

Case 6.2: Teaching Race with *Huckleberry Finn*

Samuel, one three African American students in Ms. Kohl's language arts class, loved discussing literature. Ms. Kohl loved having students act out the stories they read to connect more deeply with characters. Samuel always volunteered to play one of the characters.

Ms. Kohl's favorite novel was Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. When her students returned to class after reading its first fifty pages, she couldn't wait to begin the thespian festivities.

She was aware, of course, that this approach was risky with *Huck Finn*, which was full of racialized language. She considered talking with students about the use of the n-word in the novel before they read it. But she resisted, concerned that such a discussion might manipulate students into a particular view of the book.

Once students were settled into their desks, she asked for volunteers: "Who wants to play a role?" Several students raised their hands but, to Ms. Kohl's surprise, Samuel was not one of them. In fact, he appeared distracted. As classmates moved to the front of the room to play a role, he stared down at his desk.

"How about you, Samuel?" Ms. Kohl asked. "Didn't you like the novel?"

"It was all right," he answered.

"Well everyone can't love every piece of literature," she said, continuing with the lesson.

Johnny, one of Samuel's white classmates, volunteered to play the role of Huck, which also made him the narrator of the story. He played his role with verve, trying his best to sound the way he imagined Huck sounding.

Initially Samuel sat quietly, following the story in his book. But within minutes Ms. Kohl noticed him growing listless, shifting in his seat.

"Everything OK, Samuel?" she asked.

"Not really," he answered.

"What's going on?"

"I hate this book."

"Yes, well, everyone can't love every piece of literature," Ms. Kohl said again. "Let's get through these first ten pages. Then I'd like to hear why you don't like it."

Samuel sighed.

Samuel's classmates continued to read. Ms. Kohl, noticing that Samuel remained uncomfortable, started to worry it might be because of the racialized language.

The students had reached the eighth page of the novel. Ms. Kohl always felt nervous about page eight because, although the n-word was scattered through the first seven pages, it appeared several times on page eight. Ms. Kohl's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Samuel shouting, "Stop it! You think saying that is OK? Shut up!"

Samuel threw his book on the floor and exited loudly out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Ms. Kohl, looking up to find 26 students as shocked as she was, had no idea what to do next.

Questions

1. How might Ms. Kohl have prepared her students for the language in *Huck Finn*? Should she have done so before they began reading the novel, or do you agree with her not wanting to "spoil" their experience of the book by talking too much about it before reading it?

2. Should teachers assign readings that use the n-word or other oppressive language? Some people argue that such language should be removed from literature used in schools. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Should Samuel be punished for his outburst and for walking out of the classroom the same way another student would have been punished if it had happened on another day for another reason? How might Ms. Kohl address the situation with her other students?