

## **Living a Values Driven Life**

**Regina Hastings**

*Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center School*

Abstract:

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Media images of women of color involved in the fight for social justice often present a strength that seems impossible. From mothers who have lost children to police violence to young women who are trying to understand their lives in the educational system, young women of color experience a tension between who they are and who they are expected to be. Using a variety of activities, this curriculum utilizes self improvement material to help students identify the values that they hold to be the most important to them. Once students discover the language of values that they can apply to themselves, they then apply that language to a movie and novel.

Keywords:

Movie Analysis, Novel Analysis, Values, Vocabulary, ELA, Social Justice, Self Improvement

### **Unit Content**

In 2022, Philadelphia continues to see a rise in violence within the youth community. Teachers across the city are impacted by the struggles our students face. Working in a juvenile detention facility offers me a unique and challenging opportunity to work with the youth who are at the center of much of this activity.

With much of the emphasis placed on the young men of color who are engaged in gang related and gun violence activities and how to deter these young men from the paths they are taking, the center has also been seeing an increase in the number of young women of color who are detained. Interacting with these girls on a daily basis, one realizes that they do not understand the full scope of the consequences of their actions. Similarly, they

claim that they often get “caught up” in these behaviors due to their romantic involvement with the boys they choose.

Seeing the tension that arises for these young women in the values they want to live and the behaviors they exhibit, I wanted to gain an understanding of what causes that tension and how best to shape lessons that would help ease that tension at this point in their lives.

Foremost, one place the tension could arise is in the portrayal of the strong black woman that comes from mothers who need to fight for justice on behalf of their children who were killed due to police. In a 2016 *Elle Magazine* piece, “Who Are the ‘Mothers of the Movement’ Speaking at the Democratic National Convention?”, Michael Sebastian highlights the plights of mothers whose children’s deaths are controversial due to their proximity to police involvement. Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, Lezley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown, Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner, and Geneva Reed-Veal, the mother of Sandra Bland, who were involuntarily thrust into the spotlight to demand justice for their children’s deaths. These mothers were forced to demonstrate strength at a time when they should have been processing their grief over the loss of their children. While admirable, young women receive messages that the processing of feelings could need to be put on the backburner for the fight for justice.

This need to put the sorrowful feelings aside is reiterated through the popular movie and book, *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas. Every female student in the facility is familiar with the story of Starr, a young girl of color forced to use her voice in the name of social justice when her friend is killed by a white police officer. While Starr’s character is strong and appears to be a good role model for young women, she also must forego the time to process her grief as she is called to use her voice to the social justice cause.

While using such materials to explore the ideas of strong women of color around grief was tempting, the idea of pushing images of black trauma onto young women who are moving through their own traumatic experiences seemed like it could add to their trauma

rather than enable them to work through it. Therefore, the need to explore topics along different lines arose. The focus of my research took a turn towards the challenges young women of color face in their everyday lives on a more granular level.

When thinking about the challenges young women of color face as they navigate the educational landscape and how to think about themselves in a variety of situations, girls of color often experience tension. In a 2017 article published in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Gadsden discusses the ways in which girls of color, particularly black girls, feel invisible when it comes to trying to fulfill their potential. Using research that shows girls of color are disciplined more often than their white counterparts, she points out that “the potential of girls of color within and outside the inner-city is underestimated and underdeveloped and the ways in which these girls are exposed to risks” (pg 16). Along the same line, Gadsden highlights additional material that suggests girls are pushed into situations that force them “to make themselves visible and audible in settings where they are rendered invisible or silenced and assert their power to be acknowledged” (pg 22).

To illustrate the point of being made to feel invisible, Gadsden interviews several girls who discuss how they had high expectations for their education when attending high school. Accepted into a magnet school where she thought she would be exposed to growth and cultural diversity, Nancy, one of the interviewees, felt that the academics were not rigorous enough to prepare for college. Furthermore, she suffered consequences for wearing her head scarf to school from one of her counselors. In her attempt to lead students to voice their opinions about this unfair treatment, her pleas to be heard could not find an audience. She felt disillusioned by how the school promoted itself (pg. 23).

Another resource that contributes to this tension faced by young women of color comes from Monique Morris. She also provides an understanding of how that tension starts early

in life. Publishing *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* in 2016, Morris's material became the basis for a documentary as well as her TedTalk. Within the TedTalk, "Why black girls are targeted for punishment in schools - and how to change that" Morris quotes several studies to illustrate her point that black girls have an unfair disadvantage in their educational journeys: Black girls are overrepresented along the entire continuum of discipline in schools; Black girls are 7x more likely than their white peers to be suspended and 3x more likely to be referred to juvenile court than their white and Latinx peers; Black girls experience a specific type of age compression where they are seen as more adult like than their peers; People perceive black girls to need less nurturing, less protection, to know more about sex and to be more independent than their white peers; The perception disparity begins when girls are as young as 5-years-old - Believing a girl is older than she is can lead to harsher treatment, immediate censure when she makes a mistake, and victim blaming when she is harmed; It can also lead a girl to believe that there is something wrong with her rather than the conditions in which she finds herself.

While people would think that only inner city youth who live within poverty experience this type of tension, we find that women of color on various levels face similar challenges. Michelle Obama is one example of this.

In a chapter from "Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America" by Melissa Harris-Perry, which focused on Michelle Obama's humanity and role as wife to the first black President of the United States, helped put into perspective the true difficulty that even the most clean cut of black women faced in this world. Harris-Perry articulated the language of the "crooked room."

Within this idea of the crooked room is this idea that no matter what Michelle Obama did she would be criticized. Despite how her and Barack Obama's relationship was scandal free, commentators used derogatory terms to describe their relationship. Using terminology like "Barack's baby mama," media pundits used racial stereotypes to create a distorted image of Michelle Obama (pg. 273). Hence, this characterization stole levels of respect from her wherein she was not viewed as an equal.

Another way in which Michelle Obama's situation within the crooked room arose was when commentators delved deeply into her studies. Michelle Obama graduated from Princeton but spoke about how she felt alienated from the campus based on her race and her family's history of slavery. Instead of acknowledging her experience, the media used this discussion to perpetuate another racial stereotype of "the angry black woman" (pg. 276). The claims were that Michelle Obama should have been grateful for the opportunities to receive an Ivy League education as opposed to complaining.

The crooked room got applied when the media discussed her physical features. From one reporter saying Michelle Obama "...got back" to another suggesting that Michelle Obama should cover up when the President is making speeches because men are distracted by temptations.

Finally, this idea about the tension within this "crooked room" where Michelle Obama could not stand up straight comes from within her own race. A Chris Rock skit in which he talks about how Barack Obama has a "handicap - a black wife" adds to the idea that women of color are hard to deal with. Rock states: Just imagine telling your black wife that you're president? "Honey, I did it! I won! I'm the president" "No, we the president! And I want my girlfriends in the Cabinet. I want Kiki to be secretary of state! She can fight!" (pg 288). These lines suggest that women of color do not act from the principle of qualifications but association and the physical capabilities of friends, particularly friends who will fight for her.

Another source that offers a view on the tension that surrounds celebrities comes through an article published in *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*. In "The Cardi B-Beyonce Complex: Ratchet Responsibility and Black Adolescent Girlhood", Ashley N. Payne discusses how young women must discern how stereotypes of prominent celebrities influence their understanding of their own beliefs and behaviors. She writes about how girls are caught in a struggle between "the loud Black girl as loud, hot tempered, and promiscuous" as seen through Cardi B (pg. 35).

Payne suggests that if handled correctly, the study of Cardi B and Beyonce can help redefine the idea of what being ratchet is and how it relates to “Black girl magic.” Payne cites research that calls for the “need for engaging Black girls to embrace the multiplicity of the Black girl experience” (pg 37). Artists like Cardi B are teaching these young girls that there are ways to succeed with sexuality and volume. Similarly, they do not need to reserve their louder selves for the private experience amongst just their other black friends but that they can celebrate all parts of themselves.

From these sources, we gain an understanding of how young women of color can be confused by the images which are put before them. From young to old, everyday to famous, females of color are fed different, and often confusing, ideas of how they should act and expect to be treated.

### **Rationale**

As an educator with knowledge about the tension these young women experience, the curriculum I develop is intended to help these growing girls to hone in on this tension to distill the values they hold dear. By prescribing activities that provide a deep dive into a study of the language of values, they will gain a vocabulary that centers on values, analyze photos of Michelle Obama, Cardi B and Beyonce, a movie, “For Akheem,” and novel, *Never Look Back*, and emerge with a commitment to their own individual values.

The journey into the language of values is offered through Susan David’s book, *Emotional Agility*. David offers an in depth discussion on the disconnect that arises when people are uncertain about their values. From peer pressure to constant comparisons with others, people’s lives can run amuck when they do not understand themselves and their reasons for why they do what they do.

In Chapter 3, *Walking Our Why*, David contends that people fall prey to “social contagion.” By this, she means that people pick up the values of those with whom they surround themselves and their behaviors are influenced by what happens around them. In order to become confident about the decisions they make, people must know their values. Their behaviors must be made based on those values and, whether they succeed or fail, they can be comfortable with their decisions because those decisions were guided by who they are (pp. 113 - 134).

Published in 1994 and updated in 2016 by Winona State University, the “Values Card Sort,” offers a list of 50 values with definitions. From “Acceptance - To be accepted as I am” to “Wealth - To have plenty of money,” this list offers readers the opportunity to select ten values that resonate with them. The next step in this activity is to write about how to put these values into action while living daily lives.

For the purposes of this curriculum, students will not only distill the values that are most important to them, they will apply the values to the photos, a novel and a movie to be analyzed throughout the course.

The YA novel, *Never Look Back* by Lilliam Rivera, is a story of a teenage girl who suffers from PTSD after Hurricane Maria devastates her home in Puerto Rico. Her mom devises a plan for her to live with her aunt and cousin in the Bronx for a summer in hopes that the change of scenery will help her heal. She develops a romantic relationship with another teenager, Pheus, who tries to help her with the memories that haunt her. Amidst her own inner turmoil, she encounters problems with the group of friends with whom Pheus is a part. Ultimately, Eury learns that it must be her own inner strength that leads to her healing.

“For Ahkeem” is a documentary about a young woman of color, Daje Shelton, who gets expelled from school for getting into a fight and then must attend an alternative school in

order to graduate. Daje Shelton encountered multiple obstacles while trying to pursue her high school education. Her resolve gets tested when two friends die from gun violence, when she becomes pregnant with a son, and when rioting and protests break out in her area over the killing of Michael Brown. In the movie, Daje expresses disappointment over finding out that the child she is carrying is a boy because boys of color face such big challenges growing up in areas of poverty. Since many of the girls within the facility face similar challenges, this story will provide opportunities for many discussions around what it means to grow up poor, of color, struggling to do the right thing in school, falling in love, creating a family, and graduating from high school. The trajectory of Daje's life resembles many of young women of color in poverty stricken areas of the city.

## **Standards**

CC.1.4.9-10.X Write routinely over extended time (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

CC.1.5.9-10.A Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CC.1.5.9-10.B Evaluate a speaker's perspectives, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

CC.1.5.9-10.C Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

## **Objectives**

Students will be able to understand and apply the language of values to their own lives as well as to the lives of characters in various media.

Students will be able to discuss plot and complex characters in various media.

Students will be able to compare and contrast characters in the various media to discuss how different values and beliefs guide behaviors.

### **Teaching Strategies**

Image/photograph analysis - So many of the challenges girls of color face are based on people's perspectives of them, we want to think deeply about what we see when we look at pictures. What kinds of judgments arise for us?

Vocabulary Development - Using a worksheet, students will understand the meanings of different words associated with values. These value words will be used to discuss the characters from *Never Look Back*.

Journal Writing - Journal writing exercises will be used as "Do Nows" and ways to reflect on classroom discussions.

Accountability Mirror Project - Using mirror paper, students will design a mirror with stickers and post-it notes to commit the values they want to embody to gain confidence in their beliefs.

Movie Analysis - We will watch the movie, "For Akheem," to analyze the values we think the characters live by.

### **Classroom Activities**

Lesson #1

Materials: Values Worksheet developed by University of New Mexico

Do Now/Journal Entry: Two of your friends have a crush on the same boy. Both have confided in you about their crush and they are starting to gossip about each other. How would you handle this situation?

Discussion: Teacher will share how she would handle the situation. Listening to how I answered the question, what could be said about the teacher's values? Students will share how they handled this problem. Then we will discuss what the decisions could say about a student's values.

Activity: Using the values worksheet from University of New Mexico, we will study the meanings of the first 10 words on the sheet. Students will then be broken into groups to present the rest of the words. The goal is for students to think about the words to determine to which they most identify.

Exit Ticket: Students will identify three to five words that most resonate with them and answer a series of questions to determine how they will live by those values.

## Lesson #2

Materials: Picture of Michelle Obama, Cardi B, Picture of Beyonce, Classroom set of *Never Look Back* by

Do Now/Journal Writing: When we think of the word, ratchet, what comes to mind? When we think of the word, classy, what comes to mind?

Activity #1: Show images of Michelle Obama, Beyonce and Cardi B to discuss what comes to mind when we think of these three celebrities. What do we think these women value? What value words could we use to describe the women in these images? Why do we think the way we do?

Activity #2: Read selections from *Never Look Back* to determine the values of the characters in the book. What values do we think the main character possesses? What is helping guide her through her day to day life?

Exit Ticket: How can the discussion we had about the images of Beyonce and Cardi B relate to the selections we read from *Never Look Back*?

## Lesson #3 - #7

Materials - Classroom set of *Never Look Back* by Lilliam Rivera

Do Now/Journal Writing: What parts of yesterday's reading stood out to you because of how you might relate to the main characters' experiences?

Additional journal writings and activities will arise as we read discuss the novel.

Activity: We will continue to read selections from the book and talk about the values that arise. Spontaneous discussions might also arise.

Exit Ticket

Lesson #8

Materials - Mirrored paper, stickers, post-it notes, craft supplies

Activities - Students will design an Inspirational Mirror with post-it notes & stickers that encourage them to stick to their values.

## **Resources**

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*The Hate U Give*. Directed by George Tillman Jr., performances by Amanda Stenberg, KJ Apa, and Algee Smith. Fox 2000 Pictures. 2018.

## **Appendix**

