As an educator, I’ve always enjoyed the pleasures of reading and teaching. In the 2017-2018 school year, I had the wonderful opportunity to teach a course titled Middle School Chatroom. The course was designed to address both academic and non-academic issues concerning early adolescence. Topics included healthy relationships, community building, stress reduction and wellness, identity, and social justice. Throughout the year, we discussed these issues in a way that was thoughtful, engaging, and powerful for all involved.

I started the course by engaging students in courageous conversations. Specifically looking at identity, we began by exploring the “Big 8” identifiers: age, (dis)ability, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class. In class, students listed which three identifiers they felt most defined them and brought in artifacts to exemplify one. We also began to compare how these internal identifiers might relate to the labels put on us by society and started to unpack stereotypes. In class, students began writing “I am, I am not” poems, which expressed their ideas in a creative medium. We created a collaborative poem that included each students’ voice about their own identities.

Over the next several months, we continued to explore each of these topics separately and examined how they interact and overlap to form the very complex identities that each of us hold. The conversations and activities were designed to explicitly teach about these often charged and sensitive issues and terms, so that our students can confidently and positively engage with these issues and perspectives. We also focused on race and ethnicity and particularly how it manifests in our local and national communities.

To provide more depth to these issues and topics, seventh-and eighth-grade students read the novel *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. This book, which explores police brutality and systemic racism, came out in February 2017 and was an instant New York Times bestseller. The novel brings together so many of the concepts and skills students learn throughout their CFS careers, including themes such as identity, power, and perspective, as well as character development, historical context, and literary appreciation.

Teaching explicitly about race can, at times, present many challenges. Students bring a variety of perspectives and a wide range of knowledge. Adults (both teachers and parents) can often view race through a different generational lens from their students. Our racial history is complex, often unjust, and almost always uncomfortable to discuss. Despite these difficulties and in light of the School’s social justice mission, I feel it is
essential that our Middle School students have the skills to begin to speak frankly and thoughtfully about the complexities of race relations in America.

Teaching Middle School Chatroom provided me with the opportunity to have honest conversations with students about the biggest topics in their lives. As our School’s mission states, we hope that “through the example of their lives,” our students are able to encounter and speak up against oppression and injustice. By engaging with the difficult topics of race, power, and identity, Chatroom provided a foundation for students to become advocates for themselves and others.

“Sometimes you can do everything right and things will still go wrong. The key is to never stop doing right.”

Angie Thomas, The Hate U Give