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Exploring Privilege with Young Adult Literature

STEFANI BOUTELIER

Presently, the concept of white privilege is a key phrase some deem overplayed, others ignore, and few fight. Privilege has become a combination of denial and acceptance passed down through generations (McIntosh, 1989; Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001; Toldson, 2019). This article will guide teachers towards exploring the concept of racial privilege through the reading of *I am Alfonso Jones*.

For this article, privilege is defined as “unearned assets” (McIntosh, 1989) or advantages. Discussing race with students and analyzing privilege as an educator is a necessary discomfort. Being uncomfortable through new experiences helps one grow and gain rewards (Bunzeck & Duzel, 2006; Cozolino, 2013; Erickson, 1963) and a recommended normalization of discomfort helps build critical thinkers (Brown, 2015). As teachers, we are called to recognize privilege and respond to it in a manner that supports an anti-racist curriculum based on equity literacy and inclusion (Gorski, 2016).

Educators must integrate equity literacy to include an awareness of privilege by recognizing, responding, redressing, and sustaining a bias-free classroom (Gorski, 2017). Equity literacy further encourages the interpretation of text through a “privilege” lens, because ignoring it is as much a political act as including it (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). Often, the equity curriculum design connected to a text is either lacking or simply entirely absent (e.g., ignoring controversial language, not discussing colonial circumstances). Similarly, offering only one lesson about privilege and diversity is not adequate. We must incorporate this concept through all readings, assignments, and pedagogical units.

Young Adult (YA) literature and curriculum helps build or perpetuates social constructions which lead to permeations of privilege (Foss, 2002). Utilizing a lens of equity literacy to address privilege can break this social construct and serve as a bridge for change. Equity literacy overlaps with Freire’s (2007) theory of critical pedagogy as a bridge, or praxis, for change. The goal of working together to convert theory

to action is a root element of praxis. Freire’s work calls for teachers to not simply utilize their power to “fix” but to embed their skills of facilitator and motivator to empower their students. Embedding a topic such as racial privilege to initiate empowerment is one route. Participation in equity literacy and critical pedagogy allows for reading the world/word (Freire & Macedo, 1987) with a justice-centered and a relationship-building curricular intention (Emdin, 2015).

Reading *I am Alfonso Jones* (and similar texts) allows for the exposure of racial controversy and creates a space and purpose to explore how binary viewpoints can be blurred and better understood. One quote from the book, “...because he had no right to be black. No right to be a boy. No right to be downtown. No right to buy a suit,” (Medina, Robinson, & Jennings, 2017, p. 135) provides an example of how and why white privilege is a larger theme to explore in this text. Connecting to privilege and identity help us empathetically understand others, become more mindful, and increase our global citizenry (Brown, 2015; Erikson, 1963; Emdin, 2015). We must be equipped to teach controversial topics (Simmons, 2018; Toldson, 2019) and engage students. Privilege is an often avoided theme, therefore, as teachers, we must scaffold our own learning and understanding before incorporating this concept in class.

Pre-Reading

One never wants to point fingers, place blame, or jump into a topic that could elicit an overly emotional response. This is never a successful route for critical conversation. Classroom conversations should remove an “us” versus “them” lens to help build understanding and empathy. Scaffolding is an imperative component for successful conversation protocols which is a high leverage practice to further support equity (TeachingWorks, 2019). Relationship building and trust are also important, but in regards to strategizing, we must begin by intentionally scaffolding low stake connections to privilege.

A Socratic Seminar is one way to scaffold and embed

conversations in a secondary classroom. To start, provide a script with an exemplar Socratic discussion or share a video clip of students participating in a complete Socratic circle (e.g., Tolerance.org provides an example connected to their social justice standards). Mount anchor charts of question/sentence starters or a list of guidelines on classroom walls. Next, provide questions and topics for students to discuss, along with discussion expectations (e.g., respect, turn-taking). The end goal is for the teacher to provide a topic and students to lead meaningful discussions with questions, comments, and quotes (QCQ).

Discussing and understanding white privilege through literature helps build empathy and decreases fears that the brain leans toward (Cozolino, 2013). There are plenty of attention grabbers to visually initiate the topic of privilege and integrate equity literacy. The following are three effective examples: Morris' (2015) comic *On a Plate: A short story of privilege* provides comic strips with examples of privilege; Elliot's (1970) well-known "Blue eyes-Brown eyes" experiment demonstrates a group of elementary students separated based on eye color and given certain advantages in class based on these groupings; or view a more current viral video "The \$100 Race" (2017) of young adults participating in a running race where certain privileges (e.g., race, gender, family) allow individuals to move closer to the finish line before anyone starts.

To sustain the level of intrigue initiated by these attention grabbers, teachers can set-up low-risk, small group Socratic seminars to discuss generic privilege topics (see Table 1). Beginning with generalized topics helps students become more comfortable with the notion of privilege and its application. Once this comfort level has increased, educators can discuss broader, more potentially contentious topics (high-stakes). The topics in Table 1 can be debated as privilege through various lenses, but the goal is to find topics most students can relate to and then move towards a deeper understanding of racial privilege.

To extend this conversation, make a tallied count from a

list of privileges and reflect on personal experiences (see Table 2 for examples and bit.ly/Privilege_List to access the entire list). Modify or shorten the list as needed for age or time limits.

Table 2
Sample statements from privilege list of 100+

1. Our trash is picked up weekly.
2. I've never had to skip a meal.
3. I've always had access to free, clean water.
4. I frequently take an airplane to travel or Uber when needed.
5. My parents are still married.
6. I grew up with plenty of books in my house.
7. An adult I lived with checked in on my homework.
8. My primary language is English.

Educators must individually tally their own privilege before integrating this concept into their curriculum. First, access the full list and make a hash mark for every agreeable statement. Then contemplate what the number of marks represent and consider how privilege affects our roles as educators. When using in class, read at least 50 of the privilege statements (accessed online) aloud to students. Students can then tally and reflect upon their own responses. This activity allows students to contemplate their own advantage and recognize various (un)privileged circumstances. Through this, our classes can move to a place where oppression is no longer unconscious (Macintosh, 1989).

After reading the entire list, individuals can reflect with these prompts:

- What topics have you never considered to be a privilege? Explain your feelings.
- What topics made you feel uncomfortable? Why?
- What questions do you have about this exercise?

Let your students know that the results of this activity will be kept private. All notes and reflections are building points for further discussion and personal connection;

Table 1
Generic and contentious topics

Generic: Privilege examples for secondary students	Contentious: Privilege examples for secondary students
Living in the United States	Race
Receiving a free education	Material possessions; socioeconomics
Having (name) as a teacher	Family dynamics
Freedom of speech	Religion
Use/access of technology at school	Participating in fee-based activities

therefore, do not collect or assess them. This practice is not meant to make anyone feel guilty, but rather to begin a conversation, create awareness, and raise consciousness. This approach allows teachers and students to have a “healthy racial identity” (Toldson, 2019, p. 151) and works to break the system of privilege. It also helps break stereotype threats (i.e., conforming to a social label) while not perpetuating or fulfilling these prophecies (Cohn-Vargas, 2018).

Hill (2009) stated “forms of knowledge that privilege the interests of dominant groups” sustain collective memories throughout the K-12 curriculum and beyond (p. 101). Students will possess a deeper understanding of privilege and dominant “memories” through the pre-reading activities and can then evaluate a text from this viewpoint. However, privilege-related conversations may create defensiveness from individuals or groups of students. Some students might engage in the discourse of denial or blame of others; allow for this reaction and move forward while analyzing these assumptions. This response is natural as most people don’t want to be told they are taking advantage of others—even unintentionally. The goal is to understand that exploring privilege can work against prejudices and limit negative behaviors related to preconceived notions (Cozolino, 2013).

Reading the Text

I am Alfonso Jones is a YA graphic novel set in present-day. The book addresses the shooting death of an innocent black teen and develops into a fictional Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign. Themes of social justice, racial profiling, media bias, and police brutality appear throughout the book. These topics provide important context and content to allow educators to expand upon the pre-reading concept of racial privilege.

In the book, a clothing store security guard kills Alfonso, the main character. The white male, an off-duty police officer, shot Alfonso after assuming the hanger he was holding was a gun. Alfonso simply wanted to buy a suit to celebrate his dad’s release from prison. His father also experienced racial profiling. In fact, racial profiling led to his dad’s imprisonment and denied father and son from ever meeting face-to-face.

Before his death, Alfonso was trying to get the role of Hamlet in a Shakespearean play at his school. Immediately after Alfonso’s death, his spirit joined a ghost train with other black men and women who died at the hands of society’s protectors—this parallel journey is to help make sense of his own death. The ghosts on the train cannot find peace without

justice. Meanwhile, Alfonso’s family and friends partake in BLM rallies to support the search for justice in Alfonso’s death. The shooter is acquitted while Alfonso is stereotyped in the media. The ensuing protests turn violent. Alfonso neither has the privilege of living past adolescence nor the opportunity to use his voice to change the world he left.

The book is full of figurative language, contentious themes, and a push for true poetic justice. The graphics display violent imagery and illustrate oppressive circumstances. *I am Alfonso Jones* helps frame the integration of exploring racial privilege in the ELA classroom through the generational themes of profiling. The following are three standards-based activities to supplement the conversation of privilege and the embedded use of verse in this text.

Poetry supports the dialogue and the plot throughout *I am Alfonso Jones*. One way to extend beyond this with text sets is to first analyze lines (Medina et al., 2017):

- “[T]hey got you looking like a colander” (p. 25).
- “In America, if you are black, you can run on a football field, a baseball field, a track field, and a basketball court...but God forbid you should ever run from the police. Your blood’ll run from your flesh and your breath will run out of time” (p. 47).
- “That’s not the point. Most cops don’t kill—or beat people. You’re doing the same thing society does-- stereotyping all cops by the actions of a few” (p. 89).

These quotes will lead to a discussion of police brutality from a racial perspective. Add in Willie Perdomo’s (n.d.) poem “41 Off Broadway” about the shooting death of unarmed Amadou Diallo in the Bronx in 1999 and Robert White’s (2018) poem “A Policeman’s Fight” about his experience as a veteran police officer. Comparing these poems act as exemplars and the need for equity-focused discourse in the ELA classroom. Students can write their thoughts in a Venn diagram to track their thinking and develop questions before participating in a two cents discussion.

During a two cents discussion, give students two pennies to allow them to put in their “two cents” at some point. Facilitate this in small groups or as a whole class. Every time a student has something to add to the conversation, they put a penny into the middle. This strategy allows all students to share opinions, encourages timid students to participate, and facilitates deeper peer exploration of racial privilege through comparison of multiple voices.

In *I am Alfonso Jones*, Medina et al. (2017) reference the concept of black invisibility in relation to Ralph Ellison’s book

Invisible Man and the statue of the same name in New York City. This connection of black invisibility further connects the text to racial privilege. Consider using a fishbowl approach to discussing invisibility. Half of the students sit in the middle and the other half circle around them. The outside group is not allowed to talk. Have the students inside the circle dissect and discuss the meaning of “where to be black is to be practically invisible” (Medina et al., 2017, p. 5). Allow them to lead the discussion amongst themselves while the outside group remains invisible and voiceless—although students can be prompted to take notes. Then switch roles and have the outer circle move to the inside and discuss the meaning of, “I tried to make myself invisible, but my heart beat so loud the whole world could hear it” (p. 83). Come back together to debrief, ask students to continue to reflect, and question who else invisibility applies to. Ask students if there is an opposite emotion or if there is a systemic support of not being seen or heard. End by asking students to write about a time they have felt invisible.

One way to review and summarize a chunk of text is to create a found poem. In this activity, students pull out words or phrases from a larger piece of work and create their own poem using the author’s words. This is an innovative place to start to recap any text. Here is a found poem to summarize chapter 32, “Ready” (Medina et al., 2017, pp. 104-106) in *I am Alfonso Jones*:

Mobilizing
Destroyed, dead
Walking around free
Death into a circus
To be mobilizing
Uprising
Free
Social media
Need to be mobilizing

Found poems can include repetition or be rearranged to create meaning. The goal of a found poem can be as specific as a chapter summary or as broad as a character analysis.

Utilizing textual comparisons, poetry, and creative writing are only a few ways to support a deeper grasp of white privilege while reading *I am Alfonso Jones*.

Post-Reading

Exposing students to privilege provides mixed responses, ideas, and motivation. *I am Alfonso Jones* is only one YA book to provide a starting point for the deeper conversation

and comprehension of racial privilege. An equity literacy framework of including controversial, justice-minded, and anti-racist curricular themes in YA literature helps move theory into practice. Use conversation scaffolds and protocols suggested to purposefully continue the dissection and analysis of white privilege.

Below are performance assessments recommended to demonstrate application and understanding of privilege in a greater context after reading *I am Alfonso Jones*. These options allow for choice, a highly effective practice in secondary classrooms (Armstrong, 2016).

Racing the News: Students will analyze, discuss, and debate privilege presented in news or social media platforms related to race in the United States. Have your students present information found in a written document or alternative format. Students should create guiding questions and lead peers in a two cent or fishbowl discussion related to the topic. You should also require a reference page.

Play it Write: Students will author a manuscript for a 5-10 minute play (approximately 1,000-2,000 words) related to the theme of privilege (e.g., white privilege, racial profiling). Student(s) will perform the short play in front of peers. The playwright should debrief after the performance.

Art Justice: Students will create artwork (e.g., PSA video, photographic essay, poetry collection) to promote and encourage social action related to privilege. Have your students duplicate and display their creation around the school, community, or as a social media campaign to mobilize action. A short reflection should be submitted with the final product.

Learning how to respectfully discuss hot topics is a lifelong, transferable skill. As teachers, we can integrate conversations of privilege, race, and stereotypes to have a larger place in our classrooms (Armstrong, 2016; Cozolino, 2013; Drakulich, 2015). This builds empathy, self-awareness, and metacognitive strategies encouraged for adolescent growth (Armstrong, 2016; Erikson, 1963). Providing students with these skills should infiltrate the curriculum as they fulfill standards related to literacy domains.

Understanding privilege allows individuals to discern the power of their voice and increases equity. This new evaluation of racial privilege builds identity and relationships, so encourage students to take this new knowledge and stand up. Stand up for a shamed individual, stand up for an oppressed group, and stand up against injustice. Empowering students through the context of privilege is a significant seed to start

change. By incorporating these lessons found in literary works, we can promote and provide critical skills for our students to influence the world around them.

Further Resources

- Harvard Implicit Bias Test: Take one of these tests to expand the conversation of privilege and bias.
- Bit.ly/Privilege_List: Referenced above, this growing list will help start and continue conversations related to privilege and areas of advantage.
- Lee and Low Publishers: Use the Classroom Library Questionnaire to evaluate the diversity in classroom bookshelves.
- Rethinking Schools: Multiple articles and resources to support educators and students in discussions of race, inclusivity, and beyond.
- The Zinn Project: Resources with counter-narratives to educate students about history from marginalized interpretations.

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