

# An Education in Empathy

Category: Racism

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | June 2, 2020

Before introducing my eighth-grade students to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I played for them a song from *South Pacific*, one of my favorite musicals. I chose this song because the lyrics describe the illness known as racism and how this acquired disease infects so many people: "You've got to be taught before it's too late/before you are six or seven or eight/to hate all the people your relatives hate/you've got to be carefully taught."

For years, my students failed to show much reaction to what I considered a creative lesson plan. I attributed their blasé attitude to the demographics of the class—all white students who defined each other in terms of the houses in which they lived, the professions of their parents and the cost of their clothes. Race never played a role in their lives.

Then, about eight years later in 1999, Jasmine, an African-American girl, moved into the district—and my class. Suddenly, both my students and I faced a challenge: discussing a book on racism that freely used the "N" word while in the company of a young woman whose skin was darker than ours.

My concerns about offending Jasmine led me to call her parents several weeks prior to beginning the *Mockingbird* unit. When I realized they had not read the novel, I gave them a summary of the plot: a trial in which a white girl falsely accuses a black man of rape. Although the girl and her father represented the bottom of the hierarchy in terms of education, money and values, they had one thing the defendant lacked—white skin. I asked Jasmine's parents if they had suggestions about how I could deal with this delicate topic of racism without making Jasmine, already an outsider due to the class, feel even more different.

The parents asked to read the novel before they responded. One week later, they called with their feedback: "Teach the book as you always do, but emphasize that Harper Lee offers a cure for the disease of racism: developing empathy by climbing into the skin of another person and seeing things from that person's perspective. Encourage your students to understand others without judging them."

Through *Mockingbird*, I educated my students on empathy, a lesson I hope has stayed with them as they, now adults, find themselves in a world still plagued by racism.

Ronna Edelstein

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

