

Chapter 4

Heeding the Call of America's Youth: Teaching Pre-Service Teachers About Race and Young Adult Literature

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that English teacher educators must meet the needs in secondary English classrooms created by a growing diversity gap between students and the teachers who teach them. Those needs can be met, at least in part, by a curriculum that includes critical pedagogy in relation to the study of Young Adult literature about race. English teacher educators must model for pre-service teachers what careful Young Adult literature text selection looks like and train them regarding how to talk about racial justice in their future classrooms. If English education programs fail to incorporate Young Adult literature that focuses on race into their college classrooms, they are doing not only future teachers a disservice, but they are also contributing to and sustaining the systemic racism and the cycle of oppression that so often occurs in secondary English classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

In Fall 2019, I began a new position in which part of my job requirement was to teach two English education courses – one on teaching composition and the other, a methods course on teaching English. Through developing these courses, I realized how much of an impact what I was teaching pre-service teachers could have on future middle and secondary students, and I made sure to include readings and issues related to diverse topics such as gender, language, disability, and race. Despite taking these steps, I was not doing enough, a fact that only became clear after the deaths of Ahmad Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor and the resulting mass protests and marches that happened across the United States and the world in 2020.

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These protests during the summer of 2020, which were composed of many young people, caused me to reevaluate the courses I would be teaching that Fall and into the future. I, being a white, female, middle class professor, also began to educate myself, both on Black history but also on the ways in which English courses contribute to social injustice and violence. In doing so, I attended the Summer Institute on Education, Equity, and Justice. One panel, which was a student panel for women and girls of color, focused on what students need educators to do to support racial equity in the classroom. These students (Sanchez-Viafara et al., 2020) asked that teachers give Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) the language and space to speak to their identities. They emphasized that minority students want to have input on what they learn and that teachers need to facilitate more conversations in the classroom about racism, inequity, and social barriers (Sanchez-Viafara et al., 2020). The students in the panel each ended their presentation with questions they want educators to ask ourselves: what are we doing to make sure there are safe spaces for students of color at our schools, and what are we doing to ensure all students in our classrooms are understood (Sanchez-Viafara et al., 2020)? Later that summer, I attended another panel as part of the Folger Institute's series on Critical Race Conversations. In that panel, Brown and Stoeber (2020) made the argument that as teachers, we have to do more than diversify our syllabi. They contended that we cannot expect a text to do the job of teaching race because "teaching is the teacher's job" (Brown & Stoeber, 2020). In other words, as English teachers, in addition to adding diverse literature to our curriculum, we likewise must explicitly teach race in the classroom.

After the Conference on College Composition & Communication (CCCC) released their demands for linguistic justice in the English classroom in July 2020, I knew I had a responsibility towards pre-service teachers to make more room in my English education course to teach them about race and to also teach future English teachers how to do the same with their future students. I had to take ownership for the fact that the same anti-Black violence toward Black people in the streets across America reflects the anti-Black violence that is taking place in academic settings (Baker-Bell et al., 2017). Additionally, I had to meet the CCCC demands that English education programs prepare the next generation of teachers to be conscious of linguistic justice and Black activism (Baker-Bell et al., 2020). For my English education students who will teach at highly diverse schools, this is essential, but for the future faculty who will take jobs at rural, majority white schools, I found the demand from CCCC to be more pressing when it comes to battling racism in this country.¹ In the former, students need to learn from voices that are similar to their own, and in the latter, white students must be exposed to experiences and cultures that differ from their own.

In this chapter, I will present my revised approach to teaching the capstone course for English education majors, "Teaching English," in which I expanded what had been a single day of the course that focused on race to six days. In those six days, students learned about race, linguistic justice, and anti-racism. Young Adult (YA) literature, admittedly, was not a topic I had considered incorporating as part of my English education courses. I was under a common misconception that it did not count as "real" literature and that it certainly was not rigorous enough to meet state and local standards, but in thinking about the aforementioned statements, my pre-service students and I used this knowledge to discuss the importance of YA literature. The unit described in this chapter mainly focuses on the novel *The Hate U Give*, but I also briefly introduce students to and encourage them to read *On the Come Up* by Angie Thomas, as well as the graphic narrative *Destroyer* by Victor LaValle, an adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Together, we brainstormed ideas on how to introduce these texts to high school students and how to use the language within the texts to teach literary principles such as narrative structure, dialect, and rhetoric. In this chapter, I will share some of the resulting ideas, challenges, and assignments

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