

# How teachers are bringing lessons from the racial justice uprisings into the classroom

By [Deanna Pan](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 18, 2020, 8:23 a.m.



Joana Chacon, an English teacher at Newton South High School, will teach only works by authors of color this year in her courses. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

For centuries, dead white men have dominated high school English classes. Syllabi and summer readings lists are chock full of Shakespeares, Hemingways, Faulkners, and Fitzgeralds.

But this year, Joana Chacon, an English teacher at Newton South High School, is trying something new: Like many in her department, Chacon is only teaching texts by authors of color. Freshmen will read “The House on Mango Street” by Sandra Cisneros and civil rights

poetry by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Maya Angelou. Juniors will dive into Sherman Alexie's bildungsroman "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian," Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel "American Born Chinese," and one of Toni Morrison's searing early works, "The Bluest Eye" or "Song of Solomon."

"I take issue with the criteria being used to say some things deserve to be in the canon and some things don't," Chacon said. The Western literary canon, the works that we regard as "classics," she noted, is overwhelmingly white, male, and Eurocentric. "It's doing some harm to the souls of our students who are Black, indigenous, and people of color, and it's honestly doing harm to the souls of all our students."

Besides, she added, "we've been doing it a certain way for so long, why not give this a chance?"

Galvanized by a summer of civil unrest, teachers across the Commonwealth are planning to integrate the tenets of antiracism into their curriculum during a school year already defined by radical change and experimentation amid the coronavirus pandemic. At Brookline High School, a physics teacher wants to make topics on race and diversity "organic" parts of her usual lessons. The Boston Teachers Union is pushing the district to adopt and fund a [proposal for an ethnic studies curriculum](#). Chacon plans to take advantage of the online-only environment by inviting activists, who would otherwise be unable to make the trip to Newton, to speak with her classes over Zoom to discuss their work and show students how they, too, can get involved in activism.

"There have always been teachers committed to truth-telling," said Deborah Menkart, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, [Teaching for Change](#), which offers a reservoir of programs and resources for teaching social justice. "But I think this moment ... has also impacted teachers in recognizing that this country has to come to grips with the reality of institutionalized racism. It's not a question of just diversity."

As a young Latina who spent much of her adolescence in Seattle, Chacon rarely saw herself or her Salvadoran background reflected in her schools' literature and history curricula.

“I remember thinking to myself, ‘Why do I never see people like me?’” she said. It was a fleeting thought that burrowed into her subconscious, and wrecked her psyche and self-esteem. “It was teaching me that certain things were right and good and certain things were wrong and bad, and my culture was in the bad category,” she continued. “I got to college with this internalized racism and internalized white supremacy.”

But college also exposed Chacon to antiracist teachings for the first time. She read Black, brown, and indigenous scholars who taught her that her “melanin is something to see as beautiful and celebrate,” she said. Those experiences soon informed her own approach as an educator.

“I wanted to not do what had been done to me,” she said, “[I wanted] to uplift students rather than have them stall their identity formation.”

While Chacon always has included writers of color in her courses, she felt determined to do more as protests over the police killings of Black Americans, such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, roiled the country this summer. Last month, she organized the multi-day [virtual National Educator Antiracism Conference](#), attended by thousands of teachers around the world from a range of disciplines, including the arts, special education, and math. She’s building on her work with the conference by starting a nonprofit, [Educators for Antiracism](#), which she hopes will one day host a database of antiracist lesson plans.

“It feels like there’s a critical mass [of teachers] that can change the culture of education to be more equitable and more robust,” Chacon said. “It feels like it can happen.”

Indeed, teacher sign-ups for the [Zinn Education Project](#), an initiative of Teaching for Change and Rethinking Schools, which offers free lesson plans based on Howard Zinn’s best-selling book, [A People’s History of the United States](#),” have doubled nationwide since June, according to Menkart. Sociologist James Loewen, author of [Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong](#),” also senses a shift in how teachers are approaching subjects like American history.

“After George Floyd, after the positions, shall we say, taken on race relations by our president, a lot of teachers realize they’ve got to do better than just teach the textbook,” Loewen said. “So I think there’s real opportunity for students and teachers to cooperate in bringing out an exciting new kind of US history courses in our schools.”

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is developing a number of new resources to help teachers “examine and adjust their planning to be more inclusive, critical, and responsive,” Reuben Henriques, the agency’s history and social science content lead, said in an e-mail to the Globe, after several reached out this summer seeking guidance on explicitly addressing issues of racism and prejudice in their classes. The department also is revising the guidebook for school civics projects to “include more support around centering students' identity, race, and lived experience,” Henriques said.

Of course, teaching antiracism can court controversy. Teachers around the country have faced pushback from parents, administrators, and politicians for addressing issues of race and social justice in their classrooms. Earlier this summer, Republican Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas [introduced a bill](#) that would prohibit schools teaching The New York Times' 1619 Project, which reexamines the consequences of slavery in American history, from receiving federal funds. A teacher in Texas was [recently suspended](#) for refusing to remove images of “Black Lives Matter” and LGBTQ posters in her virtual classroom. And in June, Zakia Jarrett, a teacher at Pierce Middle School in Milton, was [briefly placed on paid leave](#) for making a comment on racist police officers during a class discussion about Black poetry. She was reinstated following a community uproar.

On Thursday, in a speech at the National Archives Museum deriding Zinn, the 1619 Project, and “critical race theory,” [President Trump announced](#) he will sign an executive order called the 1776 Commission promoting “patriotic education” in US schools.

“The right wing has been very attentive to every effort to try to reform the curriculum ... and so it’s a commitment to say, ‘I’m going to teach outside the textbook,’ ” Menkart said. “Teachers have to really become activists themselves.”

Antiracist teachings are even permeating classrooms that, at first blush, seem like unlikely incubators for social justice education. Graciela Mohamedi, a physics teacher at Brookline High School, said the ninth-grade science department plans to introduce more storytelling into their lessons, which will give educators the opportunity to teach about lesser-known scientists of color or discuss naming conventions in scientific laws and theorems rooted in European colonization.

“We can acknowledge the fact that we’re naming things because of a colonial influence, because of imperialism, and that’s why we don’t know about the science that was done in Africa and South America and throughout the world,” she said. “It’s not that learning and science didn’t occur in those other places outside of white Europe, it’s just that white imperialists, when they got to those places, they literally destroyed [those civilizations] ... The bits and pieces we do know we need to hold on to and we need to spread.”

The national reckoning on race has brought different challenges to schools serving predominantly students of color. Neema Avashia, who teaches civics at McCormack Middle School in Dorchester, where the vast majority of her students are Black and Latino, said discussions on racism are already commonplace. As she rewrites her curriculum for this year, one of her goals is to emphasize stories of resistance to political oppression — in athletics, arts, and other arenas — rather than “stories of Black pain.”

“In my classroom, I want kids to have the ability to name what systems of oppression are playing out and to be able to identify what are the ways in which people resist these systems, and how do we find power and inspiration in that resistance?” she said. “That for me, I think, is a different conversation than the reckoning. Reckoning is acknowledging the thing exists. For my kids, they know it exists. It’s happening to them.”