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Justifying Juneteenth: A Critical Pairing of Two Children's Texts

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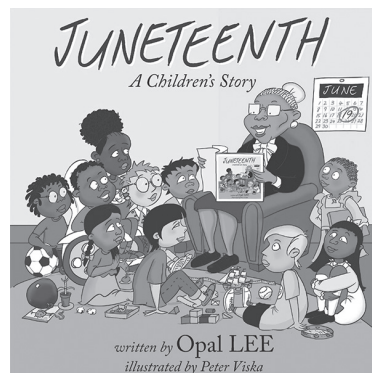
Justifying Juneteenth: A Critical Pairing of Two Children's Texts

by Rebecca Witte and Amber Lawson



Need a text to support your students' understanding of Juneteenth? We suggest two! As Juneteenth approaches in the upcoming school year, we anticipate teachers will look to incorporate texts that recognize this notable and new-to-some holiday. We seek to share two texts, whose impact, we suggest, is stronger when read together. The first text we highlight is *Juneteenth: A Children's Story*. It is a relatively new book, written in 2021, by Opal Lee, "the grandmother of Juneteenth," herself and illustrated by Peter Viska. The comic-like illustrations are sure to delight readers of all ages even into middle school. In fact, we couldn't help but notice all the details embedded in the illustrations that can support children's understanding of the holiday. The other text, *Juneteenth for Mazie*, was written and illustrated by the late Floyd Cooper. Its rich, velvety pictures draw the reader into the story. The two books together create a story of Juneteenth that presents a full picture of an event that should be acknowledged and celebrated while also recognizing the ongoing history of racism that continues to the present day.

***Juneteenth:
A Children's Story***
Juneteenth: A Children's Story, by Opal Lee, takes place in an elementary classroom. A culturally diverse and inclusive group of children are sitting on the carpet, and they ask



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Opal Lee to read a story to them about Juneteenth. Opal Lee, also the narrator, begins the interactive read aloud by explaining what enslavement is and when it occurred in history. She distinguishes the history of enslavement in the United States and the biblical enslavement in Egypt to better support children's historical understanding. The illustrations of the enslaved people include a variety of facial expressions that acknowledge Black people's struggles and discontentment with slavery. The illustrations also include white enslavers with whips, guns, and other tools used to control Black people to acknowledge them as a major source of oppression and to depict their thoughts and feelings towards enslaved people. As Opal Lee continues to tell the children about the history of Juneteenth, the children's illustrations include a variety of facial expressions as well. It is crucial to point out the children's reactions, including Black children's anger and a white child in shock, as children listening to the story in classrooms may have similar reactions when learning the history.

While the text acknowledges Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation, it would be beneficial to children to receive a further explanation as to why President Lincoln is compared to President Obama. Students should be aware of their similarities and differences. Opal Lee continues the story by mentioning the first "Watch Night" service when enslaved people waited at churches for their freedom after learning about the Emancipation

Must Read Texts

Proclamation. She then mentions how "watch night" services still happen every New Year's Eve in Black churches. The story continues with a flashback to the announcement in Galveston, Texas, in 1865 by General Gordon Granger and Black soldiers of the end of enslavement two years later. This event marked the first celebration of Juneteenth. Opal Lee concludes the story by stating the ways enslaved people celebrated the first Juneteenth, as well as how and where Juneteenth is celebrated today.

Juneteenth for Mazie

Juneteenth for Mazie begins with Mazie, a young Black girl, staring out a curtained window and feeling upset because she can't have and do what she wants. Responding to this angst, her dad approaches her with a promise of celebration the next day and begins to tell a story of her ancestors. The narrative begins with a story of enslavement and hope for freedom that eventually comes with an announcement given from a balcony on a warm summer day in Galveston, Texas. Celebrations of freedom for those enslaved erupted and continued through the night. Notably, the story doesn't end there. As the author notes and illustrations show, in every era of American history Black people fought for freedom and opportunity. But, through it all, they found time to celebrate together, especially on Juneteenth.



Appropriately, the book's illustrations feature Black people throughout history yet are nestled within the family narrative of a father and daughter relationship. In soft and muted hues, the illustrations are rich and inviting. Blackness is celebrated with a variety of skin tones. The faces of those who are singing, praying, listening, and celebrating are detailed and full of expression. The illustrations also provide nuance to the written text. For instance, while the text hints at struggling through desegregation, the pictures reveal a foregrounded Black student with a classroom of white students in the background. There is also a not-so-subtle nod to Barack Obama, recognizing his monumental triumph while being sworn into office.

Besides the illustrations, the strengths of this text can be found in its acknowledgment that the struggle for equality didn't end with Juneteenth, but continued throughout history. While the celebration of freedom was discussed, it doesn't overshadow the plot.

White people are notably missing from the text and illustrations. While arguably this is a good thing, since they should not be the focus of Juneteenth, the book fails to show how white people were a major source of oppression. Thus, a failure to connect the dots for students may leave students thinking that injustices were not due to race. It should be noted that this book lacks references to ongoing racism today. Knowing these considerations, a teacher should address these issues with thoughtful questions.

We feel that pairing these two highlighted texts would offer a fuller picture of Juneteenth. Together, recommending first *Juneteenth: A Children's Story*, followed by *Juneteenth for Mazie*, simultaneously supported by classroom conversation, children will be able to grasp a detailed understanding of enslavement before learning about the continued fight for freedom by the Black community through the decades and conclude with a more detailed account of the celebration of Juneteenth.

Author Biographies

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