

# Shared Cultural Connections

## Help Students Analyze Literature

By Arathy Manoharan

The title of “person of color” was bestowed on me when I moved to the United States. Until that time, I had simply identified as Indian. I was born in a small town, Kottayam, in Kerala, a state in southwestern India. When I was young, we moved to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but I never lived in Middle Eastern culture. Many people, like my parents, had moved to the UAE from Kerala, and my life remained within the Kerala community. I attended a school in which the students and most teachers were from Kerala, the school followed the Kerala state curriculum, and I returned every summer to our family’s original home in Kottayam.

When I was 16 years old, I left Dubai and returned to Kottayam to stay. I finished eleventh grade and graduated from twelfth grade, earned a bachelor’s degree from CMS College in Kottayam, and then moved to New Delhi to get a master’s degree in English literature at Delhi University. At the university, I got to know students from all over India and from other countries. In 2009, during the final year of the master’s program, I learned about the Deaf community. I came across Indian Sign Language (ISL) classes on campus, and I happened to watch the movie *Sweet Nothing in My Ear*, which discusses Deaf culture and Deaf pride. I took a class in ISL and met my first deaf person (my teacher, Rabindranath Sarkar). My life changed completely. I became part of the local Deaf community, and after I got my degree I worked as an English teacher for deaf adults. I learned what it meant when a deaf person uses the term “hearing person.” Indeed, I “became hearing,” as described by Dr. Dirksen Bauman in his TED (2018) talk “On

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*Photos courtesy of Arathy Manoharan*



Becoming Hearing: Lessons in Limitations, Loss, and Respect.” What I mean is that I realized that as a hearing person I had a specific privilege in that it is easier for hearing people to fit into societies that were created by people who hear for people who hear. Hearing people who join the Deaf community experience what it feels like to be “the other,” someone for whom the society was not designed.

After a year of teaching deaf students, I realized that I needed to be able to apply the principles of bilingual deaf education in order to be able to do justice to my profession. For this reason, at the age of 23, I moved to the United States to pursue another master’s degree in deaf education from McDaniel College in Westminster, Md. On this predominantly white campus, I served as a graduate assistant in the Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs. As I had once “become hearing,” I now became a “person of color.” This is how people saw me and how they referred to me. It became a new aspect of my identity.

Of course this was only one of the 1,000 natural culture shocks that I experienced in coming to the United States. In India and Dubai, I had watched American movies in which the unspoken assumptions of American culture were reflected matter of factly on the screen (e.g., children were allowed to close their bedroom doors, parents actually knocked before

**Clockwise from top right:**

Manoharan as a toddler in India; as a child in Dubai; with her younger sister in India; in her classroom at MSSD.

entering, and teens were allowed to have crushes on their peers and even encouraged to talk to their parents about them). I enjoyed these movies and I learned from them, but it might have helped me to gain insight into myself and my own family if I had also had books available that reflected Indian culture—the culture in which relationships between young teens of the opposite sex were forbidden—the culture and the cultural assumptions that underpinned my own life.

My learning continued inside and out of the classroom, and when I graduated and joined the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) as an English teacher, I realized that I had a lot more to learn about the intersectional identities of deaf children. As a “person of color,” I was believed to be in a better position to understand what students of color go through, but I really didn’t know what a deaf black student goes through in high school, what a Latinx student has to deal with, or what East Asian American students have to put up with on a daily basis. I was introduced to young adult literature with culturally



## In the Classroom: Anti-Bias Education Through Reading a Young Adult Novel

By Arathy Manoharan

At first, I struggled to come up with a well-thought-out year-long plan to incorporate teaching social justice into my classroom. I first exploited and then avoided the heritage months. While they proved worthwhile for involving students in outside activities, I realized that this practice might not have a positive effect on students whose identities were not part of the heritage months.

Now I plan the academic year with genres of writing (i.e., narrative, argumentative, informative, poetic), social justice standards, and Common Core State Standards guiding my instruction. I have students read material reflecting each genre and then write their own. While students deepen their understanding, they also improve their skills in reading informational texts, argumentation and analysis, and insight into what social justice means. Here's how I approached and handled one unit.

**Select reading material**—*The Hate U Give*, an award-winning young adult book by Angie Thomas, is about a teenage girl who witnesses her friend murdered by police and then grapples with police brutality and activism. The novel serves as a 'mirror' to students who identify with the characters and as a 'window' to students who find themselves in a position of privilege in comparison to the characters (Sims Bishop, 1990); it also raises searing issues of social justice.

**Develop goals**—By the end of the unit, I wanted my students to analyze the harmful impact of bias and injustice, both historically and today. Analyzing this impact is a critical practice for anti-bias education. The essential question I wanted my students to consider: *Would Khalil, the young protagonist's friend, receive justice?* This higher-order question also promotes discussion, stimulates student thinking, and allows students to hypothesize, speculate, and share ideas. I wanted my students to consider this open-ended question (for which there is no single "right" answer) within the context of social justice and social justice standards. There are four standards (Teaching Tolerance, 2016):

1. **Identity**—Students develop positive identities based on language, historical, and cultural knowledge.
2. **Diversity**—Students examine the historical, political,

diverse characters by my friend and colleague Lia Bengtson, who was trying to help me understand my students better. Young adult literature captures the interest of my students as they are able to relate to the characters in them. When they read about characters who look like them and talk like them and who stand up for what they believe in, students are able to more meaningfully explore social justice. Further, they are equipped to branch out into exploring other social issues through projects related to their reading.

I began to attend events hosted by the DC Area Educators for Social Justice with my colleagues, during which I was introduced to a plethora of resources. I learned about sites such as *teachingtolerance.org*, *teachingforchange.org*, and *zinnedproject.org* that help teachers craft lesson plans with a social justice theme. Meeting other educators who were incorporating social justice issues in their curriculum and learning about the resources they used gave me the confidence to revamp my lesson plans.

As I see more instances of injustice in the world around me, I realize that I am able to understand and engage in the discourse and decisions that shape my future because I have access to the tools of literacy and critical analysis. These are the tools I want to give to my students. These tools will allow them to understand and meaningfully participate in the world around them. I have come to realize that as a person of color, I experience a unique advantage in working with my students. With our shared experience, they connect with me easier, and I am in a better position to support them as they navigate the world we all share.

### Reference

TED. (2015, March 6). *Dirksen Bauman: On becoming hearing: Lessons in limitations, loss, and respect* [video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCuNYGk3oj8>

and social context of diversity and develop a respectful comfort with individuals who are similar to and different from themselves.

**3. Justice**—Students learn to recognize individuals as members of groups, identify stereotypes, and recognize the individuals and events that have contributed to social justice around the world.

**4. Action**—Students express empathy and carry out an action against injustice and bias in our society.

**Craft anticipation guide**—I developed an anticipation guide for my students to help them identify and confront common misconceptions related to the communities described in the novels. I checked out what is on the Internet and used this information to develop the guide for my class.

**Increase students' background knowledge**—At first I thought that I could introduce diverse young adult novels and that would naturally lead to discussion on social justice issues. I soon realized that my students needed more background knowledge. They needed to know more about the communities, historical settings, and current issues to fully engage with this novel. I helped them develop background knowledge through showing a documentary, *13th* by Ava DuVernay, and using news articles related to police brutality from *newsela.com*, an instructional website that offers up-to-date, high-interest articles that meet students at their reading level. Students also watched relevant news reports from *thedailymoth.com*, a website that delivers news using American Sign Language. Once armed with the background knowledge related to the novel, the students could more easily engage with it.

**Research**—The level of the students' skills determined whether the documentary or their research came first, with the more advanced students doing their own research before viewing the documentary and the students who were less advanced first viewing the documentary. Students researched a range of topics, including: the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Black Panther party, the history and significance of music, TV shows in Black culture, code switching in the Black community and in the Deaf community, the prison industrial complex, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Students selected a topic, developed 10 guiding questions for their inquiry, and searched online for answers to their questions. I also gave them a set of reliable resources related to their topics. They received feedback from me and at least one peer on their work, and they created slides with the information they learned and presented them in class to their peers.

**Read**—I created a three-week reading schedule for the students and shared it with them using Google Classroom. Students were expected to create notes as they read the book focused on information that would help them answer the question of

whether or not Khalil would get justice. They were given 20 minutes to read their novels in class. They also created character webs to keep track of the storyline and Book Snaps, a digital visual representation used to annotate and share reflections of an excerpt of a book or text.

**Write**—Students wrote an argumentative essay connecting the articles, text, documentary, and question. "Justice means ... more police accountability, cameras, [and] diversifying the police force ...," wrote Jake, a freshman from Maine, in his argumentative essay. "Khalil may not have gotten justice, but I hope that justice will come [for others]."

**Final creative project**—I planned a multimedia poetry slam that enabled students to express what they learned during the unit. Reflecting on the killing of young African American boys and the police officers who had not been found guilty, Justina, a freshman from Pennsylvania, looked fiercely at the camera and asked, "What kind of justice is this?" She answered her own question with another question, coming closer to the camera and fingerspelling, "W-H-I-T-E justice?"

**Reflections**—Teaching the unit on justice using contemporary young adult novels has provided an opportunity for mutual dialogue between the students and me. When talking about issues of identity, power, privilege, and bias, I have become the learner and my students have become the teachers. By facilitating projects that required questioning, forming challenging opinions, and feeling outrage or inspiration, I enabled my students to critically engage with the text. As a result, students made the texts their own, connected classroom learning to current affairs, and came a step closer to taking action toward advancing justice in their school and communities.

## References

Sims Bishop, R. (1990). Mirror, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 1(3), ix-xi.

Teaching Tolerance. (2016). *Introducing the Teaching Tolerance anti-bias framework*. Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center. Retrieved from <https://www.tolerance.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards>

## Resource

Book Snaps—<https://bookcreator.com/2017/09/booksnaps-and-book-creator/>