TEACHING TOUGH TOPICS

How do I use children’s literature to build a deeper understanding of social justice, equity, and diversity?
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# Contents

Overview 6

Foreword by Deborah Ellis: “Building Empathy Through Children's Literature” 7

Acknowledgments 8

Introduction: Tough Topics and How to Deal with Them 9

Why Teachers Should Take On Tough Topics 10
When to Teach a Tough Topic 10
Books as Bridges 12
Perspective: “Why Use Multicultural Literature to Teach Tough Topics?” by Shelley Stagg Peterson 13
Perspective: “Children's Literature as a Way to Empower Our Students” by Anne Burke 14
Organizing a Literature-Based Program: An Overview 16
The Role of Response in Yielding Fresh Insights 19

1 Race and Diverse Cultures 23

How My Definition of Great Books Has Evolved 24
Perspective: “Challenging Racism: Developing Children's Critical Racial Literacy” by Michelle Grace-Williams 26
Perspective: “Multicultural Books and Critical Reading as Mirrors, Windows, and Doors” by Maria José Botelho 27
The Language and Vocabulary of Race and Diverse Cultures 29
Opening Up the Topic of Race and Diverse Cultures 30
Model Lesson 1: Responding to a Picture Book Through Thinking Stems 31
Model Lesson 2: Unpacking a Monologue Script 34
Great Books for a Tough Topic 36

2 The Immigrant and Refugee Experience 40

Humanizing the Global Refugee Crisis 41
Perspective: “Why We Need to Teach About Immigrants and Refugees” by Arif Anwar 42
The Language and Vocabulary of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience 43
Opening Up the Topic of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience 44
Model Lesson 1: Exploring a Picture Book Through Tableaux 45
Model Lesson 2: Creating a Graphic Page 48
Great Books for a Tough Topic 50
3 Indigenous Identities  52
Confronting Historical Truths  53
Perspective: “The Need to Learn the Truth” by Joanne Robertson  54
The Language and Vocabulary of Indigenous Identities  55
Opening Up the Topic of Indigenous Identities  55
Model Lesson 1: Four-Rectangle Responses to a Picture Book  58
Model Lesson 2: From a Think-Aloud to Thoughtful Responses  61
Great Books for a Tough Topic  64

4 The Holocaust  67
Planting the Seeds for Change  67
Perspective: “How to Teach About the Holocaust” by Kathy Kacer  69
The Language and Vocabulary of the Holocaust  70
Opening Up the Topic of the Holocaust  71
Model Lesson 1: Interpreting Picture Book Visuals  72
Model Lesson 2: Raising a Range of Questions  74
Great Books for a Tough Topic  78

5 Physical and Mental Challenges  80
Strengthening Inclusiveness  80
Perspective: “Why Addressing Physical and Mental Challenges Is Important” by John Myers  82
The Language and Vocabulary of Physical and Mental Challenges  83
Opening Up the Topic of Physical and Mental Challenges  84
Model Lesson 1: Using a News Report as a Persuasive Writing Source  86
Model Lesson 2: Using a Novel as an Impetus for Questioning  86
Great Books for a Tough Topic  90

6 Poverty  92
Addressing Poverty: Five Considerations  93
Perspective: “Poverty — The Need for Teachers to Provide a Gentle ‘First View’” by Jim Giles  94
The Language and Vocabulary of Poverty  96
Opening Up the Topic of Poverty  97
Model Lesson 1: Storytelling from Third Person to First  99
Model Lesson 2: In-Role Interviews to Further Understanding  101
Great Books for a Tough Topic  103

7 Death, Loss, and Remembrance  105
Preparing or Protecting Children: The Conundrum  105
Perspective: “Dealing with Bereavement Through Children’s Literature: An Interview with Katherine Paterson” by Joyce Marcel  107
The Language and Vocabulary of Death and Loss  108
Opening Up the Topic of Death  109
Model Lesson 1: Eliciting Oral Narratives Through Literature  109
Model Lesson 2: Researching Diverse Ways of Honoring Death  112
Great Books for a Tough Topic  113
8 Gender Identity and Homophobia  115
Considering a Spectrum of Equity  115
Perspective: “Children’s Books: Making the World Understandable” by Ken Setterington  117
Perspective: “Why Teach Students About Gender Identity and Homophobia” by Tara Goldstein and Benjamin Lee Hicks  117
The Language and Vocabulary of Gender Identity  120
Opening Up the Topic of Homophobia  120
Model Lesson 1: Responding to a Picture Book Through Prompts  124
Model Lesson 2: Interpreting a Dialogue Script  124
Great Books for a Tough Topic  129

9 Bullying  131
Taking Action on Bullying  131
Caring Classrooms: Taking a Literacy Approach  132
The Language and Vocabulary of Bullying  133
Opening Up the Topic of Bullying  134
Model Lesson 1: Writing from a Character’s Perspective  136
Model Lesson 2: Interpreting Poems Through Choral Dramatization  139
Great Books for a Tough Topic  143

10 Ripples of Kindness  145
Creating a Culture of Kindness  145
Perspective: “Teaching Kindness?” by Eric Walters  146
15 Events to Help Nurture a Caring Classroom Community  147
Learning More About One Another  148
Practising Kindness  152
“I Am Doing Everything I Can!”  156
Great Books About Kindness, Caring, and Connecting  159

Bibliography  161

Index  163
## Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Featured Texts</th>
<th>Genres</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Race and Diverse Cultures</td>
<td>The Other Side, Skin</td>
<td>picture book, monologue script</td>
<td>thinking stems, text interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Immigrant and Refugee Experience</td>
<td>The Day War Came, Escape from Syria</td>
<td>poem; picture book, graphic text</td>
<td>tableaux, graphic page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Indigenous Identities</td>
<td>Stolen Words, Hiawatha and the Peacemaker</td>
<td>picture book, legend; picture book</td>
<td>Four-Rectangle responses, think-aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Holocaust</td>
<td>The Promise, All About Anne</td>
<td>picture book, nonfiction</td>
<td>visuals interpretation, questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Physical and Mental Challenges</td>
<td>CBC News, Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus</td>
<td>news report, novel</td>
<td>opinion writing, questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Poverty</td>
<td>Those Shoes, How to Steal a Dog</td>
<td>picture book, novel</td>
<td>storytelling, in-role interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Death, Loss, and Remembrance</td>
<td>Always with You, After Life</td>
<td>picture book, nonfiction</td>
<td>oral narratives, research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Gender Identity and Homophobia</td>
<td>stories on genderfluidity, Jake’s Progress</td>
<td>picture book, dialogue script</td>
<td>sentence stems, interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Bullying</td>
<td>Say Something or Dear Bully of Mine, The Bully, the Bullied, the Bystander, the Brave</td>
<td>picture book, poetry</td>
<td>Character Journals, choral dramatization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Ripples of Kindness</td>
<td>“The Little Hummingbird”</td>
<td>folktale</td>
<td>Readers theatre</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Race and Diverse Cultures

We’re best friends.
Even though we live in two different worlds.
Different, different but the SAME!
— From Same, Same but Different by Jenny Sue Kostecki-Shaw

“Ayden, you look upset,” said Mom. “Did something happen?”
“Some people called me a word I never heard before,” said Ayden.
Mom was immediately concerned. “What did they call you?” she asked. “Come sit down.”
Ayden whispered in Mom’s ear.
Mom gasped . . .
“Mom, what does that word mean?”
— From My Skin: Brown by @studentAsim, illus. Sari Richter

I do not know if these hands will be
Rosa’s
or Ruby’s
gently gloved
and fiercely folded
calmly in a lap,
on a desk
around a book,
ready
to change the world . . .
— From Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson

I began teaching in the 1970s and was eager to build a collection of great books to bring into the classroom. My first teaching job was in a rural setting, a homogeneous cultured class of Grade 7 students. I was taking continuing education Language Arts courses, I regularly visited The Children’s Bookstore in Toronto, and I talked with colleagues, including the school librarian, about books as I strove to gather good books that would engage my students and spur them on to choose and enjoy good books. In my early years of teaching, I wanted to introduce students to what I thought were great authors (Gary Paulsen, Robert Newton Peck, and Monica Hughes). Judy Blume’s notoriety was on the rise. S. E. Hinton’s The Outsiders was the must-read for young adolescents. Many students were keen to enter Tolkien’s fantasy world or the horror books of V. C. Andrews.
How My Definition of Great Books Has Evolved

Thinking about it now, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor, a book about racism in America during the Great Depression, was likely the single title on my classroom bookshelf with an African American character. Perhaps I bought it because it won the 1977 Newbery Medal. Was I aware of the need to invite my all-White classroom to read a story about a character very different than them?

A Seminal Read-Aloud to the Class

When I was in my fourteenth year of teaching, the novel *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli was released, and I chose to read it aloud to my Grade 5 students. This Newbery Medal–winning novel tells the story of Jeffrey Lionel Magee who is forced to live with his strictly Catholic aunt and uncle when his parents are killed in a car crash. The orphaned boy runs away and lives in the streets of Two Mills, Pennsylvania, where he eventually becomes a local hero. Maniac is challenged with bullying and racism in his encounters with characters who live in the African American east end and the White west end of the town. For me, this story, where students root for the homeless hero, come to learn about prejudice, and feel compassion for those who are illiterate, is a deserted island keeper of the best of great books. My students (not one Black person in the class) voted this book their favorite of the year.

I would say that this novel became a seminal choice in my career of book collecting. I set myself a challenge to find books that would inform and stretch students of otherness. And the publishing industry helped me, as it came to recognize the need to put books on shelves that represented the varied cultures of readers.

The process may have begun slowly, but in the past few years, in particular, books with Black, Hispanic, Latino, Asian, Jewish, and Muslim protagonists have been published. There are more and more titles that help students find themselves on the pages of literature and help open windows into the diverse lives of others.

Diverse Books and Authors Needed for Diverse Communities

For the past 20 years I have taught courses to teachers in the teacher education program and certainly in the past few years, the students in my class have become as diverse as any urban-centred community could find. As a middle-class, White male, I have become acutely aware of the need to find books that introduce diverse races and cultures. Choosing such books, I feel, shows respect for students who need and want to find themselves represented in books or to learn about others who are considered different from them because of their race and culture. Presenting picture books, novels, and nonfiction titles with characters of different skin colors, religions, and family customs informs beginning teachers, I hope, of the need to do so in the classroom, both in urban and rural settings.

Each year, I am approached by several teacher candidates who are genuinely interested in using books that deal with racism and anti-discrimination. They ask questions like these: “Do you have any books for Black History month?” “What do I say to a young girl in my class who wouldn't play with another girl because
she said her skin was too brown?” “How do I help the student who hears the slur ‘Go back to where you came from?’”

Serving students with literature that features characters who are different from themselves is a good place to start. Today there are many books written by diverse authors (Jason Reynolds, Walter Dean Myers, Cynthia Kadohata, Jacqueline Woodson, and Pablo Cartaya) who tackle typecasting as they present stories of racially diverse characters finding a place to belong. Many contemporary novels provide stories that help our students unpack the sensitive, messy topic of race and racism (Wishtree by Katherine Applegate, Count Me In by Varsha Bajaj, The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas). This is a far cry from the lonely title about racism sitting on my shelf in 1976.

**How to Talk About Race and Racism**

Choosing to talk about race is an option for many teachers and parents. Conversations about racism can be tricky and the context will vary depending on who is talking and what their personal experiences with race and racism are. Parent Toolkit, an online resource, provides expert advice for parents (and teachers) in *How to Talk to Kids About Race and Racism*. A few key points are noted below:

- **Set the example.** We need to feel comfortable discussing race and racism among ourselves.
- **Help children navigate their curiosity.** Encourage students to ask questions about otherness as they meet it in life and in literature.
- **Make it relatable.** An activity that calls upon children to make a tangled web involving balls of string can teach them how creating racism is easy but untangling it is hard for people who want society to be fair.
- **Be open about addressing mistakes.** Encourage honest communication about a put-down, rather than just calling someone “racist.” “Tell me more” invites opportunities to share a point of view.
- **Be an advocate.** Don’t just say people are equal, but act in ways that reflect that thinking.

Our classrooms need to be places where every student feels safe. Teachers can help students recognize that they are both similar to and different than the person who sits alongside them. Introducing the concept of “racism” may be scary, especially if the student could be the target of racism; however, doing so is essential. We must empower children to understand what it means to be racist, to confront others who are behaving as racists, and to work towards challenging stereotypes and talking honestly about race and culture. All this will be done with the hope of someday overcoming racism in society.

In the feature that follows, Michelle Grace-Williams discusses why even young children can and should understand what racism is so that deficit racial messages will affect them less.
Challenging Racism: Developing Children’s Critical Racial Literacy

by Michelle Grace-Williams

Tricia: What do you want to eat, my little princess?
Sasha: I’m not a princess, mummy. I’m not white!

The preceding dialogue between Tricia, a Black mother and an early childhood educator, and Sasha, her four-year-old daughter who had recently begun attending Pre-K, reveals that children often begin to internalize deficit perspectives about their racial identity at an early age. Sasha’s statement reveals that she is beginning to associate whiteness with societal standards of beauty. Since children are exposed to racial stereotypes at an early age, it must be interrupted in the classroom during these early years. Being color blind and silent about racism keeps the status quo intact to the detriment of racialized children and their families (Boutte 2015; Grace-Williams 2018; hooks 1994; Ladson-Billings 2009; Lyiscott 2017).

Children Can Handle Talk About Racism

My conversations with Tricia and my teacher candidates often reveal their struggle to identify ways of engaging children in conversations about racism and other forms of discrimination because they assume that children are too young to understand and handle these issues. However, several research studies reveal that children can engage in critical conversations about racism — something that is necessary for interrupting the reproduction of racism (Boutte and Muller 2018; Hagerman 2019). As Kaczmarczyk, Allee-Herndon, and Roberts (2019) argue, “Safe, effective conversations depend on teachers knowing that normalizing whiteness likely shuts down important explorations of past and present racial diversity, power, and oppression” (524).

Below are useful tips for beginning this journey:

Engaging in Anti-discriminatory Teaching: Tips

• Acknowledge and plan for ethnic-racial diversity in the classroom.
• Critically reflect on and address deficit teacher narratives, assumptions, and low expectations of racialized students.
• Engage students in critical racial literacy activities to raise their critical awareness.
• Select children’s literature that represents diverse racialized groups positively.
• Consider including the silenced perspectives of racialized students and their families in planning lessons and choosing textbooks and resources.
• Promote children’s voices and action against racism and other forms of discrimination.
• Collaborate with critical scholars, educators, parents, and community members to construct inclusive lessons.
**Why Early Conversations About Racism Are Essential**

Children are often observers and recipients of racism. Thus, delaying conversations about racism in the classroom is tantamount to delaying the support they need to understand this issue, cope with it, and address it. In this vein, though they do not fully understand the complexities involved, racialized children face challenges and internalization of deficit racial messages that will often impact their academic performance and psychological well-being. Thus, teachers must help to interrupt the cycle of oppression they face by engaging in anti-discriminatory teaching. When teachers embrace this liberating approach, racialized children like Sasha will begin to learn to see themselves positively.

**References**


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**Multicultural Books and Critical Reading as Mirrors, Windows, and Doors**

*by Maria José Botelho*

The metaphors of mirrors, windows, and doors have a long-standing relationship with multicultural children's literature. Children's books can serve as mirrors of readers’ cultural identities and experiences. They also can function as windows into other cultural circumstances. The readers’ imagination can transform the window into “a sliding glass door” as they step into worlds created by the words and/or images of the text (Bishop 1990). This transformation can deepen and expand the readers’ understanding of cultural communities. Consequently, literature can affirm and diversify readers' lived experiences.

These metaphors demand that teachers reconsider what to read, that is, who is represented, under-represented, misrepresented, and invisible in the curriculum and on their classroom bookshelves. Multicultural children's books about or by under-represented communities of color, such as Aboriginal, African American,
and Asian Canadian, offer counter-narratives to the ever-present White, middle-class, monolingual storylines. Several caveats can support teachers’ use of multicultural children’s literature.

**Caveats About the Use of Multicultural Children’s Literature**

First, one book cannot represent a cultural experience because there is diversity within and among cultural groups. This caveat unsettles fictive unities within cultural groups. For example, all European Canadians are not represented in children’s literature. The Portuguese Canadian experience is rarely rendered in children’s books.

Second, race and ethnicity should be at the centre of any multicultural literature discussion. Whenever relevant, these power relations should be considered alongside class, gender, language, and sexuality.

Third, multicultural books are not immune to stereotypes and dominant worldviews. Children’s books are cultural products, records of the worldviews and publishing practices of the time in which they were produced.

Last, although multicultural children’s literature brings readers up close to the experiences of cultural groups, these circumstances are often represented as just personal and cultural. These multicultural texts should be analyzed alongside and beyond other texts. Narrations, monologues, dialogues, and plotlines should be examined within the power relations of race, class, gender, language, and sexuality.

**The Necessity of Critical Engagement**

These caveats demonstrate that teachers must attend to not just *what to read* but also *how to read*. The meaning in these texts is made through readers’ critical engagement with them. Building on reader response practices that draw on readers’ prior knowledge of cultural themes and text types creates spaces for critical engagement with multicultural books (Cai 2008). Recontextualizing the reader–text interaction within a broader context enlists the readers’ lived and literary experiences as well as historical and socio-political factors as resources for text analysis.

Critical engagement with multicultural books demands that the metaphors of mirrors, windows, and doors be reframed within a broader context, too. Books as mirrors magnify how society is organized. As windows, they offer a panoramic view of how power is exercised among characters through their words and images. Children’s literature as doors serves as entry points to examine how power relations can be reconstructed, informed by the readers’ new understandings. These reclaimed metaphors of multicultural children’s literature can guide the reading of culture and power relations and create a site for readers to become aware of how texts position them (hail them who to be and not be) and reposition themselves as researchers and makers of language, literature, and culture.

Critical engagement with multicultural literature becomes mirrors, windows, and doors into readers’ lives and how cultures work and is constructed socio-politically and historically.

The multi-layered critical multicultural analytical practices (Botelho 2015; Botelho and Rudman 2009) offer tools to examine how books represent cultures and power relations:

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*From “Multiplication Is for White People”*

“If the curriculum we use to teach our children does not connect in positive ways to the culture young people bring to school, it is doomed to failure.”

— Lisa Delpit (2013, 23)
• How do the book’s design elements (e.g., book cover, jacket, front matter, spreads, typography, medium) shape how the story is told or the information represented?
• How do the book’s literary elements (e.g., point of view, social processes among the characters, story ending, genre(s)) shape how the story is told or the information represented?
• In what ways do socio-political and historical contexts offer insights for reading these texts critically and multiculturally?

The production and teaching of multicultural children’s literature generate silences and render some cultural experiences invisible. All cultures deserve to be represented in children’s literature because it is through these representations that cultural members negotiate their identities (Hall 1996). While multicultural children’s literature can stretch readers’ cultural imaginations, its integration in curriculum alone will not consider misrepresentations, under-representations, and invisibilities. It is through critical engagement with these texts that readers develop complex understandings of culture and socio-political and historical imaginations.

References

The Language and Vocabulary of Race and Diverse Cultures

1. As a way for students to carefully consider their assumptions, prompt them to search for definitions of these three words: race, racism, and racist. Alternatively, provide them with the following explanations to confirm or challenge their assumptions about what these words mean.
   • A race is one of the major groups into which human beings can be defined according to their physical characteristics. The term race refers to groups of people who have differences and similarities in biological traits deemed by society to be socially significant; in other words, people treat other people differently because of them. The most widely used human racial types are based on visual traits (skin color, facial features, type of hair).
   • Racism is prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior.
   • A racist is a person who shows or feels discrimination or prejudice against other people of other races, or who believes that a particular race is superior to another.

2. Meanings of the words race and ethnicity are sometimes confused. Draw students’ attention to the words and what they each mean.
Chapter 2

The Immigrant and Refugee Experience

Different languages, different food, different customs. That’s our neighborhood: wild and tangled. Like the best kind of garden.

A few months ago, a new family, Samar’s family, rented the blue house. They were from a distant country. Their ways were unfamiliar. Their words held new music.

Just another transplant in our messy garden, it seemed.
— From Wishtree by Katherine Applegate

Once there was a boy who had to leave his home . . . and find another. In his bag he carried a book, a bottle, and a blanket.

In his teacup he held some earth from where he used to play.
— From Teacup by Rebecca Young

Let me experience fully these people who are so different from me. Let me be part of this fabric. Not disappear into it, not become them, but be with them.
— From A Perfect Ganesh by Terrence McNally

In preparing to introduce this tough topic, I came across an article titled “One Day We Had to Run': The Development of the Refugee Identity in Children’s Literature and Its Function in Education.” In this article, educator Julia Hope claims that refugees in British schools are increasing and, as a result, books dealing with the struggle and survival of those who flee their countries are being published in great numbers. Hope provides an ethnography study to consider the significance of personal testimony and understanding of real historical events and fictional refugee characters in children’s literature. The Silver Sword by Ian Serraillier (1956), I Am David by Anne Holm (1965), and Number the Stars by Lois Lowry (1989) are cited as examples of stories where young people are forced to flee their countries in wartime. Her article was written in 2008.

Today’s headlines inform us that the global refugee crisis continues with more than a million migrants fleeing war in Syria, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, and Central and South America. These life stories can be considered both tough and inspirational.
Humanizing the Global Refugee Crisis

Whether from an adult’s grasp of the world or a child’s viewpoint, it is hard to make sense of how a refugee crisis can even occur. Would it not be better if our children didn’t know about such traumatic events? The facts, however, are real and present and should not be denied. As educators we are challenged to explain and humanize the refugee crisis for young readers, especially when the curriculum is drawn from issues of identity, diversity, and the making of connections.

Literature to Raise Awareness of the Plight of Refugees

As with the discussion of each tough topic in this resource, it is important for us to turn to literature to bring authenticity, humanity, and story power to learning about the immigrant and refugee experience. Contemporary publishers recognize this essential need. From picture books to young adult titles, from fiction to nonfiction, a range of titles are currently available to advance understanding of the world of immigrants and refugees. This world, where war, natural disaster, or acts of terrorism drive families out of their home countries, is much broader in scope than in past decades.

Many students who sit in today’s classrooms, urban and rural, have been part of those experiences. To build empathy and caring within our students, we must raise their awareness of people who are confronted with the desperate need to find a place of safety, a place of belonging, a place that is home in the community. For immigrant and refugee children in our midst, the school is that community. Raising awareness is a vital first step in understanding the backgrounds and lives of refugee children. Relevant books can also help to validate the experiences of children who have been immigrants or refugees.

Literature to Foster Safe and Welcoming Communities

According to Margaret Meek (2001, x), children’s literature plays an important part “in the development of children’s understanding of both belonging (being one of us) and differentiation (being other).” In a curriculum that values social justice, diversity, and equity, teachers — and their students — need to welcome immigrants, many of whom have come through extraordinary experiences and trauma. Friendship and acceptance are essential to help people of different cultural and social backgrounds find a place of belonging.

In most communities and schools today, citizens will likely have some contact with immigrants or refugees who are newly arrived into their neighborhoods. Asking questions and learning about these neighbors, who have likely left much behind, can help to uncover assumptions about and perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers. Refugee stories have the potential for challenging stereotypes and countering racism; they can help children make stronger connections with the experiences of others.

Many children encountering the strangeness of living in a new country identify with picture book characters. In Mustafa by Marie-Louise Gay, there is Mustafa, who strives to enjoy life in his new home while meeting the challenge of learning a new language. In The Name Jar by Yangsook Choi, there is Unhei, who is anxious that American kids will not like her. Out by Angela May George, The Journey by Francesca Sanna, and The Day War Came by Nicola Davies can open doors to understanding of refugees and migrants who have travelled from
countries all over the world and can connect many students to their own experiences of leaving their homelands.

Many teachers of Grades 6 through 8 recognize the title *Refugee* by Alan Gratz as powerful and essential novel reading to help young adolescents dig into historical events framed around the stories of three refugees: a Jewish boy in Nazi Germany, a Cuban girl in 1994, and a Syrian boy in 2015. Gratz’s book, along with free verse novels *Home of the Brave* by Katherine Applegate, *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai, and *Other Words for Home* by Jasmine Warga, would provide a strong literature base for exploring the topic.

When engaged with literature, students can begin to make sense of historical events and raise questions about the political circumstances that led to those events. Moreover, these powerful stories move beyond just giving information to arousing strong emotions. When students read about the determination and resilience of characters who are victims of political and social circumstances that have put their lives at risk, both mind and heart are engaged. Julia Hope (2008, 300) affirms, “Children's literature about the refugee experience is an ideal context for sharing stories, feelings and fears that many children have had to deal with in their relatively short lives.”

Today’s books may be drawn from wider global experiences than those that Hope addressed, but some universal truths apply to the narratives in past and current books. In a sense, we are all immigrants. Every family has a heritage story about ancestors who have moved from one country to another. It is important to have these stories revealed and to learn about the fictional and real stories of others. These stories can facilitate dialogue and foster empathy. In a diverse and equitable classroom, they can help young people accept that an immigrant or refugee can “be one of us” while holding on to their “otherness.” Children's literature can inform young people about how yesterday’s refugees held on to hope and showed the courage to survive and find a safe home. It can also help students to take action to ensure safe and welcoming environments in today’s communities — and in those of tomorrow.

In the Perspective feature that follows, Arif Anwar reminds us that the immigrant and refugee experience is ultimately a human experience that affects all of us.

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**PERSPECTIVE**

**Why We Need to Teach About Immigrants and Refugees**

by Arif Anwar

It is important to learn about immigrants and refugees because we might have them in our family trees or because these terms have been applied to us in the past or may be applied in the future. At the same time, words such as *immigrants* and *refugees* are labels. Calling people *immigrants* or *refugees* neither eclipses their past nor defines their future. It is only a part of their identity.

Although the topic has taken on some urgency because of Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War, refugees have existed throughout history. Refugees are often the victims of intricately connected global economic and political alliances that prop up oppressive governments in rich and other resource-rich countries. Many are political refugees from civil strife.
Chapter 2: The Immigrant and Refugee Experience

Immigrants and Refugees — They Are Us

One way to understand the immigrant or refugee experience is through literature, a powerful vehicle for truth that allows us to experience the world through the senses of another. However, when you seek to understand the immigrant or refugee experience, do not simply pursue the easy path of doing a search for books that contain the terms in their descriptions; rather, seek literature grounded in the cultures — in the past and in the future of the people you wish to learn about — not merely a window in time when people are defined in relation to their legal status in a new land.

As you read these works, remember that the immigrant or refugee experience is a human experience. There have been times and places in all our lives where we have been the stranger, unsure of ourselves, hoping for a kind smile or a welcoming word. In short, we need to learn about immigrants and refugees — and to teach our students about them — not because they are different from us, but because they are us.

The Language and Vocabulary of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience

1. Ask the students the following: “What do you think is the difference between an immigrant and a refugee? How might the experiences of an immigrant be similar to or different than that of a refugee?” After hearing a number of responses, you could share following definitions with the students to help them better understand the difference.
   - **Immigrant**: one that immigrates, such as a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence; the term can also refer to a plant or animal that becomes established in an area where it was previously unknown.
   - **Immigration**: an act or instance of immigrating, of journeying to a country from one’s native country for the purpose of permanent residence there
   - **Immigrate**: to come to another country with the intention to live there permanently
   - **Emigrate**: to leave or go from one’s country to live in another
   - **Migrate**: to move between places, such as different countries; in the case of birds, for example, the movement pattern is seasonal.
   - **Refugee**: a type of immigrant individual seeking refuge or asylum, especially one who has left his or her native country and is unwilling or unable to return to it due to persecution or fear of persecution (because of race, religion, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion)

2. Ask the students: “What do you think are reasons for people to emigrate?”

   Reasons are reflected in the various government categories of immigrants. Explain to the students that there are essentially four categories:
   - **family-class immigrants** (persons closely related to Canadian residents living in Canada)
   - **economic immigrants** (skilled workers and business people)
   - **refugees** (people who are escaping persecution, torture, or cruel and unusual punishment)
   - **people in the humanitarian or other category** (people who have endured much suffering and whose lives would improve if they could immigrate)

Arif Anwar, born in Bangladesh, has worked on issues of poverty alleviation for BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities). He is the author of the adult novel *The Storm*, which crosses continents and interconnects stories of immigration drawn from 50 years of Bangladeshi history.
Opening Up the Topic of the Immigrant and Refugee Experience

Three recent novels pertaining to immigrants and refugees expose racial and religious intolerance. The quotations below echo hateful words that can still be heard in present-day North American society. Rejecting newcomers (or treating established citizens as if they were newcomers) is a tough topic to address in our classrooms, but literature and discussion can help students to take a moral and ethical stance to disturbing language and hateful deeds.

Present the following samples of dialogue to the students and ask, “Do you think these statements are fact or fiction? Why?”

LEAVE!
— From Wishtree by Katherine Applegate (page 51)

“I don’t believe a word any of these people say. They need to all go back.”
— From Count Me In by Varsha Bajaj (page 148)

“Go back to where you came from . . . We don’t want you here.”
— From Other Words for Home by Jasmine Warga (page 263)

Written Response and Discussion

Using at least one of the excerpts given above, have students complete these three sentence stems:

• When I read this excerpt, I am reminded of . . .
• When I read this excerpt, I wonder . . .
• When I read this excerpt, I predict . . .

Students can then share their written responses in small groups. Afterwards, during a whole class discussion, encourage students to share their responses by discussing these questions:

• How truthful is this statement(s) to media reports you are familiar with?
• How can a novel help you to understand different views about immigration?
• What are some connections that you as readers can make to yourselves? to others? to other books? to the world?
• How can we help or give advice to those who make such hateful statements?

Graphic Organizers Based on a Picture Book

• The K-W-L Chart. Many educators are familiar with the teaching strategy of the K-W-L chart which is used before, during, and after teaching a new topic. Students record what they know (K), what they want to know before being introduced to a text (W), and what they learned (L) by the time the reading or lesson was completed. This strategy is useful for activating students’ prior knowledge, for raising questions, and for identifying new content that students have learned. Here it is applied to refugees.

Volunteers contribute ideas as the teacher records answers in the What We Know About Refugees and What We Want to Know About Refugees columns. After a read-aloud session with a picture book about immigrants and refugees (see the list on pages 50 and 51), the teacher can then record ideas in the What We Learned column.
Chapter 2: The Immigrant and Refugee Experience

Use of a T-chart. An alternative is for students to work in small groups to address these two headings after they have heard an appropriate picture book:

- What We Know About Refugees
- Questions We Have About Refugees

Each group can then meet with another group to share and compare answers, or one group can share their T-chart notes with the whole class as the basis of a master chart. Students from other groups can report items that they think should be added.

As an introduction to the topic of refugees, the students in Rachael Stein's Grade 7 class worked in groups of three or four to list facts and questions they had about refugees. Groups then shared their responses with the whole class. The following lists were compiled on the whiteboard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What We Know About Refugees</th>
<th>Questions We Have About Refugees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most refugees come from countries that are at war or face terrorism.</td>
<td>What is the difference between a refugee and an immigrant?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugees can be different ages, both male and female, and different races.</td>
<td>What is a refugee camp?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are camps set up to help refugees survive once they leave their country.</td>
<td>How can refugees possibly afford basic needs? What if they have no money?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are over 20 million refugees in the world today.</td>
<td>What role does the government play in admitting refugees to a country?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not all countries open their arms and welcome refugees.</td>
<td>What does &quot;seeking asylum&quot; mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It takes a long time for a refugee to become a citizen of a country.</td>
<td>Where do most refugees come from today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugee children can be split up from their parents.</td>
<td>Why would a country turn refugees away? What happens to them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes refugees pay smugglers to get them into a country.</td>
<td>When children are separated from their parents, how can they find them again?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A refugee is a person, like you or me.</td>
<td>Who helps refugees once they settle into a community? How are they helped?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A refugee's top wish is freedom.</td>
<td>Why do some people seem to hate refugees?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the theme of refugees is explored over time, students can add to the list of facts they learn about immigrants and refugees through media, picture books, novels, and the Internet.

Model Lesson 1: Exploring a Picture Book Through Tableaux

This lesson works well for students in Grades 3 to 9.

See the boxed list titled "More Picture Books with Strong Narratives for Exploring Tableaux" for other picture books especially appropriate for tableaux making.

Featured Text: The Day War Came by Nicola Davies, illustrated by Rebecca Cobb

British author Nicola Davies created the poem “The Day War Came” in response to children utterly alone in the world and the U.K. government vote against the nation accepting 3000 unaccompanied child refugees from Syria. The poem, first published on The Guardian newspaper’s website on April 28, 2016, has also been transformed into a picture book.

What inspired Davies to write the poem was the story about a refugee child being refused entry to a school because there wasn’t a chair for her to sit on. In the days that followed publication of the poem, hundreds and hundreds of people posted images of empty chairs with the hashtag #3000chairs. These images served as symbols of solidarity with young people who had lost everything and had nowhere to go.
Tableaux: A Way to Convey Dramatic Human Moments

A tableau depicts a moment in time, such as the arrival of immigrants on the pier. Students can represent a story by creating still images, or frozen pictures, in different periods of time depicting characters from the story or implied characters that connect to the story. Presenting a series of tableaux is a convenient way to retell story events: three to five images can be used to represent the beginning, middle, climax, and ending of the story. When instructed to depict scenes that might not be in the story, students are moving beyond retelling by considering possibilities and abstract ideas inherent in the story. Since creating tableaux encourages — indeed, requires — students to represent ideas nonverbally, this dramatic form helps students succinctly convey explicit and implicit events.

Tableaux is a meaningful strategy for retelling events from a picture book and exploring possible situations implied by the narrative. Several picture books on the topic of immigration and refugees can be used as sources for facilitating active responses to the narrative. The books identified in the text box below have strong narratives related to the theme (see also Great Books for a Tough Topic on pages 50 and 51). Students work in groups of three to five to explore the story. Each participant becomes a member of the tableau by representing a character; an object, such as a tree; or perhaps a concept, such as loneliness, connected to the story.

More Picture Books with Strong Narratives for Exploring Tableaux

- *My Beautiful Birds* by Suzanne Del Rizzo
- *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family’s Journey* by Margriet Ruurs
- *Adrift at Sea: A Vietnamese Boy’s Story of Survival* by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch with Tuan Ho (illus. Brian Deines)
- *Teacup* by Rebecca Young (illus. Matt Ottley)

The following outline provides possibilities for exploring the dramatic technique with a picture book that has been read aloud to the students.

Working Inside and Outside the Story

1. *Sequencing the Story.* Direct students in their groups to create three tableaux: one representing the beginning; one, the middle; and the third, the end of the story. This activity allows students to retell main ideas from the story.
2. *Digging Deeper into Important Moments — Exploring Cause and Effect.* Ask students to examine significant moments in this story by creating three more frozen images. Invite them to (1) highlight the climax, or turning point, of the story; (2) consider what happened before that moment — the cause; and (3) consider what happened after that moment — the effect.
   - Tableau 1: Groups choose one moment from the story that they think is the most interesting or the most important. Students create a tableau that represents that moment.
   - Tableau 2: Students create a tableau that represents a moment or an episode that happened *before* the first key tableau.
   - Tableau 3: Students create a tableau that represents a moment or event that happened *after* the first key tableau.
Grandma’s voice shook as she softly whispered, “Would you want to mess with a very strong, young, green-eyed medicine woman?” I said nothing and she added, “You are someone who can handle both worlds — the Native and the non-Native, the old and the new. Someone who can learn the knowledge of the past and carry it forward to the future.”

— From *Little Voice* by Ruby Slipperjack

There’s a power in these lands,
One that’s been here many years,
Strong enough to make you stand
And forget all your fears.

It started in the past with a blast of light and thunder;
Ancient ones looked up and beheld the sky with wonder.

— From *Go Show the World* by Wab Kinew, illustrated by Joe Morse

In October 2019, I went to see a performance of a theatrical piece called *The Mush Hole*, performed by members of Kaha-wi: Dance Theatre. This wordless performance drew upon stories and writings of survivors of the Mohawk Institute, a residential school. Through gesture and dance, strong images about what went on inside the walls of the boarding school were conveyed: a hand held over the mouth to represent silence, facial expressions of anguish, a mimed sequence of a boy being strapped, numbered red bricks that told the story of the numbers assigned to the students, replacing their names.

I did not know about the Mohawk Institute. I had never heard the term *Mush Hole*, a nickname given by Aboriginal students who were forced to eat mushy oatmeal every day. I have some knowledge of residential schools, but this information did not come from my elementary, secondary, or university education.

“The story is about hope and finding light in dark places. As much as it speaks to intergenerational trauma, it screams resilience,” says Santee Smith, director and creator of the Kaha-wi: Dance Theatre.

Silent No Longer

After the performance, three seniors, Charlene, Roberta, and George, who were survivors of the Mush Hole, shared some of their stories. It was these stories that brought authenticity and powerful narratives into the trauma that emerged from being inside the government- and church-run residential school.

It was Roberta who said that work like this [*The Mush Hole*] can open “gates of understanding” to what happened. For years, survivors of residential schools were forced to remain silent about what happened. Roberta said, “I will never put my hand over my mouth again.”
Confronting Historical Truths

I was lucky to have attended this performance at Young People's Theatre in Toronto. Although The Mush Hole will continue to be performed across the country, I accept that only a few will have the good fortune to see it. I, like many around me, had a strong emotional response to this powerful piece. As an audience member, I wondered about the truths we learned and the truths that were perhaps hidden. As an educator, I wondered, what am I doing to teach students, young and old, about Indigenous culture? What could I do? What should I do?

I believe that many teachers — and I am one of them — worry about teaching this history about Indigenous peoples. Since I feel I know so little myself, I believe I might offend when I strive to build insight, understanding, and inquiry into First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) cultures. Families who identify as Indigenous today represent just over 4 percent of the population in Canada. How can I meet the needs of all students and the demands of government expectations for changes in pedagogy while doing justice to the task? How will I deal with comments that seem stereotypical and racist when they emerge in discussions of this content?

Opening the Gates of Understanding

In the teacher education program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, attention is given to teaching about Indigenous ways of life. We have an initiative titled the Deepening Knowledge Project for and about Aboriginal cultures. Each of the course instructors in the program is required to bring attention to this significant area of learning to prepare novice teachers to teach this in classrooms today and tomorrow. I wonder: What is the most important content to teach? How do these Grades 1 through 8 teachers teach their students about Indigenous culture? residential schools? reconciliation? How prepared are teachers to teach this tough topic? Which resources and strategies will open up conversations?

For any curriculum topic, teachers need to plan carefully, gather material, and ensure that they have some knowledge about the content they are presenting. Teachers may hesitate to address a tough topic because they feel unprepared to do so. But for social justice, equity, and diversity understanding, prepared we must be to educate our students about Indigenous identities. Accepting the recognition and obligation to bring the topic forward, I absolutely contend that picture books, fiction, and nonfiction selections can open a door to understanding. Children's literature is not the only thing, but it is a good place to start. Offering a range of fiction and nonfiction resources, having discussions, and encouraging curiosity, inquiry, research, and reporting are all important. This approach certainly would apply to any tough topic, but with this strand of learning, it is especially important to bring in the voices of Indigenous authors as written (for example, Shi-shi-etko by Nicola Campbell, When We Were Alone by David A. Robertson, and Fatty Legs by Christy Jordon-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton).

I readily admit that an opportunity to watch a play or have survivors visit a school is not easily available to all, but we can bring the words from pages, illustrations from picture books, and copies of photographs into the classroom to open the “gates of understanding.”

In the Perspective feature that follows, Joanne Robertson tells us how important our role can be.
The Need to Learn the Truth

by Joanne Robertson

It’s important for teachers to teach students about Indigenous cultures so that students understand that Indigenous peoples have lived on Turtle Island forever, and that if you laid it all out on a timeline, they would see we only began sharing the land with newcomers very recently.

Generations, including mine, were misled in the classroom to believe that immigrants to this land were heroic and superior and “civilized.” One has only to read the comments section of media stories to know that this thinking is still alive and strong in Canada. Our Indigenous students sit beside students whose families still believe this. As teachers you need to have their back.

It is imperative that children in Canada learn the truth. Without truth, how can we possibly reconcile? Many teachers have shared with me that they feel as if they are walking on eggshells when they begin teaching about Indigenous cultures, and I get that. I was adopted as a baby and raised away from my culture, and I struggle to gain back what is my birthright. There are still many times that I feel foolish for not knowing all our traditions. Having shared that, I ask you teachers to be as tough and resilient in the classroom as our ancestors were: as tough and resilient as our children are today. You will not know everything about our cultures, no matter how many books you read . . . but still read all the books!

It is also imperative to respectfully invite Indigenous people to your classrooms to help you. All students must know that we are not historical figures, but alive and still fighting to be recognized in Canada.

If you are an educator choosing to explore FNMI learning in your elementary classroom, know that we are diverse. Just like you wouldn’t ask a student from Germany about life in Scotland, don’t ask a student from one First Nation about another First Nation. We are international diverse nations.

When you talk about residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, drinking water advisories, and troubling current events, be sensitive to the fact that Indigenous students in your class may be affected by one of or all these experiences. Trust is earned.

Get to know the chiefs and Elders in the territory your school is on. Relationship building takes time — don’t be in a rush. Ask them who the local heroes are. Invite them to your classroom to have these stories shared. Our children need to see their heroes celebrated among their peers.

Water Will Bring Us Together

Water is a beautiful starting point when introducing Indigenous knowledge into the classroom. There is no arguing that we all need water to live. Grandma Josephine Mandamin always used to say, “We are not related by blood, but we are related by water.” Water will bring us together; it is something we can agree on.

Anishinaabe women have respected and honored water forever. Colonization and industrialization took only a couple hundred years to destroy what we protected. The climate change clock says we have 15 years to stop our negligence. It will take all of us to do this.

Learn the truth. Speak the truth. Ask for help.
Chapter 3: Indigenous Identities

The Language and Vocabulary of Indigenous Identities

As teachers embark on this unit with students, it is important to explain and clarify some terms. Vocabulary words could be posted on a chart. Students can share their assumptions about the meanings of the words.

*What does the word Indigenous mean?*
There is much discussion about this. **Indigenous** specifies something or someone that is native rather than coming or being brought from elsewhere. Globally, there is no accepted definition of **indigenous peoples**. Some countries think of indigenous peoples as the people who were there at first contact. Other countries consider indigenous peoples to be the nomadic peoples of long ago. In Canada, the terms **Aboriginal** and **Indigenous** are used to encompass all indigenous peoples within the country, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. The word **Indian** remains a legal term in Canada: the **Indian Act**, originally passed in Parliament in 1875 and much revised since, remains a part of Canadian law.

The terminology used by indigenous peoples of the Americas to describe themselves, as well as how these peoples prefer to be referred to by others, is changing and under discussion all the time. The only consensus on naming is that most indigenous peoples prefer to be referred to by their specific nation. In the United States the preferred term seems to be **American Indian** rather than **Native American**, which has met with only partial acceptance.

*Who are the Aboriginal, or Indigenous, peoples of Canada?*
According to Canada’s **Constitution Act** (1982), **Aboriginal peoples** includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. The initialism FNMI captures this and is now considered a legal term for describing Canadian Aboriginal peoples. **Aboriginal peoples** is considered the correct term as opposed to “the Aboriginal” or “Aboriginals” as a noun. Some First Nations prefer not to be called Aboriginal peoples. **First Nations** is a term used to identify as **Indian** for individuals and Indian bands.

*What is meant by “residential schools”?*
Residential schools were government-sponsored religious schools that were established to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture. Indian residential schools operated in Canada between the 1870s and the 1990s with the last one closing in 1996.

Opening Up the Topic of Indigenous Identities

The assumption statements and quotations featured on “Perspectives on Indigenous Identities,” the line master on page 57, are designed to help open up the topic of Indigenous identities and culture.

Guidance on How to Interact with the Statements on Indigenous Identities

1. Some teachers may feel that they lack enough information to address all these statements. There is no need to feel burdened. The intention of this activity is to find out what the students know and what they might need to know. Teachers don’t have to have all the facts about a given issue. The responses
that students make can inspire them, as well as their teachers, to find out more!

2. As students respond to these statements, they might raise questions and express curiosities about correct information on Indigenous cultures. When sharing information, some students may have doubts about what they are offering. Their wondering about what they know and what they think they know can lead to further research and reporting. For example, students may want to find out more about the water supply to Indigenous communities or identify contributions made by Indigenous people.

3. As with many of the tough topics in this book, students might reveal stereotypical thinking. These wrong assumptions can provide a meaningful context for challenging students’ beliefs and educating them about pertinent issues. Listening to the viewpoints of others may bring students to new understandings.

Exploring Indigenous Voices and Perspectives

Students can use the line master to interpret, respond to, and reflect on what the statements mean; they will also have an opportunity to share their opinions and background knowledge related to Indigenous cultures. Three ways of proceeding are outlined below.

Option #1: Small Group Discussion. Provide students with the line master titled “Perspectives on Indigenous Identities.” Direct students to identify three statements that resonate with them by marking each with an asterisk (*). The students can then be arranged in small groups to discuss the statements and the meanings behind them. Tell them that their opinions may vary. You may want to offer the following questions to guide discussion:

- Whose perspective is represented by the statement? Give reasons for your choice.
- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain.
- What questions related to this statement come to mind?

Option #2: Independent Reflection. An alternative way to present this activity is to cut the statements into strips and distribute one strip to each student. Working independently, students write a short reflection expressing their opinion about the statement. Students then work in pairs to discuss the statements they have been assigned. Finally, they are arranged in groups of four to share their responses.

Option #3: Gallery Walk. Display the statements around the room and invite students to go on a gallery walk to read them. Students can then stand by the quotation that most interests them. What questions come to mind after reading this statement? Prompt each student to record a question on a sticky note and display the students’ questions on a chart.

Students can revisit this Opening Up activity after reading related children’s literature, making inquiries, and doing research on Indigenous cultures. Ask: “How have your responses been challenged or confirmed? What new questions have you come up with?”

“First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples have concepts of rights and responsibilities based on worldviews in which everyone and everything is related.”
— Canadian Museum for Human Rights Winnipeg, Manitoba
Perspectives on Indigenous Identities

I know a lot about Indigenous culture.

“People need to see and understand that Indigenous people should be considered the founding peoples of this land.” (Perry Bellegarde, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, re-elected in 2018)

Land acknowledgments are an honest and historically accurate way to recognize the territories of place of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. It is important to make a respectful land acknowledgment at the beginning of cultural, sports, and educational events.

Indigenous people have made huge contributions to this country.

“All though you and I are in different boats, you in your boat, and we in our canoe, we share the same river of life.” (Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Seneca Nations, Iroquois Confederacy)

There are Indigenous communities lacking clean drinkable water; the federal government is responsible for fixing this problem.

“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.” (Thomas King, author)

It is important for residential school survivors to continue to tell their stories today, even though the events happened long ago.

The injustice of residential schools could never happen in today’s world.

Indigenous people should have their own schools.

We should read stories about Indigenous people only if the stories are written by an Indigenous author.

Indigenous peoples are all the same.

I can tell a person is Indigenous by looking at them.

School is the best place to learn about Indigenous cultures.

“It must be sad for Indigenous people to have other people thinking that Christopher Columbus was a hero.” (Grade 4 student)

We are all Indigenous people on this planet.
“This History Must Be Taught”

This is what Dr. John Doran, Mi’kmaq, Shubenacadie First Nation, Pipe Carrier for his nation, asks all settler Canadians to realize:

You are on Indigenous land; you have a responsibility to know about it. You have responsibilities through still-relevant and valid treaties with the Indigenous peoples of this land. Everyone living on Turtle Island needs to know this. Indigenous people are not part of the multicultural movement. They were the first humans here. Indigenous peoples have unique legal agreements with the Canadian government, land, and Settlers. These agreements need to be taught in schools. Attempts to destroy cultures and assimilate the Indigenous Peoples, including Residential Schools, have shaken the Indigenous world to the core, and have done almost irreparable damage. This history must be taught.

Model Lesson 1: Four-Rectangle Responses to a Picture Book

Featured Text: Stolen Words by Melanie Florence, illustrated by Gabrielle Grimard

This lesson focuses on the picture book Stolen Words. A young girl comes home from school and asks her grandpa how to say something in his Cree language. Because his words were stolen from him during his life at a residential school, he tells her he cannot teach her. The granddaughter is determined to help her grandpa rediscover his language.

Making Responses in Three-Person Groups

This activity works best when students work in groups of three.

1. Students take a blank piece of paper and fold it twice to make four rectangles. They number the spaces 1, 2, 3, and 4.
2. In space 1, students write a short response to the text to consider what it reminded them of, to share their opinions, or to raise questions or puzzles.
3. Students exchange their organizers with another person in the group. Students read the response in space 1 and then react to it by writing in space 2. What did the response in space 1 encourage them to think about? Students can disagree or agree with what was written.
4. The activity is repeated. Students read both responses on the sheet they receive and write a response to them in space 3.
5. The sheet is returned to the person who wrote the first response on the page. Students read all three responses on the sheet and write a new response in space 4.
6. In their groups, students discuss the text, using their written responses to frame the discussion.

Ways to Enrich Four-Rectangle Responses

- Consider offering thinking stems, or prompts, to students to record their responses. (A list of thinking stems appears on page 31.)
- Encourage students to write their responses as if they are having a conversation, connecting to what has been shared.
Chapter 3: Indigenous Identities

• Allow three to four minutes for each written response. Doing so encourages students to fill in the space with more than one thought.
• After the group discussion, invite students to write a final reflection synthesizing the responses they have read or heard from others.

Some Grade 4 students heard the book Stolen Words by Melanie Florence read aloud and were guided through the Four-Rectangle activity. Here is how one group completed the activity.

Further Ways of Responding to Stolen Words

• Whole Class Discussion
As a follow-up to the Four-Rectangle activity, a discussion with the whole class can provide a meaningful way for students to share their insights and give opinions, and to validate, question, or make connections to the insights and opinions of others. Before, during, or after the discussion, encourage students to share statements from their written sheet. Here are suggested questions for discussion with the whole group:
  • How do we know that this young girl and her grandfather had a special relationship?
  • What do you learn about Indigenous identities from this picture book?
  • How do the words and pictures in this story help you to learn about residential schools?
  • Which illustration do you think is the most interesting? the most powerful? (Draw students’ attention to one or more illustrations and discuss what information they learn from them.)
  • What are some different emotions conveyed in this story? Is there happiness? sadness? fear? love?
  • How is the title Stolen Words appropriate for the story?
  • What alternative title might you suggest for this book?

Glossary: Cree Vocabulary
Draw students’ attention to the English translation and pronunciation of the Cree words in the story. (See the final page of the book.)

A more detailed guide for Stolen Words can be found at https://secondstorypress.ca/kids/stolen-words.
Index

The ABCs of Death: Key Vocabulary, 110
Aboriginal peoples, 55
activating prior knowledge, 76
active joyful learning, 145
anti-discriminatory teaching, 26
antisemitism, 70
Assumption Guide
  Disability, 85
  strategy, 84
Be Kind to One Another: Quotations for Reflection, 154
being poor, 96
bereavement, 107–8
books
  addressing tough topics with, 12–13
  bullying, 143
  children's literature, 14–16
  considering choices, 30
  death, loss, and remembrance, 106, 113–14
  diverse books, 24–25, 31, 36
  gender identity and homophobia, 129–30
  great books, 24–25
  historical fiction, 79
Holocaust, 78–79
immigrant and refugee experience, 50–51
Indigenous identities, 64–66
kindness, 147, 159
making connections, 12–13
multicultural literature, 13–14, 27–29
nonfiction, 18, 51, 65–66, 79, 114
physical and mental challenges, 90–91
picture books, 16–17, 36, 38, 50–51, 64–65, 78, 90, 103–4, 113, 129, 143, 147, 159
poetry, 18–19
poverty, 94, 103–4
race/diversity, 36–39
young adult, 39, 66, 79, 104, 114, 130
brainstorming, 88, 90
bully/bullying
  beyond the classroom, 133
  books, 143
  bracing for, 11
  children's literature, 132
  choral dramatization, 139–43
  Four Corners, 134, 136
  gender-based and homophobic, 118
  language and vocabulary, 133–34
  literacy approach, 132–33
  Opinionnaire, 134, 135, 136
  perspective writing, 136–39
  poetry, 140
  relationship solutions, 132–33
  taking action, 131–32
  types, 134
  bystanders, 134
caring classroom, 147–48
Character Journals, 136–39
children's literature
  bullying, 132
  culturally responsive teaching, 15
dancing
  affect, 106
  bereavement, 107–8
diversity
  defined, 83
  diversity and, 81
diversity/diverse cultures
  human rights issue, 81
  literature and, 81
  statistics, 80
  making sense of, 10–11
  oral narratives, 109, 111–12
  protecting children, 105–7
  research, 113
discourse
  script, 124–29
disciplinary
  defined, 83
disciplinary diversity
  defined, 83
  diversity and, 81
  human rights issue, 81
  literature and, 81
  statistics, 80
  making sense of, 10–11
  oral narratives, 109, 111–12
  protecting children, 105–7
  research, 113
Discipline
  defined, 83
discipline
  defined, 83
books, 24–25, 31, 36, 38–39
death and, 109
disability and, 81
language and vocabulary, 29–30
scenarios, 30
dramatization, 157
Drawing on Prior Knowledge: A Quiz About Anne Frank, 77
dreams, 47
e-mail, 129
emigrate, 43
empathy, 93, 95, 117, 146
equality, 96
equity, 96
ethnicity, 30
face-to-face bullying, 134
facts, identifying, 74
First Nations, 55
Four Corners, 134, 136
Four-Rectangle responses, 58–60
Frank, Anne, 74–78
gallery walk, 56
gender, 118
gender identity
books, 129–30
bullying, 118
children’s literature, 117
concepts, 118–19
definitions, 120
dialogue script, 124–29
gender, 118
gender stereotypes, 11
gender fluidity, 124
homophobia, 120, 128–29
language and vocabulary, 120
parents’ advice to teachers, 119
picture books, 124
pronouns, 120
questions of identity, 116
reasons to teach, 117–20
sex, 118–19
sexual orientation, 119
spectrum of equity, 115–17
gender fluidity, 124
Global Read Aloud, 104
global refugee crisis
fostering safe and welcoming communities, 41–42
humanizing, 41–42
raising awareness of, 41
graphic organizers, 44–45
graphic page
creating, 48–50
example, 49
extensions, 50
showing prediction through, 48
tableaux and storytelling, 50
historical fiction, 79
Holocaust
books, 69, 78–79
children’s literature, 68
classroom’s role, 68
complexity, 68
definitions, 70
interpreting picture books, 72–74
language and vocabulary, 70
mind mapping, 71
planting seeds of change, 67–68
questions, 74–78
researching, 71
teaching, 69
homophobia
books, 129–30
bullying, 118
children’s literature, 117
concepts, 118–19
definitions, 120
described, 117
dialogue script, 124–29
discussing, 128
gender, 118
gender fluidity, 124
language and vocabulary, 120
parents’ advice to teachers, 119
picture books, 124
pronouns, 120
questions of identity, 116
reasons to teach, 118–20
sex, 118–19
sexual orientation, 119
spectrum of equity, 115–17
understanding, 128–29
hot seating, 35
How to Steal a Dog, 102
hunger, 93
Illustration
bullying, 142
Holocaust, 74
immigrant and refugee experience, 48
poverty, 97
immigrant experience
books, 50–51
definitions, 43
discussing, 44–45
global refugee crisis, 41–42
graphic organizers, 44–45
graphic page, 48–50
language and vocabulary, 43
picture book, 44–48
teaching about, 42–43
written response, 44
immigrants, 43
immigration, 43
improvisation, 35, 47, 50, 128, 138
inclusiveness
appropriate language, 84
benefits, 82–83
strengthening, 80–82
independent reading, 18
Indian Act, 55
Indigenous identities
books, 64–66
confronting historical truths, 53
definition, 55
exploring voices and perspectives, 56
Four-Rectangle responses, 58–60
interacting with statements on, 55–56
language and vocabulary, 55
learning the truth, 54
think-alouds to thoughtful responses, 61–64
water, 54
indirect bullying, 134
in-role interviewing, 100–103
Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus, 89
Jake’s Progress, 127
kindness
active joyful learning, 145
books, 147, 159
caring classroom community, 147–48
culture of kindness, 145–46
learning about one another, 148–52
names, 150, 152
portrait poems, 149–50  
positivity and, 156–58  
poverty, 93–94, 95  
practising kindness, 152–53  
spreading kindness, 153, 155  
teaching, 146–47  
K-W-L chart, 44  
The Language of Sexuality and Gender Identity, 121  
LGBT, 120  
literature-based program  
nonfiction, 18  
novels, 17–18  
organizing, 16  
picture books, 16–17  
poetry, 18–19  
Literature Circles, 16, 17  
making inquiry, 60  
mental challenges  
Assumption Guide strategy, 84–85  
books, 90–91  
challenging assumptions, 81  
definitions, 83  
from shame to support, 82  
goals, 81–82  
human rights issue, 81  
inclusive language, 84  
inclusiveness, 80–83  
language and vocabulary, 83–84  
literature and, 81  
persuasive writing, 86  
questioning, 86–90  
reasons to address, 82–83  
semantic maps, 83–84  
migrate, 43  
mind mapping, 71  
monologue/monologue script  
described, 34  
extension activities, 35  
improvisation, 35  
interpretation, 34  
multicultural literature  
caveats about using, 28  
children’s literature, 27–29  
critical engagement, 28–29  
critical reading and, 27–29  
described, 12  
mirroring cultural perspectives, 14  
personal connections, 13  
tough topics and, 13–14  
understanding social inequalities, 13–14  
multimodal expression, 20  
names, 150, 152  
Nazis, 70  
news report, 86  
nonfiction  
death, loss, and remembrance, 114  
Holocaust, 79  
immigrants and refugees, 51  
Indigenous identities, 65–66  
literature-based program, 18  
novels  
bullying, 143  
death, loss and remembrance, 113–14  
gender identity, 129–30  
homosexuality and homophobia, 130  
immigrants and refugees, 51  
impetus for questioning, 86–90  
Indigenous identities, 65  
kindness, 147  
literature-based program, 17–18  
physical and mental challenges, 91  
poverty, 104  
race/diversity, 38–39  
objects of character, 47–48  
Opinionnaire: What Are Your Views on Bullying?, 133, 135, 136  
oral narratives, 109, 111–12  
Perspective writing, 136–39  
Perspectives on Indigenous Identities, 57  
persuasive writing, 86, 90, 101  
physical challenges  
Assumption Guide strategy, 84–85  
books, 90–91  
challenging assumptions, 81  
definitions, 83  
from shame to support, 82  
goals, 81–82  
human rights issue, 81  
inclusive language, 84  
inclusiveness, 80–83  
language and vocabulary, 83–84  
literature and, 81  
persuasive writing, 86  
questioning, 86–90  
reasons to address, 82–83  
semantic maps, 83–84  
picture books  
bullying, 143  
comparing information, 74  
death, loss, and remembrance, 113  
Four-Rectangle responses, 58–60  
gender identity and homophobia, 129  
genderfluidity, 124  
graphic organizers, 44–45  
Holocaust, 72–74, 78  
immigrants and refugees, 50–51  
Indigenous identities, 58–60, 64–65  
interpreting visuals, 72–74  
kindness, 147, 159  
literature-based program, 16–17  
names, 152  
physical and mental challenges, 90  
poverty, 103–4  
race/diversity, 36, 38  
tableaux and, 45–48  
thinking stems, 31–34  
poetry/poems  
bullying, 139–43  
choral dramatization, 139–43  
discussing, 140, 142  
illustrating, 142  
interpreting, 140  
kindness, 149–50  
literature-based program, 18–19  
portrait, 149–50  
writing, 142  
portrait poems, 149–50  
positivity, 156–57  
poverty  
addressing, 93–94  
books, 103–4  
defining, 98  
empathy, 95  
equity vs. equality, 96  
gentle “first view,” 94–95  
illustration, 97  
in-role interviews, 101–3  
issues, 92  
kindness, 95  
language and vocabulary, 96–97  
literature and, 94
recognizing and respecting children, 95
storytelling, 99–101
student perceptions, 99
word choice, 96–97

questions/questioning
brainstorming, 88, 90
discussion and quiz, 75–76
generating, 78
identity, 116
novel as impetus, 86–90
range of questions, 74–78
reading comprehension, 88
report planning and delivery, 76, 78
quotations, 152–53

race/racism
anti-discriminatory teaching, 26
books, 36, 38–39
challenging, 26–27
children and, 26
definitions, 29, 30
everl conversations about, 27
monologue, 34–36
picture book, 31–34
scenarios, 30
talking about, 25
racial literacy, 26–27
rast, 29
Readers theatre, 156, 158
reading comprehension, 88
refugee experience
books, 50–51
definitions, 43
discussing, 44–45
global refugee crisis, 41–42
graphic organizers, 44–45
graphic page, 48–50
language and vocabulary, 43
picture book, 44–48
teaching about, 42–43
written response, 44
relational bullying, 134
religion, 12, 14, 24, 67, 75–76, 106, 113, 122
remembrance
bereavement, 107–8
books, 106, 113–14
definitions, 108
diversity, 109
eounters with death, 106–7
family experiences, 113
honoring death, 112–13
language and vocabulary, 108–9
making connections, 109
oral narratives, 109, 111–12
protecting children, 105–7
research, 113
reports, 76, 78
residential schools, 55
Responding to a Picture Book, 126
Responding to a Poem, 144
response activities
benefits, 19
described, 19–20
Indigenous identities, 63–64
tough topics, 20
retelling, 100
semantic mapping, 83–84
sex, 118–19
sexual orientation, 119
singing/songs, 64
Sixties Scoop, 54
Skin, 37
snippets, 142
social class, 93
social justice, 81, 93
Spreading Kindness, 155
story mapping, 64
storytelling, 99–101
T-chart, 45
tableaux
described, 46
exploring picture books through, 45–48
extensions, 47–48
graphic pages and, 50
working inside and outside, 46–47
Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers, 63
“Tell Me Something About Yourself,” 148–49
text-message conversations, 139
text-to-text connections, 60
“That’s Me!”, 148
“The class photo that made a father cry,” 87
The Little Hummingbird: Readers Theatre, 158
think-alouds, 61–63
Thinking About Homophobia, 122–23
Thinking About My Fiction Choices, 33
Thinking About Racism: What If . . .?, 32
thinking stems, 31–34
“This History Must Be Taught,” 58
This Is Who I Am, 151
title, 9
tough topics
books, 12–13, 36, 38–39, 50–51, 64–66, 78–79, 90–91
bullying, 11
death, 10–11
described, 10
gender stereotypes, 11
helping students make sense of, 11–12
Holocaust, 67–79
immigrant and refugee experience, 40–51
Indigenous identities, 52–66
multicultural literature and, 13–14
multimodal expression, 20
physical and mental challenges, 80–91
race and diversity, 23–39
reasons for teaching, 10
strategies, 21
when to teach, 10–12
Turtle Island, 54
upstanders, 134
visualizing, 60
Voices in the Head, 47
writing in role, 103, 129
young adult books
death, loss, and remembrance, 114
gender identity and homophobia, 130
Holocaust, 79
Indigenous identities, 66
poverty, 104
race/diversity, 39
Teaching Tough Topics is a comprehensive guide to choosing and using the best children's books to address sensitive but significant topics in the classroom.

This timely book shows teachers how to lead students to become caring citizens as they read and respond to quality children's literature. It focuses on topics that can be challenging to teach, yet are key to building a better understanding of social justice, diversity, and equity. Bullying, poverty, homophobia, gender issues, racism, death, Indigenous identities, the Holocaust, and physical and mental challenges are just some of the themes explored.

Each chapter in this practical book deals with an important tough topic designed to help students consider their own identities and the identities of others. Detailed lessons throughout the book offer independent and interactive activities that support diversity, empathy, and tolerance. The lessons incorporate key picture books, novels, poetry, scripts, and nonfiction as sources for responding through talk, writing, and the arts.

Teaching Tough Topics includes:

- insights from leading children's authors including Deborah Ellis, Kathy Kacer, Joanne Robertson, and Eric Walters
- thoughtful perspectives from guest voices who are experts in their field
- a thorough overview of tough topics and how to deal with them in a variety of classroom situations
- model lessons, using children's literature as a source, with clear instructions on how to implement a range of instructional strategies at different grade levels
- comprehensive up-to-date booklists including picture books, novels, nonfiction, and poetry titles that can be used to explore each topic
- provocative samples of student response that illustrate how children's literature can nurture tolerance and foster kindness

This highly readable book is rooted in the belief that teachers can enrich learning with compassion as students make connections to texts, to others, and to the world.