
Print Statement

Overview

Knowledge of the past exists to serve the needs of the living. In the current context, this includes an honest reckoning with all aspects of that past. Americans of all ages deserve nothing less than a free and open exchange about history and the forces that shape our world today, an exchange that should take place inside the classroom as well as in the public realm generally. To ban the tools that enable those discussions is to deprive us all of the tools necessary for citizenship in the 21st century. A whitewashed view of history cannot change what happened in the past. A free and open society depends on the unrestricted pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. (American Historical Association)

Recently, an honest reckoning with the past has come under renewed attack at the federal, state, and local levels. Legislation has been proposed to cut federal funding for schools that use lessons based on the New York Times’s 1619 Project (Ujifusa, 2021) and 27 states with legislation either passed, pending, or under discussion would severely limit K–12 and university educators’ ability to engage with critical race theory (CRT) and antiracist teaching. Such legislation is “designed to stifle a full exploration of the role of race and racism in United States history” (Association of American Law Schools, 2021). In fact, such legislation stands in opposition to the principles of academic freedom and the comprehensive teaching of history, literature, sciences, and social sciences that are so integral to maintaining a democratic society.

Recognizing that the motivation behind this legislation comes from a desire to silence teaching about race and racism, we also know that many people support these bills because they are informed by divisive soundbites used to provoke fear and knee-jerk reactions. As a result, while many educators, educational leaders, and community members across the country may sense that the bills are unjust, they may also lack the necessary background to fully understand, support, and/or actualize their concerns.

This statement addresses these realities and asserts that antiracism is “a collective investment in the human ‘us’” (Ferlazzo, 2020) and is essential to the development of informed citizens (American Historical Association). It was developed in the face of legislation that obstructs antiracist pedagogical efforts to create a more just and equitable society, the principles of academic freedom (e.g., 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure), and the right to teach about systemic and ideological racism.

Statement

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) actively follows recommendations put forth by the Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English and the NCTE Statement on Anti-Racism to Support Teaching and Learning (2007/2018) to inform and support
accurate public discourse around antiracist education. Drawing from and remaining consistent with earlier assertions, educators have both the right and responsibility to engage in antiracist teaching. Recommendations on how to do so include:

- Identify and challenge individual and/or systemic acts of racism and other forms of discrimination and bigotry in educational institutions and within our profession, exposing such acts through external communications and publications.
- Express declarations of solidarity with people of diverse human, cultural, and racial backgrounds to eradicate all forms of racism, bias, and prejudice in spaces of teaching and learning.
- Promote not only cultural diversity and expansive forms of linguistic knowledge, but also explicitly advocate for antiracism by participating in ongoing professional development for educators to productively counter racism and other forms of bigotry.
- Support the enforcement of laws and policies that provide sanctions against racial and ethnic discrimination in education. Also, advocate for legislative reform that will lead to policies that provide sanctions against discrimination in education based on race, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, class, mental and physical abilities, nationality, and migrant, immigrant, and refugee status.

Furthermore

- Administrators should secure funds and resources to provide opportunities for professional development for teachers and instructional programs that affirm cultural diversity and expansive forms of linguistic knowledge among all students.
- All educational stakeholders—policymakers, parents and families, and the general public—understand that they can best support educators or teacher professionals and students by actively participating in public conversations about racism and bigotry in our
multilingual and multicultural American society, defined in the key opening words of the United States Constitution’s Preamble, “We the People . . . .”

NCTE also advocates for support for educators at all levels, administrators, students, parents and families, and communities to deepen understandings of antiracist education that includes and emphasizes:

- the importance of antiracist education in a democratic society;
- that teaching racial histories and antiracist education do not constitute anti-Americanism but serve as one element in an education that supports the development of informed citizens who can work toward a more equitable society;
- antiracist education as the antithesis of teaching that one race is superior to another or that anyone should feel guilty for the past actions of members of their race; and that “educators must provide an accurate view of the past in order to better prepare students for community participation and robust civic engagement” (American Historical Association, 2021) in the present and into the future;
- antiracist teaching as that which encompasses the complexity of history including but not limited to systemic and ideological racism, as well as nuances and rich histories of who we are as peoples, including joys, accomplishments, resistance, and resilience;
- research demonstrating how children receive racialized messages in the first years of life, necessitating that antiracist education begin with our youngest children;
- strategies for countering rhetoric of fear and reactions to it that would prohibit antiracist teaching at any level (legislation, book bans, curricular bans, withdrawal of funding, etc.);
- clarification that critical race theory is one of many research-based theoretical frameworks (such as behaviorist, sociocultural, constructivist, critical disabilities, and
feminist theories, to name a few) originating in legal studies in the 1970s as a framework for “understanding . . . racial inequity within our social, economic, political, legal, and educational systems . . . even absent of individual racist intent . . . among other exclusionary systems [sexism, classism, homophobia, etc.]” (American Association of Law Schools, 2021).

References and Resources


**Statement Authors**

This position statement was developed from an original resolution created by the 2021 NCTE Committee on Resolutions. The 2021 NCTE Committee on Resolutions combined two resolutions to produce the text for a single resolution. Existing NCTE work from the Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English also provided substantial guidance and is listed in the citations. At the direction of the NCTE Presidential Team and the NCTE Executive Committee, NCTE leaders used the text from the resolution as the basis for this NCTE position statement.

2021 NCTE Committee on Resolutions:

Susi Long (Chair), University of South Carolina
Katrina Bartow Jacobs (Associate Chair), University of Pittsburgh
Renée Wilmot, Michigan State University
Lynsey Burkins, Dublin City Schools, OH
Becky Sipe, Eastern Michigan University

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