

3690: A Journal of First-Year Student Research Writing

Volume 2021

Article 1

2021

The First Step Towards Change is Knowledge

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Recommended Citation

Antinelli, Jake (2021) "The First Step Towards Change is Knowledge," *3690: A Journal of First-Year Student Research Writing*. Vol. 2021, Article 1.
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/journal3690/vol2021/iss1/1>

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The First Step Towards Change is Knowledge

Abstract

Overview: No justice, no peace. We have all heard this phrase by now; whether you have seen it on the news, on signs and posters, on your favorite professional athletes' shirt, or have heard it shouted by thousands marching the streets. People are sick and tired of being sick and tired of waiting for justice (depending on what justice means) that seemingly will never come. The cries for justice of those oppressed, long falling on deaf ears for those who choose to plead ignorance, are growing louder and louder, reaching a fever pitch that demands to be heard. The fight is gaining momentum, with more conversations happening about societal issues like hate, racism, and social injustice. Although we are a very long way from complete equality, and racism and hate will unfortunately continue to live like a virus inside of the uneducated and ignorant people, the work being done today is trending in the right direction. Change needs to happen, actual change. Performative activism, frivolous gestures, and empty promises and sentiments mean nothing. The pressure of the people needs to continue to force the hands of those in charge to address racial inequality and social injustice. Change will not come overnight. It relies on those that do not even have a strong idea of what any of these issues are. The next generation is always the most important one. They will keep up the fight. They will keep shouting for justice and equality. They will be the change.

Author's reflection: My name is Jake Antinelli and I am currently a sophomore here at St. John Fisher majoring in biology. In my second semester as a freshman, I took a research-based writing class with the topic of young adult literature. My professor, Mrs. Barry, encouraged me to use my writing skills to talk about issues that were important to me, and which I thought other people should be aware of. This is what brought me to write this paper about racial inequality. Throughout the course, we talked about the argument about whether or not young adult literature novels should be included in the curriculum of schools. We read several novels which included themes of and experiences with racial inequality in coming-of-age stories. These novels got me thinking about how the younger generations can learn so much from reading the stories of characters their age, and think deeper about the importance and prevalence of racial issues. I was able to use the research skills taught to me to further my inquiry to this topic, and combine my research skills with the writing skills I had gathered to write an effective argument.

Another key idea that prompted my research was how if racism and discrimination was going to start to improve in our society, it would have to come from the younger generation. As kids, our minds and opinions are waiting to be molded by influences around us. If all we are taught is the opinions of our parents, this can lead to close-mindedness, and continue the trends of hate. This is what makes young adult literature so important. It can be an avenue to exposing the younger generations to new perspectives that they otherwise may never encounter. Growing up in a white household, I was privileged to not have to worry about the racial issues of discrimination or police brutality, and my parents never had to have those conversations with me. Now, I've been lucky enough to grow up around other cultures which have allowed me to work to understand other perspectives. Not everyone shares this experience, and this is where young adult literature can come in, providing kids with the ability to read about the stories of diverse characters. This is why I say that young adult literature can be a major player in the younger generation making strides towards change.

The First Step Towards Change is Knowledge

Jake Antinelli

Research Based Writing

Mrs. Barry

May 2, 2021

I certify that this paper is mine alone with support from my teacher, an extra ear, and possibly the writing center in accordance to St. John Fisher's Academic Honesty Policy

Jake Antinelli

Jake Antinelli

Mrs. Barry

Research Based Writing

2/5/2021

The First Step Toward Change is Knowledge

No justice, no peace. We have all heard this phrase by now; whether you have seen it on the news, on signs and posters, on your favorite professional athletes' shirt, or have heard it shouted by thousands marching the streets. People are sick and tired of being sick and tired of waiting for justice (depending on what justice means) that seemingly will never come. The cries for justice of those oppressed, long falling on deaf ears for those who choose to plead ignorance, are growing louder and louder, reaching a fever pitch that demands to be heard. The fight is gaining momentum, with more conversations happening about societal issues like hate, racism, and social injustice. Although we are a very long way from complete equality, and racism and hate will unfortunately continue to live like a virus inside of the uneducated and ignorant people, the work being done today is trending in the right direction. Change needs to happen, actual change. Performative activism, frivolous gestures, and empty promises and sentiments mean nothing. The pressure of the people needs to continue to force the hands of those in charge to address racial inequality and social injustice. Change will not come overnight. It relies on those that do not even have a strong idea of what any of these issues are. The next generation is always the most important one. They will keep up the fight. They will keep shouting for justice and equality. They will be the change.

The younger generations will be the key to fighting racism and social injustice. With the focus and fight growing, the younger generations can continue on the foundation of work and keep applying the pressure. How will this generation learn about these issues in order to know what is going on? Young adult literature. This genre has the power to inform and teach young adults about the topical issues discussed. Young adult literature is a genre which is easy to read for young readers and has the power to address important issues and teach valuable lessons through a story that is both interesting and relatable. Young adult literature is a powerful tool to teach the younger generations about racism and social injustice. This genre can provide students with more awareness about these issues, give minority students better stories to relate to, and can allow adult figures like teachers to better understand all of their students.

Young Adult Literature as a Genre

Young adult literature is often overlooked in terms of teaching resources, thrown aside in favor of what is deemed as literary classics. Young adult novels, however, should not be discarded. They deserve a closer look at how these books can actually provide students and adults with valuable lessons. Not only can these books relay lessons to those reading them, but as Chris Crowe, a professor of English and English education specializing in young adult literature puts it, “YAL [young adult literature] can be used to accomplish the same English and language arts objectives as traditional literature; however, YAL has the added advantage of being more relevant to the lives of teenagers and is therefore more likely to overcome the resistance to ‘school books.’” (122). In the context of young adult literature being worth reading for students, novels can contain heavy themes of racism and social injustice that would normally be looked at as difficult topics and get these ideas across to students in a way that is both interesting and easy to read. When framed in a story that many kids can relate to, these readers will be able to grasp

the concepts, applying them to their own lives and learning from the novel. We all know that the "classics" that teachers give students today do not exactly garner much excitement, so students often end up not reading them, letting the lessons and themes fly right over their heads. On the other hand, young adult literature can be appealing to young students, who enjoy reading quick, fast-paced stories that are not difficult or require deep analysis to understand what is going on. Young readers can be given a young adult novel and come away with more knowledge about themes of racism or social injustice or inequality by reading a story that is fast-paced, interesting, and easy to read.

Young Adult Literature with Themes of Race and Social Injustice

In looking at the topic of racial inequality and social injustice in young adult literature, there is a clear importance to having these books and including them in students' reading. All of us know what racism is and how it affects people. But how will our kids learn about race and the problems plaguing our country? Depending on the influences that different young adults have, they could learn about race in a way that makes them want to see change, or they could not be aware of any of the problems because their parents chose to avoid tough conversations and did not feel comfortable talking about such an important issue. Or, they could even inherit the hate and racism instilled in them by their parents. This is where young adult literature has the power to influence its readers in a positive way, teaching them about race and injustice to hopefully give them valuable exposure to what is going on in the world. White students specifically do not have to experience the hate and racism that minorities have to deal with, so it is hard for white students to understand from a perspective that they cannot relate to. Tim Engles is an English professor focusing on multicultural and contemporary literature at Eastern Illinois University, and Fern Kory is also an English professor who teaches children and young adolescent literature

at Eastern Illinois University. Engles and Kory talk about the ideas of racism in the justice system in their article *Incarceration, Identity Formation, and Race in Young Adult Literature* and state that, “If young adults do not become aware of these egregious manifestations of contemporary US racism, they remain susceptible to common misconceptions regarding race and criminality” (53). This is where young adult literature has the power to reach these students that will not experience racism and give them insight into what their peers are up against. Without these novels, students may not be exposed to what racism is and how stereotypes are a big promoter of racism. They will thus be uneducated on these topics, continuing in the tradition of racist thinking. Engles and Kory continue saying, “English teachers can heighten the awareness of the factors that influence racial disparities in arrest and incarceration rates by working with literature that dramatizes the differences between white and nonwhite experiences within the US criminal justice system.” (53). Teaching young adult literature in class can be a vital teaching point for students who will simply never grasp an awareness of racial inequality if left on their own.

An example of a young adult novel that tackles themes of racial profiling and racial disparities is *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. The story is one of Starr Carter, a black female teenager who sees her friend killed unlawfully by police, and the aftermath of that event. Starr lives in a black urban neighborhood but goes to school at a mostly white private school and has to navigate those two worlds in the context of riots and protests and problems following her friend’s murder. One specific part of the novel includes a conversation between Starr and her father about systemic racism and how there is a cycle that makes the sure the oppressed stay oppressed. Starr’s father states, “When the Khalils get arrested for selling drugs, they either spend most of their life in prison, another billion-dollar industry, or they have a hard time getting

a real job and probably start selling drugs again. That's the hate they're giving us, baby, a system designed against us" (169). Many white students never think about the idea of systemic racism. They do not have to. Growing up in very different environments, every young adult experiences the world in completely different ways as they mature. Depending on one's race this could mean a variety of things. White students do not have any experience with police brutality, or the challenges of dealing with a corrupt system that hates you, or having to feel the opinions of others simply because of your skin color.

For black students like Starr, the ideas of systemic racism and police brutality are not foreign concepts. These students don't have to learn about it in school because they unfortunately have to live it. This illustrates the incredible importance of teaching young adult literature that contains themes like those in *The Hate U Give*, because white students need to learn what their peers are going through, so that they are compelled to end the cycles that minorities are faced with. Having a novel in which the reader can dive into the story from the point of view of a minority adolescent like Starr allows students to see what it is like from a different perspective. They can read Starr's thoughts and feelings, and realize what really goes on in the lives of their peers that they have no idea about.

When teachers engage their students in a young adult novel regarding social justice, students can go a lot deeper than an interesting story. As these books are taught in classrooms, teachers can push students to think critically about the real-life implications that racial issues, white privilege, and other societal issues have. Many students will often not learn a whole lot about other races from their family when they are coming from a one-race family. For example, I would guess that white students are not getting a whole lot of information about police brutality against african-americans or systemic racism in the criminal justice system. This does not mean

that they come from racist families. It simply means that white students have the privilege of not having to worry about these issues. Parents can gloss over these difficult conversations. As I alluded to earlier, when young adolescents are not exposed to the problems plaguing others, they are often destined to continue the cycle. This is why young adult literature is so important. Not only are students exposed to what is going on in the world, but teachers can prompt them to dig deeper and really get at what is happening and uncover the not-so-obvious implications.

Jaqueline Glasgow is an author who specializes in social themes and teaching young adults social responsiveness. In her article *Teaching Social Justice Through Young Adult Literature*, Glasgow states, “If we as teachers believe that prejudice is a learned behavior, then it is imperative that we work as teachers to reduce, if not eliminate, prejudices we find both in ourselves and students” (56). Glasgow conducted a study where she explored the value of young adult literature in teaching societal issues by having students read these books and seeing how they reacted. In looking at the students’ responses, many students stated that the books were worthwhile and even went to say that they had not realized how big of a role racism can actually play. This is why young adult literature about race is so vital to the younger generation. Students do not even realize the extent to which these problems reach, and thinking about them in a classroom setting with guidance from a teacher can be so beneficial. When more students think about what is going on, they will be more compelled to fight for change for their peers and themselves.

Glasgow also mentioned how teachers themselves can work to end their personal prejudices. When teaching a young adult novel, obviously the teacher must also read it and be aware of the themes in the book. When the teachers are exposed to these issues and perspectives, it allows them to gain a deeper understanding of what their minority students live through and

where they are coming from. Thus, teachers can gain insight into other cultures and can even use this critical thinking to create a better environment for all students regardless of race by eliminating their prejudices. I know in my high school, for example, I could count on one hand the number of minority teachers in a fairly large school whose population was pretty diverse compared to others around it. When minority students always get white teachers, it can hurt them as students, especially when they sense that teacher's prejudice or underlying racism. Having teachers become more aware of racial issues and gaining a further understanding of their students only helps to create an overall better environment for all students.

Wendy Glenn, a Professor of Literacy Studies and Teacher Learning, Research, and Practice at Colorado University, also dives into the impact these novels can have on educators. In her article, "Developing Understandings of Race: Preservice Teachers' Counter-Narrative (Re)Constructions of People of Color in Young Adult Literature", Glenn describes a study performed in which English teachers read and responded to chosen young adult novels written from the perspective, and focusing on the cultural issues, of people of color. She states the results of the study, and how teachers reported having a better understanding of other cultures and the struggles and pride that shaped non-white cultures. Glenn says:

"participants provided evidence of how the [novels] encouraged them to reconsider assumptions that society holds and perpetuate relative to people of color. The texts offered readers a new way in which to re-conceptualize societal norms to reconsider how they see the seeming "other" and, in some cases, recognize their own culpability in promoting existing stereotypes. Finally, the counter-narrative texts heightened participants' awareness of whiteness, the ways in which race can privilege or limit by fostering insider or outsider status."

Clearly, young adult novels do not only play a role in teaching students valuable themes, but can even reach teachers in a way that can get them to realize their own prejudice, and overcome it to relate to all of their students.

Relatable Stories for Minority Adolescents

The “classic” novels that are taught in today’s high schools often have white protagonists. For minority students, the classics do not really have much to grasp onto in terms of relatable content. After all, these books were written years ago, in a time where racism was even more common, segregation was normal, and even slavery was legal depending on how old the book is. How can today’s minority students be expected to gain something from or be interested in stories that have little to offer in terms of relatability? Schools need to teach books that accurately reflect the cultures and values of all students. These young adult novels can have strong minority protagonists, giving students an example to connect to on some level. Genyne Boston, a faculty development director at Florida A&M who conducts research regarding African-American, Multicultural, and Urban Literacy, and Traci Baxley, an Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Social Foundations: Multicultural Education Program Area at Florida Atlantic University, talk about how young adult literature can be a great resource for black female adolescents. In their article *Living the Literature: Race, Gender Construction, and Black Female Adolescents*, the pair state that, “Resisting the stereotypes and affirming other definitions is part of the task facing young Black women in both White and Black communities. As seen in these texts, racial pride and cross-cultural awareness are critical to the development of positive self-esteem.” (574). They show how black girls are found to have low self-esteem in cases where they do not embrace their culture and race (574). Racist stereotypes and racism from others works to bring these young girls down and create a feeling of low self-esteem. Young adult literature not only

helps white students, but can be integral to giving minority students something to relate to. In this case, black girls are taught to dislike things about themselves based on what white people say and what the white standard is. Young adult literature featuring black female protagonists could give these girls a strong example and provide stories to help these adolescents with identity.

Boston and Baxley further talk about how black females are often devalued in today's society and using young adult literature with black female leads can empower black adolescents. And, empowerment is huge in adolescents. Teachers and parents need to empower all students regardless of race, teaching them to love themselves. Young adult literature featuring minority stories can give minorities relatable stories that they can look to and grasp on to as stories of empowerment to build themselves up.

Relatability is one of the biggest benefits of young adult literature in general. Schools need to teach young adult literature with themes of race because minority students need stories to relate to. Carol Collins, an author specializing in teaching racial history, continues the conversation of relatability in her article. Collins says, "This literature can provide black young adults with a means of transcending racism and segregation, can lead them to self-discovery, and can help them eliminate whatever sense of isolation or alienation they may have" (378). Collins lists further benefits in this quote of the use of young adult literature in classrooms. Minority students need books that they can relate to give them an idea of other people going through the same struggles they are going through.

Call To Action

Actions speak louder than words. Socially aware young adult novels are fantastic for teaching readers about other cultures, and giving many a deeper understanding of the struggles and inequalities that are present in society. But, the only way these inequalities can actually change are through taking initiative and doing something about it. This could look like taking on a large-scale protest, or simply working to be more culturally aware in your day-to-day life. Learning about social injustice and racism is great, but until you take the next steps to change your prejudice and backward thinking, the books on the page essentially fall flat.

All American Boys, a novel written by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, is a story about an african-american boy who is brutally beaten by a police officer and the aftermath of the event on the boy, Rashad, and his community. The book splits perspectives between Rashad and white student Quinn who faces the challenge of standing up for what is right or supporting the police officer who is almost family to Quinn. Throughout the book, the reader gets insight into what Rashad and his family feel from the incident, but also gets insight into how Quinn goes from supporting the officer, to questioning if the officer actually did the right thing, to finally speaking out against the injustice himself.

The end of the novel gives a powerful example of how people, no matter your age or race or living conditions, can make their voices heard and fight for change. The students at Rashad and Quinn's high school organize a "die-in" protest in which everyone marches through the streets, and then at the end they all lie down on the pavement while someone reads about police brutality. This powerful scene can give readers an important example to look to. When students see characters that they relate to organize something like this and have such a role in fighting for justice, the students reading can gain a sense of themselves and realize what they can fight for and how they can play a role. Many students may feel that it is not their problem or that they

cannot do anything to help. But, books like these give clear lessons that these readers can absolutely fight for change and do something about societal injustices.

Final Thoughts

Some people will argue that young adult novels, especially those that promote protest and change in thinking, do not have a place in the classroom. They will say that the classics offer much more valuable lessons to students. To this I will simply ask “what are some of the biggest problems in today’s society?” If racism and social injustice is not considered an issue to you, then you are ignorant and probably could use a reading of one of these novels as well. Obviously the classics do offer lessons and good writing, they are classics for a reason. But, with young adults, these young adult literature novels have a much greater chance of getting across to its readers, while imparting themes that have incredible relevance right now in today’s society.

Whether it is students gaining an insight into cultures unlike their own, teachers being able to relate to their minority students at a deeper level, or minority students having stories that are more relatable, young adult literature featuring themes of race and inequality is integral to the younger generations. When younger generations are exposed to these novels, they can learn about what is going on in the world that they may have not realized. Young adult literature can be such a big factor in instilling a sense of change in the younger generation.

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