

Reading for a Better World: Teaching for Social Responsibility With Young Adult Literature

Teaching for social responsibility with good books does far more than encourage civic participation; it redefines the purpose of school and empowers all of us—students, teachers, administrators, parents—to be better people and live more fulfilling lives.

Steven Wolk

There are four words in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* (Smith & Wilhelm, 2003) that particularly resonated with me. The authors interviewed middle and high school boys to better understand their lives of literacy. One boy, a junior in high school, told them, “English is about nothing” (p. 188). Yes! Exactly. English is about nothing. That is exactly how I felt when I was an adolescent. Math, science, social studies, they were about *something*: geometry, sedimentary rocks, the American Civil War. I may have been bored silly because of how they were taught (textbooks and lectures and worksheets ad infinitum), but at least they were about *something*. Reading and writing—well, in my young adult mind—I already knew how to read and write. School just kept having me read and write year after year to torture me in the name of...nothing.

Authors do not write books for readers to answer comprehension questions or to do “exercises” to learn “reading skills.” They write books because they want the reader to enjoy a good story and—not always but true for the books I’ll be writing about here—they have some important ideas they want readers to think about. And what amazing thematic ideas young adult literature has. Put a good book into the hands of a skilled and passionate teacher and those ideas come alive in the classroom; no longer is reading simply a laborious and necessary evil to help students pass their science test. Suddenly, reading has *purpose*.

Why Read?

Tovani (2000) wrote that when it comes to reading “purpose is everything” (p. 24). I have my graduate students interview young adults about their reading. They ask them why they read in school. Not one student interviewed could articulate a purpose for reading in school other than to “get the assignment done,” “read the textbook,” or learn a skill. There is no mention of reading for pleasure, reading to stay informed of current events, or reading to shape political, moral, or cultural identities. In other words, they do not see any thematic content in books as a purpose for reading in school. As Tovani

wrote, “When I ask students why they read in school, they say their teacher makes them: ‘Read chapter 10. There will be a test on Monday’” (p. 24).

Yet, reading has vital purposes beyond improving reading skills, learning content knowledge across the curriculum, and preparing children for their future employment. Living in a democracy poses specific obligations for reading. While a nation of workers requires a country that *can* read, a democracy requires people that *do* read, read widely, and think and act in response to their reading. However, if you ask adolescents why they go to school you will more than likely hear a response having to do with one purpose: to get a job.

The aims of school must not be so focused on preparing workers (Wolk, 2007). As citizens we have a civic responsibility to care for our democracy, and it is supposed to be one of the primary aims of our schools to help students learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to participate in the daily governance of our nation (Engle, 1960). Our country and democracy are in urgent need of caretaking. We have vital problems that need the voices and ingenuity of our citizens. John Dewey wrote that democracy is not just a form of government or even the act of voting. Those are the “mechanical” elements of democracy. Dewey (1939) argued that the most important form of democracy is as a *way of life*. He wrote,

The heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another. (p. 10)

Teaching citizenship and government is typically seen as the responsibility of social studies teachers, but it cannot be limited to those classes. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind, the teaching of social studies has been pushed aside in the zeal to increase reading and math test scores (Dillon, 2006). And as research continually shows, students have very negative attitudes about their social studies experiences. Zhao and Hoge (2005) interviewed 300 students and over 95% “did not think their social studies class was relevant to their personal life” (p. 218). Social responsibility must go far beyond basic citizenship; it is about

shaping human beings with intellectual curiosity, a caring heart, and a belief in the common good. It should be one of the essential purposes for school—all of school—so every teacher must work to integrate this essential knowledge into their classroom curriculum. Teaching with young adult literature is one of the best ways to make that happen.

We are living in deeply troubling times. The problems confronting our nation and the world can seem overwhelming. Half of the people on this planet lives on two dollars a day. Each day 30,000 children die—largely from poverty—and thousands of acres of rainforests are destroyed. And in the United States nearly 50 million people have no health insurance, the United States ranks 28th in infant mortality, and a report on the happiness and well-being of children in wealthy nations lists the United States as 20th—second to last (Unicef, 2007). The time is urgent for all schools and teachers to awaken their students’ consciousness to the world and help them develop the knowledge and inspiration to make a better world, from local to global.

From Books to Inquiry

We are living in the enlightenment of young adult literature. Never before have teachers had so many remarkable books to bring to life in their classrooms and use to teach social responsibility. It is not enough, however, to have students read these books. Teachers can turn books into experiences of authentic inquiry (Friedman, 2000; Wilhelm, 2007). The traditional paradigm of teaching is a one-way transmission of factual knowledge from teacher or textbook to student. It is all about the students “getting” the facts and skills and keeping them long enough to give back on a test or an essay. As Muldoon (1990), a high school literature teacher, explained, this model is about turning students into parrots and data banks. In contrast to this, Muldoon wrote about her own teaching:

I have freed myself from the treatment of literature as a body of knowledge to be conveyed, memorized, and repeated. Instead, I now conceive of it as a series of encounters with meaningful problems for which there are multiple solutions.... Thus, the definition of knowledge changes from something learners extract

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from a text to something they create in collaboration with each other. (p. 34)

Teaching through inquiry and teaching for social responsibility have a symbiotic relationship. Classroom inquiry nurtures social responsibility, and living a socially responsible life means to live a life of inquiry. With inquiry-based teaching, the process becomes part of the content. No longer is the curriculum simply the novel or the facts to be learned but, rather, the

students and their teacher together using books, other authentic resources, and their own opinions and experiences to create the “living curriculum” as a true community of learners. In creating an inquiry unit, a teacher can either begin with an inquiry question that they connect to a book or begin with a book from which they form a question or set of inquiry questions. For example, rather than simply creating a unit based on Pete Hautman’s young adult dystopian novel *Rash*—which takes place in the year 2076 in the USSA (the United Safer States of America) where anything potentially dangerous (football, French fries, large dogs) have been outlawed and a quarter of the country is in prison—the unit can be framed as an inquiry question, such as “Where is the line between freedom and security?” or “How can fear be used as an instrument of control?” Unlike transmission teaching, these questions do not have single correct answers, so students are immersed into a classroom experience that values listening to multiple perspectives and thinking for themselves. And while *Rash* could be the main anchor text of the unit, the book could be just one of the sources used. Connected to the book would be shorter texts—newspaper and magazine articles, song lyrics, essays, speeches, poetry, oral histories, and articles from the Internet—as well as unwritten “texts,” such as movies, music, photographs, and artwork. These texts—used together with carefully selected activities, projects, and writing prompts and much classroom discussion and debate—create an intellectually exciting and imaginative learning experience that can help young adults shape their civic identities and develop their civic courage.

None of this is to say that teaching for social responsibility, inquiry-based teaching, or even teaching with young adult literature can be done without impediments. On the contrary, with our national fervor to increase test scores and meet No Child Left Behind standards, it has become an even greater challenge for teachers to make these practices an important part of their classrooms. Yet, even with these limitations, teachers are taking the initiative and making remarkable things happen in their classrooms with literature. For example, this school year I’ve been working with Ron, a new seventh-grade teacher in a Chicago Public School, to use literature to teach both reading and social responsibility. So far he has taught units using the novels *Black and White* (Volponi, 2005), *Before We Were Free* (Alvarez, 2002), and the earlier mentioned *Rash* (Hautman, 2006). While teachers need to contend with the political realities of schooling, they cannot see those as insurmountable hurdles but rather challenges for them to creatively rise above.

Connecting Social Responsibility and Good Books

Berman (1997) offered a concise definition of social responsibility: “A personal investment in the well-being of people and the planet” (p. 15), including basic civic responsibilities. The simplest form of civic responsibility in the United States—voting—has a turnout that is consistently near the lowest of all democracies in the world. In a typical general election, it is a struggle to get half the country to vote. And the youngest voters are the least likely to vote. In 2000 only 40% of 18–29-year-old Americans voted; in 2004 only 49% voted. In 2006—with a war raging in Iraq—only 24% voted and some states had as little as 17% (Young Voter Strategies, 2007). Early analysis of the 2008 U.S. presidential election had 18–29-year-old voter turnout at about 52%. While this is a small increase from 2004, it still means that nearly half of America’s youngest voters are not voting (Circle, n.d.). In a survey of 3,000 students at New York University, 20% would sell their next vote for an iPod and half said that for one million dollars they would give up their right to vote *forever* (Quateman, 2007).

But low voter turnout may be the least of the civic problems. Civic illiteracy is an epidemic in the United

States (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Marciano, 1997). In a survey that asked 12 questions on well-publicized current events, 18–29-year-olds had an average of only 5.5 correct. Nearly half could not name the Speaker of the House or the president of Russia, and 60% did not know how many American troops had been killed in Iraq (Pew, 2007a). According to a 2006 Zogby survey, many more Americans can name the Three Stooges (73%) than can name the three branches of government (42%) and more can name two of Snow White’s seven dwarves (77%) than can name two U.S. Supreme Court Justices (24%). And newspaper readership continues to fall. Only 16% of 18–30-year-olds and about 33% of Americans over 30 read a newspaper daily (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007).

Using young adult literature is one of the most meaningful and enjoyable ways for students to inquire into social responsibility because we can situate this content in the wonderful stories of good books. And within these stories are moral and ethical quandaries, just as they are in endless civic issues. Through young adult literature, students are invited and challenged to grapple with moral dilemmas (Proctor & Kantor, 1996). All of this emphasizes that reading and literature teachers are in a powerful position to teach for social responsibility. And turning those books into inquiry-based investigations—either on their own or collaboratively with social studies teachers—can help students to see a vital purpose for reading and thinking about what they read.

Below is some of the content that should be part of teaching for social responsibility. My purpose is to offer a more specific understanding of the knowledge and habits of mind needed for a socially responsible citizenry. Most students will not develop this social and civic literacy and the courage to act on it unless teachers make this knowledge an explicit and essential part of our classrooms. Each section below also contains book titles with short synopses that could be used to teach that knowledge, keeping in mind that all of the books could easily be placed in multiple categories. However, even when using books to teach for social responsibility we still want to create constructivist literacy experiences that honor each reader. Any book read for the larger purpose of social responsibility

should also involve teachers giving their students the necessary space to interact and make connections with that text in their unique ways. Following this overview of themes and books for teaching social responsibility, I offer a detailed example of creating an inquiry unit based on the novel *Black and White* (Volponi, 2005).

Caring and Empathy

Noddings (1991) wrote widely about the need for our schools to teach caring. She wrote that “caring” should be the foundation of our curriculums, including caring for ideas, friends, family, the earth and its ecosystems, human-made objects, and “strangers and distant others” (p. 110). The very heart of teaching for social responsibility is teaching for caring. In *The Goats* (Cole, 1987), a boy and girl away at camp are chosen to be the “goats,” stripped naked, and stranded on an island by campmates. In Fleischman’s (1998) *Whirligig*, after 15-year-old Brett is embarrassed at a party and purposely drives into another car, killing the teenage driver, he agrees to travel the country to build four whirligigs in the girl’s memory. And *Stuck in Neutral* (Trueman, 2000) is told from the perspective of a boy with severe cerebral palsy who cannot move a single muscle to communicate, but his mind is perfect.

Social Problems and Social Justice

Living a socially responsible life means understanding and acting to improve the many problems confronting the United States, especially involving culture, gender, economic class, and sexual orientation. In a study on teaching civics, only 11% of students reported spending time in their classes on “problems facing the country today” (Lopez & Kirby, 2007). Teaching for social responsibility means being honest about our problems and injustices, and literature can help us to confront these truths. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) is an autobiographical novel of 15-year-old Junior trying to cope with the modern plight on his Spokane Indian Reservation. In *Buried Onions*, Soto (1997) tells the story of 19-year-old Eddie, a Mexican American struggling to find a way out of the hopelessness of his barrio in California. In *Make Lemonade* (Wolff, 1993), the lives of two

urban teenagers, Jolly and LaVaughn, become entangled when LaVaughn becomes the babysitter for Jolly's young children.

Government and the Constitution

Social responsibility requires knowledge and understanding of U.S. constitution and government systems (as well as those in other countries). Young adult literature can bring constitutional issues—and the lack of constitutional rights—to life. The autobiographical novel *Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party* (Compestone, 2007) tells the story of Ling, a young girl growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution. Satrapi's (2003) graphic memoir *Persepolis* is her story of growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. *Spite Fences* (Krisher, 1997)—a book that explores when the United States ignored its own constitution and had systemic racism—is the story of a 13-year-old Caucasian girl in Georgia in 1960 who must confront both the brutality of racism and her own abusive mother.

Power and Propaganda

It's easy to see the abuse of power and propaganda in Communist China or Nazi Germany, but what about in the United States? Every country uses propaganda. Teaching about power is the fundamental aspect of teaching for critical literacy: who has power and who is denied it; how is power used and how is it abused. Young adult fiction can be a powerful way to teach for critical literacy (Alsup, 2003; Bean & Moni, 2003; Johnson & Freedman, 2005). Social responsibility not only requires an understanding of the abuse of power but also commands the consciousness to see it and the ethical commitment to stop it. In *Daniel Half Human* (Chotjewitz, 2005), two 15-year-old German boys are enamored with Hitler until one of them is told his mother is Jewish. *The Loud Silence of Francine Green* (Cushman, 2006) involves two girls—one politically outspoken and the other silent—who become best friends during the “red scare” of McCarthyism. Anderson's (2002) *Feed* is set in the future when people have microchips implanted in their brains so they receive media—the “feed”—literally into their heads. In *Little Brother* (Doctorow, 2008), 17-year-old Marcus—who is a computer and

Internet expert—is imprisoned and tortured by U.S. Homeland Security following a terrorist attack.

Social Imagination

Greene (1995) defined “social imagination” as “the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, and in our schools” (p. 5). Teaching for social imagination is helping students to question the world we have and envision a better world we could have. Dystopian novels offer unique opportunities to teach these habits of mind. Although these stories are set in the future—often postapocalyptic—thematically they are really about the present. The Hungry City quartet of books begins with *Mortal Engines* (Reeve, 2001) when, in the distant future, entire cities practice “Municipal Darwinism”—where they roam the land like colossal tractors, eating other cities. In the popular *Uglies* (Westerfeld, 2005), teenagers get surgery when they turn 16 to transform them from an “ugly” into a “pretty,” but when 15-year-old Tally meets Shay she sees the ugly side of being “pretty.” *The City of Ember* (DuPrau, 2003) takes place in a dying city underground that no longer knows there is an above ground world, but two characters, Leena and Dune, believe there is a way out of Ember.

Historical Consciousness and Historical Empathy

Citizens cannot make informed and critical decisions on civic matters—from affirmative action and gay marriage to criminal justice and war—without an understanding of past people and events. Knowledge of the past should help shape our opinions in the present and our vision for the future. The novel *My Mother the Cheerleader* (Sharenow, 2007) is about 13-year-old Louise, whose mother is one of the “cheerleaders” who stands outside the school of Ruby Bridges (one of the first African American students to attend an integrated U.S. school) each day, screaming racist epithets. In *Before We Were Free* (Alvarez, 2002), a family is involved in a plan to topple the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic in the 1960s. *Tree Girl* (Mikaelson, 2004) takes place in Guatemala in the 1980s during the country's devastating civil wars. The brutality of slavery—and the passionate

force of poetry—is explored in *The Poet Slave of Cuba* (Engle, 2006), a biography (written in verse) about Juan Francisco Manzano.

Multicultural Community

“Multicultural” education is often limited to teaching about different cultures’ food, fashion, and holidays. While it is important to help students appreciate cultural differences, this does not begin to tap into the political and moral issues of race and culture in our country and around the world. The growing body of young adult literature with multicultural themes opens up bold opportunities to engage students in exploring issues of culture and prejudice (Landt, 2006; Singer & Shagoury, 2005). The graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) tells three stories that connect the themes of cultural identity and intolerance. *Crossing Jordan* (Fogelin, 2000) is about two girls, one African American and the other Caucasian, who become best friends in spite of the Caucasian girl’s father’s racism. And *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003) uses magical realism to tell the story of a gay high school boy whose community and school celebrate homosexuality rather than oppress it.

Global Awareness

Nearly two thirds of Americans say that they do not pay attention to international current events on a regular basis (Pew, 2007b). Given the void of global content in so many of our schools, it should not come as a shock that U.S. citizens know little about the world beyond the country’s borders. Good books, either as part of a literature curriculum or integrated into the social sciences, help to humanize other countries and cultures for young Americans and connect across oceans. In *Chanda’s Secret* (Stratton, 2002) a girl struggles to deal with the AIDS epidemic in her African country. McCormick’s (2006) *Sold* (written in verse) is about 13-year-old Lakshmi who has been sold into prostitution and taken from her home in India to Nepal. *Asphalt Angels* (Holtwijk, 1995) explores the brutal life of the homeless “street children” of Brazil.

War, Peace, and Nonviolence

In 2005 the United States had nearly 17,000 murders and 94,000 reported rapes—that is nearly 50 murders

and 260 rapes every day (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). There is growing attention for using literature to help young adults investigate violence and war and to inspire students to promote peace (Brozo, Walter, & Placker, 2002; Franzak & Noll, 2006; Miller, 2005; Wright & Kowalczyk, 2000). Informed decisions on going to war cannot be made without critical understandings of past wars and the devastating psychologies of war (Noddings, 2006). The intoxicating yet destructive power of war is a theme in *The Lord of the Nutcracker Men* (Lawrence, 2001), which takes place on the brutal battlefields of World War I as a boy’s father writes home to his son about life in the trenches. Myers’ (1988) *Fallen Angels* takes us into the jungle of the Vietnam War, and *Sunrise Over Fallujah* (Myers, 2008) to the desert of the Iraq War. In the graphic novel *Pride of Baghdad* (Vaughan & Henrichon, 2006), the devastation of the war in Iraq and the country’s cultural conflicts are told by a group of lions that escaped from the Baghdad Zoo. In *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), the United States is now called Panem, and the government holds an annual lottery to chose two 12–18-year-olds from each of Panem’s 12 districts to participate in a reality television show where the contestants must fight until just one remains. And *Real Time* (Kass, 2004) tells the simultaneous stories of multiple characters as they converge on a terrorist attack on a bus in Israel.

Environmental Literacy

Social responsibility requires consciousness to environmental problems and the ability to critique the American way of life. Beyond simply studying recycling and pollution, this would include exploring issues of energy, natural resources, and rampant consumerism. In *Firestorm: The Caretaker Trilogy Book 1* (Klass, 2006), Jack thinks he’s just a normal high school kid until he finds out he has been sent from 1,000 years in the future to save the earth from our own environmental destruction. Another book by Klass (1994) is *California Blue*, which is about a high school student

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living in the U.S. northwest who discovers a new butterfly species on land owned by the local lumber mill where his father works. *The Gospel According to Larry* (Tashjian, 2001) is about 17-year-old Josh who creates an alter ego (Larry) on a website who espouses the dangers of consumerism. And in *Exodus* (Bertagna, 2008), it is 2099 and global warming is melting Earth's polar ice caps.

Teaching *Black and White*

In the young adult novel *Black and White* by Volponi (2005), best friends Marcus and Eddie are high school seniors and stars of their basketball team. Marcus is African American and Eddie is Caucasian. With imminent college scholarships, it seems the NBA is a lock for "Black" and "White," as the kids in school call them. But having spent \$150 they needed for school on new basketball shoes, the boys use a gun for parking lot hold-ups to replace the money. During one of the robberies, a bus driver is shot. The driver recognizes Marcus but doesn't get a look at Eddie. Once Marcus is arrested he must decide whether to turn his best friend in to the police, while Eddie must decide whether to let his best friend take the rap.

The inquiry teaching ideas listed below for the novel *Black and White* are not meant to be a finished or complete "unit." They are more of a brainstorming of possible teaching ideas. *Black and White* has multiple themes to teach for social responsibility. Simmering beneath the surface of the boys' friendship are issues of race and economic class. The novel is also a great opportunity for students to explore our criminal justice system and the treatment of people based on culture and class. After he's arrested and in jail at Rikers Island, Marcus comments, "It's black people, wall to wall. There are some Spanish inmates, too. But everybody else is black" (p. 64). These themes can lead to possible inquiry questions the book can be framed around, such as the following:

- How are race and culture a part of our friendships?

- Where is the line between loyalty to friends and responsibility to society?
- How do race, culture, and class affect our criminal justice system?

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Expanding from teaching a novel strictly to improve students' reading skills to teaching for social responsibility can be as simple as changing the questions we ask. When teaching for social responsibility, teachers must move beyond simple plot-based comprehension questions and ask students questions that do not have single correct answers. Usually these questions are for journal writing or whole-class or small-group discussions:

- On page 64 Marcus says that the prisoners in the jail are "black people, wall to wall." Why is there such a high percentage of blacks (and Latinos) in our prisons? What could we do about this?
- On page 71 Marcus says, "You don't give your best friend up to the cops. No how. No way." Do you agree with him? Should Eddie come forward and turn himself in? What are the responsibilities of friendship?
- On page 86 Eddie's dad knows his son was involved in the shooting and covers up his involvement. What is your opinion of this? Who does his dad have a greater responsibility to: his son, the victim, or society? Why?
- On page 174 Eddie's attorney, Mr. Golub, says that if his case goes to court, "we'd want more whites on the jury than blacks." What is your reaction to this comment? Do you agree with his thinking? If you were on a jury, could you

be completely impartial and not allow culture to influence your thinking?

- At the very end of the book, Marcus tells Eddie the only thing between them is “the line that separates black and white.” Why do we have that line? Is it natural or human made? Can we not have it? What should we do about it?

As a novel is taught through inquiry, teachers can engage students in a variety of small activities, including drama and role-play. Typically, they’re done in an hour or less and involve some form of discussion and debate because that discourse is central to both the inquiry process and social responsibility:

- After Chapter 4, working in small groups, complete a Venn diagram, comparing Eddie and Marcus and including their families. Then use these to form one whole-class Venn diagram for discussion.
- Pair students and have them imagine that Marcus and Eddie bump into each other five years after the story ends. They have not seen each other since then. Have them write a scene of what they think the boys would say to each other and then act it out.

Elbow (1977) wrote, “Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn’t have started out thinking” (p. 15). Writing in response to books can be a form of inquiry itself; rather than writing to simply communicate what students already know, writing can be a way for them to *come to know* as they confront political and moral complexities. Most of the writing students do in response to books should be authentic: essays, letters, speeches, poetry, and monologues are examples of authentic writing that can be done to connect young adult fiction to issues of social responsibility and the larger world around us:

- Can an African American get a fair trial in our country? How about a poor Caucasian? Choose one of these and write a persuasive essay.
- Marcus made a deal with the prosecutor to be out of prison in 19 months. Write his sentence as if you were the judge. Would you send him to jail? If yes, for how long? To juvenile or an

adult prison? Or is there a more appropriate consequence?

- In groups of five, write and perform multiple-voice poems using the voices of Eddie and Marcus plus three other characters of your choice.
- On p. 115 Ms. Sussman gives Marcus and Eddie’s class the essay assignment “How do you want people to remember you?” Write the same essay.

Once students finish reading a book it’s the perfect time for them to delve into a final inquiry project. Once again, rather than having students focus on basic literary elements such as plot and character, the goals for social responsibility encourage us to create project ideas that are authentic and help students to take their reading of the book into their own lives and out into the real world:

- In small groups, survey people on their knowledge and opinions of our criminal justice system or survey people on their opinions and experiences with race and culture in the United States. Create graphs showing the results of your survey and include a written response by each group member.
- Research the local, state, or federal criminal justice system. Who is in prison by race and economic class? For what crimes? Who defends them in court? Create a PowerPoint presentation to show what you learned and your thoughts.
- Interview two people who are friends and are from different cultures to understand how culture is (or is not) a part of their friendship. Based on your interview, create a narrative with pictures, a comic strip, or a video.

As students read a book through inquiry, it is valuable to have them interact with other texts that connect to the book and to questions under investigation. These can be written texts, such as newspaper and magazine articles, song lyrics, short stories, and poetry. They can also be unwritten “texts,” such as artwork, photographs, music, and films. Some written texts connected to *Black and White* include the

short story “Epiphany” (Wittlinger, 2004), which is about two girls who are from different cultures and are best friends; the article “Why Are So Many Americans in Prison?” (Loury, 2007) and some of the readers’ comments about the article; excerpts from the adult book *Courtroom 302: A Year Behind the Scenes in an American Criminal Courthouse* (Bogira, 2005), which is an account of the busiest criminal courtroom in the country in Chicago; and the *New York Times* article “Growing Up, Growing Apart: Fast Friends Try to Resist the Pressure to Divide By Race” (Lewin, 2000). Some unwritten texts include the following:

- PBS Frontline documentary “Juvenile Justice,” available at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/juvenile
- Photographs from the *New York Times* series “How Race is Lived in America,” available at partners.nytimes.com/library/national/race/photo-journal-index.html

The Self, the Book, the World

One of the most vital jobs of a teacher is to help students to see that there is so much more going on in a book than just the squiggles of writing on the pages. We need to help young adults understand that between those covers is the world—past, present, and future—and the emotion and complexity of the human condition. As educators, we need to help students to see that inside these provocative books are stories that can help us to better understand ourselves, who we are and who we want to become. And by doing that within a community of learners we can help students (and ourselves) learn to act to make a better world. Teaching for social responsibility with good books does far more than encourage civic participation; it redefines the purpose of school and empowers all of us—students, teachers, administrators, parents—to be better people and live more fulfilling lives. And in that process we create, individually and collectively, a more caring and thoughtful and democratic society. It all starts with a book.

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