



WHY  
**WE BULLY**

TALKING ABOUT RACE

# Using Literature to Discuss Race

(Grades K-5)

***“The 2014 school year marked the first time in US history that the majority of elementary and secondary schoolchildren were children of color—Black, Latinx, Asian, or American Indian.”***

*—Beverly Daniel Tatum, from [Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria](#)*

Talking about race with elementary students is a difficult but necessary conversation to have. According to studies like Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s Preschool Doll Test or York University’s Faculty of Health study on implicit racism found in children ages 9-12, it has been proven that children as early as preschool can show implicit pro-White bias. Since many children already have awareness, even implicit awareness, ignoring or avoiding conversations about race can potentially stigmatize differences. Children need to have conversations in order to normalize the conversation. With young students, literature is often the place to start the conversation. It is important to introduce elementary students to literature where the following goals can be reached:

1. Skin color can be discussed openly
2. Our national history can be portrayed accurately
3. African American (or other people of color) resistance is highlighted and discussed
4. White people can be seen as allies

The following books help open these conversations with elementary aged students and achieve the goals listed above.

- *Follow the Drinking Gourd* by Jeanette Winter
- *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* by Faith Ringgold

The following songs can be used to support the literature:

- *Follow the Drinking Gourd* - found on YouTube by clicking [here](#)
- *Harriet Tubman / Steal Away* by Kim and Reggie Harris - found by clicking [here](#)

After reading one of these books to the students, use the following discussion questions to have a large group conversation.

## Discussion Questions

1. Does anyone have any questions about what happened in the story?
2. How did Molly James, Isaiah, old Hattie and George (*Follow the Drinking Gourd*) or Be Be and Cassie (*Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*) resist being a slave? Have you ever resisted something in your life? Is it the same kind of resistance?

**Resistance** – when you push back against something because you do not think it is right

3. There were many people who helped the characters resist slavery. Who were they and how did they help?
4. It takes a lot of courage to be brave. What did the characters in the book have to fear if they were caught? Have you ever been brave? How? What did you fear?
5. These are the definitions of race and racism. Have you ever seen this in your life? Where?

**Race** – the color of a person's skin, the shape of a person's eyes or the texture of their hair

**Racism** – thinking you are better than someone else just because of the color of their skin, the shape of their eyes or the texture of their hair

6. Why is racism unfair and unkind?

## More Student Literature on Race for Elementary Students

- *I Love My Hair!* By Natasha Anastasia Tarpley (ages 2+)
- *Let's Talk About Race* by Julius Lester (ages 4+)
- *The Colors of Us* by Karen Katz (ages 4+)
- *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold (ages 5+)
- *Juneteenth for Mazie* by Floyd Cooper (ages 5+)
- *Tea Cakes for Tosh* by Kelly Starling Lyons (ages 5+)
- *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson (ages 5+)
- *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* by Duncan Tonatiuh (ages 6+)
- *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkinson (ages 6+)
- *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli (ages 9+)
- *Stella by Starlight* by Sharon M. Draper (ages 9+)
- *Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, their lives and dreams brought to life* by Ashley Bryan (ages 9+)
- *Ghost* by Jason Reynolds (ages 10+)
- *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson (ages 10+)

