

# Reading Representations of Race: Critical Literacy and Ferguson

*Working as a team, three teachers created an interdisciplinary course for middle schoolers to examine issues of social justice.*

**O**n August 9, 2014, Darren Wilson, a White police officer, shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown's death sent shockwaves across the nation, as people debated the issue of blame. Three activists—Patrice Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi—who founded the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the death of Trayvon Martin, another unarmed Black teen who was shot in Sanford, Florida, in 2012—quickly worked to organize protests and other plans of action (“Our Co-Founders”). Media coverage of the protests in Ferguson included a wide range of perspectives, from those who condemned the protests and referred to them as riots to those supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement who called for an end to racist policing practices. The protests intensified when, at trial, Wilson was found “not guilty” of any of the civil rights violations for which he had been charged, including first-degree murder. Brown's death and the trial's outcome continue to be discussed as a reminder of the country's ongoing unequal treatment of Black people.

As a response to the incident, educators representing a range of levels gathered resources to promote discussion of the tragedy of Brown's death in their classrooms. A crowd-sourced syllabus was born on social media, when Marcia Chatelain began using the hashtag #FergusonSyllabus and curated sources from scholars in education, sociology, and related fields. Literacy-related suggestions included

Chimamanda Adichie's TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” texts about the history of lynching, and contemporary articles on policing and police violence (Chatelain). Educator Christopher Emdin offered several ideas for teachers to discuss the Ferguson incident with students. Those most applicable to English classes include having students complete a KWL chart before and after reading about the case (where students write what they *know*, what they *want* to know, and then what they *learned* after the lesson), and having students write letters to those involved (such as politicians, police, and family members).

Soon after Brown's death, I began co-teaching and conducting research in an interdisciplinary literacy and mathematics course with the theme of social justice at The Anchor School (a pseudonym). In this article, I discuss how a fellow researcher, a classroom teacher, and I discussed Brown's case and racial injustice with a group of young adolescents using critical literacy, social justice pedagogy, and queer pedagogy to frame the instruction. I share elements of our Michael Brown unit, highlighting the literacy strategies we used to assist the students as they explored the idea of racial injustice through reading, reflection, and discussion.

## PROVIDING CONTEXT

The Anchor School is a private PK–12 Quaker institution in a southern state, located near two cities and with access to several large universities. As an element of the school's curriculum, students are taught

to think of others as equal and to treat people with kindness. With my collaborators (described below), I developed a course titled Math for a Cause framed by issues of social justice for the middle school, which housed students in the fifth through eighth grades. The interdisciplinary course purposefully paired math and language arts to allow students to explore social justice topics from more than one disciplinary perspective.

The student population of the school is predominately White: fewer than five Black students attended the middle school at the time of the study, which is unusual for the region, where the public schools include significant populations of Black and Latinx students. All of the faculty and staff at the middle school were also White. The twelve students in the class were ten to thirteen. Ten students in the class chose to participate in the study. In line with the demographics of the school at large, eight of the students were White, and two students identified as White and Asian.

Morgan, the classroom teacher (a pseudonym), Bryan Fede, a critical mathematics expert, and I collaborated to plan the course and the Michael Brown unit. We are all White and are dedicated to social justice education and racial justice. My research focuses on English education; Bryan's focuses on education and critical mathematics; and Morgan is a middle school math teacher. Morgan expressed interest in working with Bryan and me when we contacted the leaders at The Anchor School looking for collaborators for our research. She regularly incorporates social justice concepts into her teaching practices and was excited about the opportunity to teach a course that reflected that commitment. Morgan was the teacher of record, but we adopted a co-teaching model, each of us playing specific roles during instructional activities. I was the lead researcher and planned the majority of the course curriculum, with the exception of the explicit math instruction, which Bryan and Morgan developed. I led the literacy-related discussions following students' reading of news articles, and we typically co-facilitated other class conversations.

We chose to begin our course with a Michael Brown unit. We hoped that studying his death



Protests at Ferguson on August 14, 2014. Photo by LoavesofBread; used under Creative Commons license CC BY-SA 4.0.

would help students understand systemic racism more broadly and address our goal of offering a social justice curriculum that highlighted instances of injustice as part of a system, rather than as individual moments of discrimination. For our predominately White students, whose school environment focused on embracing differences, the thought of being discriminated against or harmed physically because of a person's race was a difficult idea to grasp.

## IDENTIFYING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Queer pedagogy calls not only for discussion of queer subjects in the classroom but also for a *queering*—that is, questioning and rethinking norms, boundaries, and structures—of pedagogy (Britzman). In our case, that meant trying to deemphasize classroom boundaries, particularly the idea of teachers serving as knowledge gatekeepers (which also aligned with our other critical pedagogical frameworks). Social justice pedagogy largely stems from Paulo Freire's influential educational model, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which encourages the development of critical consciousness. Freire's ideas have influenced educators who want to support a critical mindset. He promotes thinking through teaching rather than a toolkit of specific techniques, and the

model is inclusive of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other areas of identity.

Critical literacy is an intentionally political framework that asks students to consider social and cultural contexts as they analyze texts (Janks; Luke). Hilary Janks discusses four interrelated domains of critical literacy:

- Domination (discerning how texts uphold and create control),
- Access (providing access to a variety of text types, even those that are dominating),
- Diversity (including diverse subjects and texts in different modalities), and
- Design (creating personal meaning from texts) (176–77).

Students reading with a critical literacy lens seek not only to comprehend the text but also to discern the inherent power relations. Important questions include “Who does the author show as having power?”; “How do authors portray antagonists or people who are different from them?”; and “Whose voices are heard?” These questions are vital for students working within a social justice framework, of which critical literacy is an important element.

### READING WITH A CRITICAL LENS

The Michael Brown unit began on the second day of the class and took place over four days (our class met only twice a week, and we conducted three units over a ten-week trimester). Two of those days covered literacy elements. While discussing Michael Brown’s death, we worked to reserve our opinions about social justice issues to allow the students to form their own opinions from their reading and research. To describe the unit in this article, I analyzed my fieldnotes and observations, notes from reflections with my collaborators, and student work from the sixth and seventh graders. The student talk included in this article is summarized from my notes.

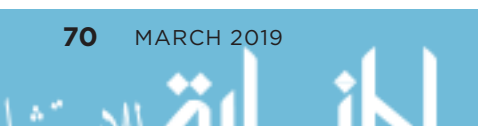
To begin, we asked students to share what they knew about Michael Brown in a large-group conversation. Their list, which we recorded on the board, included the following: he was Black; maybe he was

a victim of racial discrimination; he was shot multiple times; he was not resisting or armed; and his body was left in the street. A few students had heard about the Trayvon Martin shooting and related it to Michael Brown. In the previous class session, we had discussed the term *social justice* and noted that it referred to issues of equality and inequality among groups of people. Students decided that the Ferguson incident was a social justice issue because Michael Brown was Black and his death related to the deaths of other Black teenagers at the hands of White men.

After the whole-class discussion, we were confident the students were ready to read articles on the subject by themselves. Morgan divided students into small groups by grade level (sixth and seventh). Before the group work began, I led a discussion on what to look for as the students read their articles, focusing the students’ attention on these questions: “Who has the power or is portrayed as having the power?” and “What beliefs are shown in the article?” A sixth grader, Sum Dood (students chose their pseudonyms), was quick to respond that “reporters show their beliefs in their articles” while others pointed out that the opinions of the writers were sometimes subtle. I suggested that reporters may not write, “This is a horrible person,” but may, instead, choose words that could imply this idea. Ashley (a sixth-grade girl) said she had heard reporters “aren’t supposed to do that, they’re supposed to stick to the facts,” which demonstrated that students had different expectations for informational texts. I encouraged the students to investigate this idea as they read. In addition to these guiding questions presented orally, students were given handouts I created that included the following instructions and questions (for full instructions, see Figure 1).

1. Write a two- to three-sentence summary of the article.
2. What do you think is the author’s purpose for writing this article?
3. Who do you think is the audience for this article and why?

We assigned each group an article that described Brown’s death from a different perspective. The



**Directions:** Read the roles below, and with your group decide who will do what. Read your group’s article carefully, and answer the five questions.

**Roles:**

**Recorder:** While you should talk about your answers to the questions as a group, the recorder writes down your responses. If there are questions you don’t agree on, you can write down all answers and specify who thinks what.

**Navigator:** You keep the discussion on track—these topics are complex and your discussion may take many directions, which is OK. But the navigator must get everyone back on point if it strays too far.

**Highlighter:** When your group is answering the questions, look through the article to find specific words, sentences, or impressions you get from the article that justify your groups’ answers. Let the recorder know so they can include examples in your answers. (If the example is long, just explain where to find it, like “third paragraph.”)

**Write article title here:**

---

1. In your own words, sum up this article in two to three sentences.
2. What do you think is the author’s purpose for writing this, and why do you think so?
3. Who do you think is the audience for this article and why?
4. What math do you see in the article? Or, what kind of math would help you understand the article better, or show a different point of view? You do not need to do calculations yet, just describe the type of problems you see the potential for, being as detailed as possible.
5. What questions do you have for the class that would help you understand this article and/or issue better?

FIGURE 1.

Student groups used a set of specific instructions as they discussed the readings in the Michael Brown unit.

groups began reading after the class discussion and finished their reading during the following class meeting. The articles were diverse in scope: Anonymous’ press release denouncing Brown’s murder and threatening to attack the police department’s online servers if they harmed protesters, a discussion of hip-hop artists speaking out and raising money for Brown’s family (Associated Press), and an article blaming then-Attorney General Eric Holder for stirring up the protesters (Chavez). Some groups chose to read independently and then discuss the questions; others took turns reading aloud. The teaching team checked on groups periodically while they read the articles in their groups and answered questions they had, but we gave them space to come to their own conclusions.

## FACILITATING CRITICAL LITERACY PRACTICES

When students answered the question “What do you think is the author’s purpose for writing this?” and the question “Who do you think is the audience for this article and why?,” some groups also addressed author beliefs and power relations. This was easier for the groups whose texts were opinion pieces or from activist groups than for the students who read news reports.

Morgan overheard Group One (three sixth-grade girls), who read Anonymous’ “Operation Ferguson Press Release,” exclaim, “This is so mean!” They were shocked that Anonymous threatened to release personal information about the police officers. They wrote that the purpose was “they’re so annoyed and mad . . . they want to get more awareness.” Because the tone of the press release is clear with phrases such as “The entire global collective of Anonymous is outraged at this cold-blooded murder of a young teen,” it was easy for them to detect the purpose and author beliefs. Ashley, the student who said journalists were not supposed to state opinions but only facts, was shocked at this document written by activists who were not trying to remain neutral. The group also easily identified the audience as “the police who killed Mike Brown because they warned them about putting personal information on the internet.” The press release made their audience explicit with this

statement: “To the Ferguson Police Department . . . we are watching you very closely.” However, the students did not mention that the writers also addressed “the good people of Ferguson” and offered to “support [them] in every way.” This omission is likely because the Ferguson population is addressed only in one paragraph while the rest of the text is written to law enforcement.

Group Three (two seventh-grade girls), whose article was also inflammatory but favored Wilson and other police officers, said that “the author wrote the article as though Brown were at fault, that he turned on the police” and that the audience was “racist

**Questioning is a key aspect of queer pedagogy and important for social justice pedagogy, as social issues are rarely easily solved and require continuous review.**

people.” They discussed with me while reading that they thought the author was racist because she kept emphasizing Brown’s size and age, calling the eighteen-year-old “an adult by all legal standards . . . [who] weighed nearly 300 pounds . . . with Brown looking to

have a height advantage over Wilson and outweighing the officer by about 100 pounds” (Chavez). The students noted in their conversation that the author kept mentioning his size as if it was a justification for Wilson shooting him.

The other group’s article, about hip-hop artists who created a song in tribute to Brown, was less inflammatory. This reading focused more on the artists’ efforts than on Brown, which caused the group of sixth- and seventh-grade boys to note that it would have been “better if Michael Brown was the main focus.” They wrote that the purpose of the author was “he likes Michael Brown, Pro-Michael Brown” and that the audience was “everyone on Fox news.” Perhaps because the article was not focused on Brown’s death, it may have not held the students’ interest, as they did not consider a more specific answer like the ones their classmates generated for their articles. In this case, writing “hip-hop fans” or “Michael Brown supporters” would have indicated a deeper consideration of intended audience.

Several interesting student-generated questions emerged during their small-group discussions: “How might things have been different if Michael Brown were a woman?”; “Why did the cop shoot to kill, why not just try to slow him down, if he had to shoot at all?”; and, “What was Brown wearing, and did that impact the impression the cop had of him?” The seventh-grade girls who asked the latter question noted that if Brown were wearing a hooded sweatshirt, he may have been stereotyped as a gang member. These inquiries demonstrate the power of the student-to-student dialogue and the way it facilitated their reflection on this complex topic. By identifying questions rather than conclusions, the students were demonstrating their critical thinking skills and their curiosity. They were practicing an inquiry stance to learning, focusing on developing future directions for information-gathering and continuous investigation. Questioning is a key aspect of queer pedagogy and important for social justice pedagogy, as social issues are rarely easily solved and require continuous review.

### STUDENTS REFLECTING TOGETHER

To allow students to share their findings with each other on the day after they finished reading their article and answering the questions on their handout, we asked each group to write on the board their answers to these questions: “Who has the power?,” “What are the author’s beliefs?,” and “How was Michael Brown addressed in their articles?” The third question was Bryan’s idea. In talking with the groups, he realized that some articles called Brown “Mr.,” while others called him a teenager, and Bryan wondered how the students might interpret these differences. Full student responses are noted in Table 1.

After writing their responses on the board, each group provided the class a brief summary of their article and shared their answers to the questions; this reporting was followed by a class discussion. The teaching team facilitated the conversation, but the conversation was student-driven. We asked the students to share their knowledge and, at times, we posed questions, but we did not state whether we felt an article was accurate in how it portrayed Brown



TABLE 1.

We recorded the groups' responses to the articles about Michael Brown on the board as part of the whole-class discussion.

	Student Responses: Reported in Whole-Class Discussion			
	Article title and author	Who has the power?	What are the author's beliefs?	How was Michael Brown addressed?
<b>Group One:</b> (sixth graders)	"Operation Ferguson Press Release" by Anonymous	The police had the power, and they chose to use it by shooting the boy.	They believe the police did something very wrong and threatened to invade the police's personal information online.	Unarmed teen, seventeen, future college student.
<b>Group Two:</b> (sixth and seventh graders)	"Ferguson Shooting: Hip-Hop Moves as a Strong Force for Michael Brown" by Associated Press	People have some power because they can protest and wrote songs about it.	The rappers are good and helping society.	Michael Brown
<b>Group Three:</b> (seventh graders)	"Eric the Arsonist: Holder Fans the Ferguson Flames" by Linda Chavez	The police	The author thought Michael was guilty. Maybe she's racist?	Author did not like how people called him an "unarmed black teen," pointed out he was eighteen and an adult, 6'4" and nearly 300 pounds.

and the incident that led to his death. We refrained from sharing personal beliefs.

As each group explained the power structures and beliefs found in their assigned article, the students gained a broader picture of how different individuals and groups reacted to Michael Brown's death. Many students said that they thought the cop was racist. Some were less sure than others, but no one thought Michael Brown should have been shot and killed, even if he did rob a convenience store beforehand, as the police claimed. They felt that any crime he committed should have resulted in arrest and a trial, as they assumed would be the case for someone who was not Black.

Students also concluded that the shooting was racially motivated and tied that to a history of racist violence in our country, based on a conversation on the first day of the unit about the history of police shooting Black men and teens. The seventh graders

had also learned about the Civil Rights Movement the previous year and brought this knowledge to the conversation. Rather than buy into the racist narrative posed by authors such as Linda Chavez that Black men are inherently dangerous, judging from the comments described above, the students saw a counter-narrative of systemic racism that resulted in an unnecessary death.

The students were learning to read texts about racism in a critical way. They discerned the differences between how authors described Brown ("adolescent" or "unarmed Black teenager" compared to "large adult Black man") and inferred author biases from these differences in connotation. They also began to question the origins of racist stereotypes and pondered why White people thought Black men were frightening. Other students wondered how police officers are trained and wanted to know if most police officers were racist. Their ability to

generate these kinds of questions indicated the students' emerging understanding of the importance of addressing systemic issues of social justice from a critical inquiry perspective.

## MOVING FORWARD: SUGGESTIONS FOR ELA TEACHERS

### START WITH OPINION PIECES

When introducing critical literacy practices, particularly regarding social justice issues, teachers may want to begin with articles that have an easily discernible opinion, like the articles the sixth- and seventh-grade girls in our unit read. Perhaps after this

introduction to a topic, students will have an easier time discerning the subtler ways power relations and author beliefs are reflected in more neutrally toned news articles. The students in this class were also better able to describe the power relationships when I included a direct question such as "Who has the power?" on their handouts, rather than

**By providing students a critical literacy framework with guiding questions and allowing them to engage with the text in student-centered groups, we invited students to create their own knowledge about the Michael Brown incident.**

saving that question for our larger discussion. Discerning the power relations in a text for the first time may be easier for students when they read a piece that has a clear point of view, thus scaffolding their ability to respond critically.

### PRIORITIZE REFLECTION

We also learned from this initial unit that we needed to give students more space for written reflection. Students who did not naturally reflect on their reading needed time to pause and consider how they were feeling and thinking about the material. In the subsequent units, we implemented this adaptation by including questions on the group reading handouts such as "Are the opinions in the article different from your own?" and "What is your reaction to the article?" or "How do you feel reading this article?" These questions allowed for more intentional

reflection and encouraged the students to discuss the articles more deeply in their small groups. The personal reflections also better prepared the students for whole-class reflections. While we wanted students to have as much freedom as possible within the curriculum, guided questions were necessary for the students to work through material, especially for topics that were outside of their own experiences.

### CONNECT TOPICS TO RELATED EVENTS

Teachers may also want to ask students to connect the events in their news articles or other informational texts to related recent events, as suggested by Emdin. Identifying the relationship between incidents will help students understand that social justice issues are systemic, rather than individual. In our class, some of the students knew about Trayvon Martin, and the discussion of the similar incidents taking place in two different states—Florida and Missouri—helped the class see a pattern of violence against Black people. (The website Mapping Police Violence provides data and graphics that can assist with this conversation: [mappingpoliceviolence.org/.](http://mappingpoliceviolence.org/))

## CREATING ALLIES THROUGH CRITICAL LITERACY

While this unit was a learning experience for the students, as teachers, it was our first attempt to discuss social justice with middle schoolers. It taught us that we needed more intentional scaffolding for activities that involve reflection and critical analysis of informational texts and allowed us to better plan for the rest of the course. By providing students a critical literacy framework with guiding questions and allowing them to engage with the text in student-centered groups, we invited students to create their own knowledge about the Michael Brown incident. They examined how an author's word choices expose biases and illustrate a point of view, and then, in turn, how these word choices imply power relationships.

Students became better allies for racial justice after this unit. As the course continued, students expressed further opinions about racial justice issues and continued to improve their critical reading skills as well as their ability to articulate their arguments. They also kept asking questions, aligning with both



our social justice and queer pedagogy goals of continued inquiry. This unit demonstrated that it is possible, and fruitful, to talk about racism with students (and teachers) who have never experienced it personally. If White students do not learn about institutionalized racism, they cannot be allies. Using critical literacy can be a first step in showing students the importance of being allies. This unit helped meet our goals of increasing student awareness of social justice issues and encouraging further learning and action. For our young students, this action took the form of speaking to others in the school community and paying closer attention to news stories they watched with their families. Social justice is a constant commitment and practice, one that we worked to foster for young learners through teaching about the tragic death of Michael Brown. [EJ](#)

#### WORKS CITED

- Anonymous. *Anonymous Operation Ferguson-Press Release*, 10 Aug. 2014, [pastebin.com/KpmJKU8D](http://pastebin.com/KpmJKU8D).
- Associated Press. "Ferguson Shooting: Hip-Hop Moves as a Strong Force for Michael Brown." *Fox News*, 30 Aug. 2014, [www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2014/08/30/ferguson-shooting-hip-hop-moves-as-strong-force-for-michael-brown.html](http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2014/08/30/ferguson-shooting-hip-hop-moves-as-strong-force-for-michael-brown.html).
- Britzman, Deborah P. "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight." *Educational Theory*, vol. 45, no. 2, 1995, pp. 151–65.
- Chatelain, Marcia. "How to Teach Kids about What's Happening in Ferguson: A Crowdsourced Syllabus about Race, African American History, Civil Rights, and Policing." *The Atlantic*, 25 Aug. 2014, [www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/how-to-teach-kids-about-whats-happening-in-ferguson/379049/](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/how-to-teach-kids-about-whats-happening-in-ferguson/379049/).
- Chavez, Linda. "Eric the Arsonist: Holder Fans the Ferguson Flames." *NY Post*, 23 Aug. 2014, [nypost.com/2014/08/23/eric-the-arsonist-holder-fans-ferguson-flames/](http://nypost.com/2014/08/23/eric-the-arsonist-holder-fans-ferguson-flames/).
- Emdin, Christopher. "5 Ways to Teach about Michael Brown and Ferguson in the New School Year." 20 Aug. 2014, *The Huffington Post*, [www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-emdin/5-ways-to-teach-about-michael-brown-and-ferguson-in-the-new-school-year\\_b\\_5690171.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=tw](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-emdin/5-ways-to-teach-about-michael-brown-and-ferguson-in-the-new-school-year_b_5690171.html?utm_hp_ref=tw).
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by M. B. Ramos, Bloomsbury, 1970.
- Janks, Hilary. "Domination, Access, Diversity and Design: A Synthesis for Critical Literacy Education." *Educational Review*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2000, pp. 175–86.
- Luke, Allan. "Critical Literacy: Foundational Notes." *Theory Into Practice*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2012, pp. 4–11.
- "Our Co-Founders." *Black Lives Matter*, [blacklivesmatter.com/about/our-co-founders/](http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/our-co-founders/).



**SUMMER MELODY PENNELL** is an assistant professor of English education at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. She has been a member of NCTE since 2014 and is the current chair of the Genders and Sexualities Equality Alliance (GSEA). She can be contacted at [spennell@truman.edu](mailto:spennell@truman.edu).

#### READWRITETHINKCONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Dialogue and conversation are cornerstones to our approaches in helping students try out and develop new ideas, but not all learners are equally comfortable or adept at participating in large- or even small-group verbal discussions. Silent conversations capitalize on the social nature of learning by asking students to share their thinking and to build from and reflect on the thinking of others, but they do so by allowing students to use writing for additional time to think and refine their ideas. <http://bit.ly/2Gy7XLs>



Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.