

Inquiry-Connectors

Topic/Title Influence of Pop Culture: The Jena 6
Overview/Abstract <p>Today’s youth are bombarded with a plethora of visual and auditory messages through pop culture- television, magazines, music, radio, computer games, Internet and various forms of print media. Through their encounters with pop culture, youth can come to understand their place in the world and take critical stances towards issues such as gender identity, race, fashion, body image, sex, violence, and power. This Inquiry-Connector gives a brief literature review of the critical literacy theory, place the critical literacy discussion in the context of pop culture, provide examples on how other teachers have used pop culture as a catalyst for student dialogue and literacy in the classroom. The Inquiry-Connector calls students to participate in “critical conversations” about the <i>Jena 6</i> incident in Jena, Louisiana in 2006. Through the exercises, students would be afforded the opportunity to step outside of themselves and inside someone else’s shoes to understand things through the other person’s eyes and from multiple perspectives, with the hope of raising concern and sympathy for others and taking action on important social issues.</p>
Rationale <p>“There are two sides to every story.” We’ve heard this saying time and time again. Some would go on to say that there are three sides; your side, my side, and the truth.</p> <p>What truly occurred or the “truth” can oftentimes become warped through the media. The events of an incident can be misstated on the news and consist of twisted facts to suit the fancy of the reporter and mass media. Whatever the case, dealing with sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom is just as important as the traditional curriculum. Students should be taught to think critically about the things they encounter in the world around them, not excluding pop culture. They should be taught to not accept things at face value.</p> <p>This Inquiry-Connector invites participants to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Consider how pop culture played a role in the event that transpired in Jena, Louisiana▪ See the importance of seeing things from another’s perspective▪ Learn how to positively resolve sensitive or controversial issues.
Current research/literature review on issue/topic <p><i>It is 8:15 A.M. Sara, a ninth grade English teacher, clocks in and makes her way down the hallway to her first period class. Huddled around her door is a group of her students engrossed in a serious debate over the Jena 6 incident that was aired on the news the</i></p>

previous evening. Sara walked up on the last part of the conversation. The comments that she heard were very disturbing, so she decided to create an opportunity for her students to discuss the issue from various perspectives in hopes of the students proactively doing something to ensure the same incident would not happen at their school.

Even though the above account did not actually occur, it is an event that could transpire. Today's pop culture plays a role in the lives of our students and impacts/shapes the ways in which they think and react to the world around them. Today's youth are bombarded with a plethora of visual and auditory messages that are disseminated through media- television, commercial advertisement, magazines, music, radio, computer games, Internet and various forms of print media (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Tier, 2006).

According to the Media Education Foundation, "The average American youth spends 900 hours in school and 1,023 hours watching TV every year." This statistic only speaks to youth's television consumption; it does not take into consideration the amount of time they play video games, surf the Internet, or listen to music. Through youth's encounters with pop culture, they come to understand their place in the world and take stances on issues such as gender identity, race, fashion, body image, sex, violence, and power (Guy, 2007; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008).

With all this interference, the teacher's job becomes more difficult. Teachers on the otherhand, can use pop culture as catalyst to get students to think critically about themselves and the roles they play in this democratic nation. "Teaching a diverse population of adolescents to be writers, readers, and active citizens requires fundamental changes in how we approach curriculum development, teaching strategies, and student roles in the classroom" (Singer and Shagoury, p. 318). This article is a brief literature review on critical literacy, why it should be integrated with literacy instruction, and provide practical examples on how other teachers have used pop culture as a catalyst for student dialogue and literacy instruction in the classroom.

What is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy or *pedagogy* has its roots in the work of Paulo Freire "whose call for radical pedagogical change advocated for a sweeping transformation in ways of thinking rather than specific teaching strategies or techniques" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 3). Freire used literacy and dialogue as the catalyst for the liberation of the "oppressed" peasants of Brazil (Freire, 1993). Through their struggle for liberation, the oppressed citizens regained their humanity and began to "name the world" (Freire, 1993). *Critical literacy* has been used with other marginalized populations, such as illiterate adults and urban students, for years and its success has been documented in the literature (Freire, 1993; Purcell-Gates & Waterman; Morrell, 2002). Foss (2002) posits however that *critical literacy* should be used in all classrooms and that *critical literacy* would benefit students from marginalized groups as well as those who come from more privileged backgrounds. She states,

"...even those ascribed power because of their race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality, and religion- need and deserve guidance in problematizing the systems around them and their places within those structures" (Foss, 2002, p. 403).

It is through the "problematizing...of systems around them" (Foss, 2002, p. 403) that students begin to become active participants in the classroom and ultimately in society as a whole and not passive receivers

of information (McDaniel, 1994). “A critical viewpoint requires a step outside of one’s usual modes of perception and comprehension using new frames to understand experience” (Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2008, p. 8)

Critical Literacy and Pop Culture

The media is where we, young and old, “learn what it means to be ‘white,’ ‘straight,’ ‘gay,’ ‘middle class,’ ‘poor,’ ‘wealthy,’ ‘Christian,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘American,’” (Guy, 2007, p. 17) and even how and why certain populations (i.e. Blacks and women) are portrayed negatively in the media. Ciardiello (2004) ascertains that “critical literacy practices lead to the interrogation of the ulterior motives and below surface ideas of all types of text, including visual, print, digital, and audio” (p. 136). Critical literacy practices coupled with pop culture, leads students to examine how the media shapes “our collective perceptions, responses, and actions” (Lewison, Leland, and Harste, 2008, p. 8). Students must be taught how to question reality and construct knowledge for themselves.

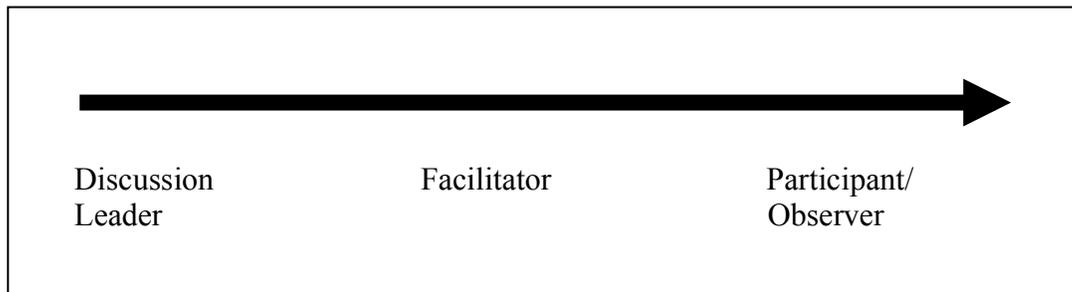
In his article “American Popular Culture: Should We Integrate it Into American Education,” Foss (2004) discusses several reasons why pop culture should be integrated into the curriculum.

Our students obviously understand the popular culture in which they live; by merging the study of this culture with traditional education, they will be *better able to grasp concepts, make sense of what they learn, and acquire perspective of the world* in which they live...[they] will have a *better attitude in regards to their education* if we can emphasize relevance to the world in which they are familiar...[and] *marginalized groups in the American society [will be elevated]* (p. 590)

Besides the benefits listed above, others include pleasure for students, increased student motivation and engagement, and “opportunit[ies] [for students] to practice and demonstrate their literacy and knowledge skills;” (Xu, 2005, p.21) skills that they use outside of school on a regular basis.

Popular culture can be the mechanism by which students can “deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices in hopes of achieving a more egalitarian and inclusive society” (Morrell, 2002, p. 72). Those who look at the integration of pop culture in this light begin to understand its place in today’s educational system (Xu, 2002) or curriculum. Implementing a pedagogy of this sort can be somewhat uncomfortable for teachers and may lead to feelings of uneasiness, which may arise from teachers lack of understanding (Morell, 2002). As summarized in Xu (2002), some teachers “shy away from student popular culture and feel that they have a moral responsibility of keeping popular culture out of the official school world” (p. 722). The adoption of this pedagogy requires a “shift in the teacher’s and student’s role” (Xu, 2002, p. 728). Both students and teachers take joint ownership in the planning and implementation of popular culture. Figure 1 illustrates this change process as discussed by Bomer and Bomer, 2001.

Figure 1: Teachers Progress of Change



Using pop culture in the classroom indeed has its benefits; however every book, genre, television show, movie, etc. is not suitable for use inside the classroom. Teachers must choose content that students can challenge but also that they can have a connection with (Xu, 2002). When teachers choose the right text, whether print or non-print, they will make it easier for students to take a critical stance (Bomer and Bomer, 2001). Teachers must know how to capitalize on opportunities to integrate social issues into the curriculum much like the teacher in the short vignette at the beginning of the article. Before all of this can happen, teachers must know how to “be a critical observer of the word and the world” themselves (Bomer and Bomer, 2001, p. 45).

What have other teachers done?

Many teachers have taken the charge to create classrooms that foster students asking not only critical questions but also students “work[ing] toward[s] positive social change” (Singer and Shagoury, 2005, p. 318). In this section, we will explore what other teachers have done and how they have used various elements of pop culture to get students talking and reflecting on change.

Let’s begin with Ciardiello (2004) who created an instructional model for transforming students into strong democratic citizens through the use of various critical literacy practices and literature. The purposes of the model was to (1) teach students how to be “critically competent and caring citizens” and to (2) encourage “critical conversations” between students through the reading of children’s literature that address various social issues such as civil rights, child labor, homelessness, and human sexuality. Ciardiello’s instructional model consisted of five critical inquiry practices: (1) regaining one’s identity, (2) recognizing social barriers and crossing borders of separation, (3) the call of service, (4) examining multiple perspectives and, (5) finding an authentic voice (p. 139). These became the avenues through which students questioned texts and challenged reality.

Singer and Shagoury (2005) used literature to encourage “students to explore issues of activism and progressive social change” (p. 319). Before the *Stirring Up Justice* unit began, students were immersed in various workshops that were designed to guide them through the process. The workshops included the use of music, film, poems, narratives, discussions, and the like. The pop cultural forms varied and were chosen with the purpose of providing students with examples of people who were activists. The teacher had high expectations for her students and created a learning environment that gave birth to students’ critical practice and reflection. As the students began to feel safe to express their views, their stance as learners

changed. They began to take the lead and the teacher began to take the back seat.

While working with different groups of high school students in various settings, Morrell (2002) created instructional units that integrated hip-hop, film, and mass media that created an engaging learning experience for the students. The learning was contextualized. It was situated in the experiences of the students and the world around them. The students were engaged in their learning and empowered through dialogue, critical conversations, and investigations.

Literature can be powerful, especially when it is placed in the hands of students. Students should know that they too have a voice and should use that voice to make a difference as citizens in this democratic society instead of passively allowing someone else to determine their futures. Popular culture can be the means by which students can work to begin to work for a more just society.

Below is an invitation that I created with ideas from www.tolerance.org and Lewison, Leland, & Harste (2008) *Creating Critical Classrooms*. The invitation invites students to participate in “critical conversations” about the *Jena 6* incident in Jena, Louisiana. Through the exercises, students would be afforded the opportunity to step outside of themselves and inside someone else’s shoes to understand things through the other person’s eyes and from multiple perspectives, with the hope of raising concern and sympathy for others and taking action on important social issues.

Materials & Standards.

References

- Bomer, R., & Bomer, K. (2001). *For a better world: Reading and writing for social action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
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- DeNicolo, C. & Franquiz, M. (2006). “Do I have to say it?”: Critical encounters with multicultural children’s literature. *Language Arts*, 84(2), 157-170.
- Fain, T.A. (2004). American popular culture: Should we integrate it into American education?, *Education*, 124(4), p. 590-594
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- Lloyd, C. (2003). Song lyrics as texts to develop critical literacy. *Reading Online*, 6(10). Retrieved on January 18, 2008, from http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=lloyd/index.html.
- McDaniel, C. (2004). Critical literacy: A questioning stance and the possibility for change. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(5), p. 472-481.
- Morrell, E. (2002). Toward a critical pedagogy of popular culture: Literacy development among urban youth. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46(1), p. 72-77.
- Guy, T. (2007). Learning who we (and they) are: Popular culture as pedagogy. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, p. 15-23.
- Singer, J. & Shagoury, R. (2006). Stirring up justice: Adolescents reading, writing, and changing the world. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(4), p. 318-339.

Students In Blackface "Jena 6" Reenactment.

<http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/years/2007/1002071jena1.html>

Tolerance.org. Fight Hate and Promote Tolerance. Retrieved April 8, 2008, from <http://www.tolerance.org/>

Trier, J. (2006). Teaching with media and popular culture. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(5), p. 434-438.

TV/Radio- CNN. <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/law/09/20/jena.six/index.html>

Xu, S. H. (2002). Teachers' full knowledge of student' popular culture and the integration of aspects of that culture in literacy instruction. *Education*, 122(4), p. 721-730.

Xu, S.H., Perkins, R. S., & Zunich, L. O. (2005). *Trading cards to comic strips: Popular culture texts and literacy learning in grades K-8*. . Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Text/Media Resources

Videos

[CNN News \(Video 1\)](#)

[CNN \(Video 2\)](#)

[CNN \(Video 3\)](#)

[Defense Fund: Jena 6](#)

[Democracy Now](#)

[Fox News](#)

[Students in Blackface "Jena 6" Reenactment](#)

Articles

[CNN News Article](#)

[CS Monitor Article](#)

Audio Streaming

[NPR: Searching for Justice](#)

Materials Needed

Handout on Different Perspectives

Venn Diagram Handout

Large Butcher Paper

LCD Projector & Laptop

Internet

Common Core Standards

- LAFS.8.RI.3.7
- LAFS.8.RI.3.9
- LAFS.8.SL.1.1
- LAFS.8.SL.1.2

Annotated Bibliography

DeNicolò, C. & Franquiz, M. (2006). "Do I have to say it?": Critical encounters with multicultural children's literature. *Language Arts*, 84(2), p. 157-170.

This article described how a teacher used multicultural literature in her bilingual language arts fourth-grade class as a catalyst for students' critical encounters with the story. The critical encounters helped students "examine personal beliefs and societal realities" (p. 157) According to the researchers, "Critical encounters emerge when a word, concept, or event in a story surprises, shocks, or frightens the reader...to such a degree that...[students] seek to inquire further..." (p. 157).

Fain, T.A. (2004). American popular culture: Should we integrate it into American education? *Education*, 124(4), p. 590-594

Fain calls for the need of American education to be more relevant to the lives of today's youth. This article explains that this can be done through the integration of American popular culture and American education.

Fain discussed how “the study of popular television programs, movies, music, and literature...[can]greatly enhance the learning experiences of our students” (p. 590).

Guy, T. (2007). Learning who we (and they) are: Popular culture as pedagogy. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, p. 15-23.

Mass media has been used for years as a tool through which information and messages are disseminated to today’s citizens. Pop culture through mass media “teaches us about race, class, gender, and other forms of socially significant difference and can reify these differences into social relationships that take on the aura of normalcy” (p. 15). This article described how pop culture was integrated into an adult classroom to help students “critically examine” mass-mediated pop culture and its effect on the social relations of the masses.

Kaye, T. (Director). (1998). *American history x*. [Motion picture]. United States: New Line Cinema. This movie was about the life of Derek Vineyard , who is a leader of a white-supremacists group. He became heavily involved after the murder of his father by a black man. Eventually Derek landed himself in jail. While behind bars he became ashamed on his past behavior. After leaving jail, he found that his brother Danny is heading in the same direction. Derek vowed to save his younger brother from the fate he was destined to.

Lee, S. (Director). (2000). *Bamboozled*. [Motion picture]. United States: New Line Cinema. This movie was a look at how stereotypes are perpetuated in the media and how a movie’s success was due to a writer “intentionally” playing into the social prejudices perpetuated in the media so as to not lose his job. This movie revealed what actually happens in the media world and ratings.

Lloyd, C. (2003). Song lyrics as texts to develop critical literacy. *Reading Online*, 6(10), Retrieved February 8, 2008 from

http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=lloyd/index.html

This article examined a topic that has been talked about a lot in the last few years. According to Freire and Macedo (1987), critical literacy “involves students ‘reading the world’: understanding how we encode power structures, and our role in these processes.” In the article, Lloyd used lyrics and music as a catalyst for discussing topics with her students with the goals of helping her students not only understand the concepts taught but also to encourage them to become active and responsible citizens in their society. Lloyd gave examples of lyrics that could be used to develop critical literacy in the following subject or topical areas: U.S. History, economics, U.S. government policies and practices, racism/racial issues, and international events and conditions.

Morrell, E. (2002). Toward a critical pedagogy of popular culture: Literacy development among urban youth. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46(1), p. 72-77.

Morrell describes several units he created for use in several of his classes over an eight-year period. The units integrated pop culture and critical pedagogy. As summarized by Morrell from the works of Freire, Giroux, Hooks, and McLauren, “...any pedagogy of popular culture has to be critical pedagogy where students and teachers...[are engaged] in authentic dialogue that is centered on the experiences of urban youth as participants in and creators of popular culture” (p. 73-74).

Schumaker, J. (Director). (1996). *A time to kill*. [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Brothers.

This movie is about a young white lawyer defending a black male accused of killing two white men who raped his ten-year-old daughter. This case sparks great controversy in this small town.

Singer, J. & Shagoury, R. (2006). Stirring up justice: Adolescents reading, writing, and changing the world. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(4), p. 318-339.

The article spoke of a unit created by Jessica Singer in her high school English class. The unit was called *Stirring Up Justice*. This unit encouraged “students to explore issues of activism and progressive social change” (p. 318) through reading and writing about issues that interested them, their passions.

Trier, J. (2006). Teaching with media and popular culture. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(5), p. 434-438.

In this article, Trier describes how he introduced the idea of “teach[ing] with and about media and popular

culture” (p. 434) to his preservice English methods students. The article describes several projects that the preservice teachers created that incorporated various media- film, music, television, and other visual texts and pop culture.

Tolerance.org. Fight Hate and Promote Tolerance. Retrieved April 8, 2008, from <http://www.tolerance.org/> “Tolerance.org is a principal online destination for people interested in dismantling bigotry and creating, in hate’s stead, communities that value diversity.” The website provides a wealth of information and resources for teachers, parents, and students to use covering a range of topics: racism, bullying, school discipline reform, etc.

Whipple, M. (1998). Let’s go to the movies: Rethinking the role of film in the elementary classroom. *Language Arts* 76(2), p. 144-150.

In this article, the author advocates the use of film as tools to enhance learning in elementary classrooms. In essence she calls for the expansion of the definition of ‘text’ to include film” (p. 144). Popular culture has largely influenced the lives of young people today. “What is viewed, just like what is read, must be interpreted by the viewer” (p. 148). Films can “open doors for students who have traditionally been thought to be at-risk...” (p. 146). It can also be another means to reach second language learners due to the fact that there are films and books written in both English and Spanish. The author used reader-response theory to support her argument. Rosenblatt asserts, “every reading act is an event” (p. 148). This event involves the reader, *the text*, and *the context* of the experience. The reader interacts with the text, whether in print, digital, or visual to construct meaning.

Xu, S. H. (2002). Teachers’ full knowledge of student’ popular culture and the integration of aspects of that culture in literacy instruction. *Education*, 122(4), p. 721-730.

Current research suggests that pop culture plays a big role in the lives of today’s youth. Even though the research suggests this, teachers oftentimes fail to integrate pop culture subjects they are teaching in the classroom for various reasons, some of which are lack of understanding of students’ pop culture and fear of the unknown. This article speaks about a qualitative study that examined the integration of students’ pop culture and literacy instruction and how a group of inservice and preservice teachers included students in the process of planning and implementing pop culture with literacy instruction.

Xu, S.H., Perkins, R. S., & Zunich, L. O. (2005). *Trading cards to comic strips: Popular culture texts and literacy learning in grades K-8*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

The authors focus on capitalizing on students’ new literacy knowledge in the classroom by infusing pop culture into the literacy curriculum. The authors give helpful suggestions on how pop culture can be integrated and what teachers need to know in order to make the integration of students’ pop culture and literacy meaningful and successful.

Inquiry-Connector Introduction

The inquiry-connector will begin by students doing the THINK – PAIR – SHARE – Activity

THINK: In your journal respond to the following questions. Does our school have any racial or ethnic issues/conflicts? If so, what are they and why do we have them? If your answer is no, why do you think we don’t have any racial or ethnic issues/conflicts?

PAIR: Share your thoughts with someone else in the class.

SHARE- The class will discuss the prompt together.

Inquiry-Connector Experiences

Activity #1

1. Introduce this invitation by showing clips from CNN’s documentary of the Jena 6 event.
2. After viewing the clips, speak to the students about multiple perspectives and how people view things differently. Discuss with them the different perspectives that were evident in the documentary.
3. Divide the class into three groups. Have them to read one of the articles on the even. Their task is to remember as many details as possible from the text. One group will represent Black Supremacists, another group White Supremacists, and the last group will be a neutral group. (The groups will not know what group the other is.)

4. Once the reading is over, each group will write as many details as they can remember from the article on butcher paper from the perspective of the group they were assigned.
5. As a class, discuss the similarities and differences between each group's lists using a Venn Diagram. The discussion will be framed around the following questions:
 - A. What were some of the similarities or differences between the groups' responses?
 - B. How did the perspective of the group you were a part of influence the events or details you remembered? How does one's personal experience affect their responses to sensitive or controversial events?
 - C. How does this exercise relate to the differences in the dissemination of information between news, radio, and other forms of media? Which source was more reliable?
 - D. How should the truth be determined? Can it truly be determined? Why or Why not?
 - E. Is it okay to listen to only one side of a story or issue? Explain your answer.
 - F. What do you think would have happened if the other group thought things over from the perspective of the other group? Would the situation have ended any different?

Activity #2

1. In groups of four, the students will visit several websites.
2. Each member of the group will choose a person or group of people to examine. While they are surfing the Internet, they will complete a section of the Multiple Perspectives Handout.
3. The groups will meet to talk about the various perspectives and sources using the "Jena 6": Multiple Perspectives Organizer.
4. To end activity #2, the students will discuss how this one event in Jena, LA impacted the school, town, state, and the nation. Did the event bring us closer or draw us further a part?

"Jena 6": Multiple Perspectives Organizer

<i>"Seeing Through the Eyes of Others"</i>		
Person/ Group	Perspective on the Issue	Source

Adapted from Lewison, M., Leland, C., & Harste, J.C. (2008). *Creating critical classrooms: K-8 reading and writing with an edge*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p. 229.

Activity #3 : Taking it to Another Level: Mix-It Up Lunch from TeachingTolerance.org

The Racial tension of the school, town, and nation added more intensity to the event. Do you think that your school is free of racial or ethnic tensions? Would a 'Jean 6' event ever take place at your school? The purpose of this activity is for the class to see if any of those issues exist here at our school and talk about ways we can bridge relations. Students will be asked to observe the social patterns in the hallways, cafeteria, courtyard, and other school locations to identify where social cliques hang out. With that information, each student will draw a map of the school and its social boundaries and reflect on the following:

- Did you map the school differently?
- How were groups labeled? Did the labels vary? Why?
- What did the students notice that the teacher didn't? Why might this be?
- Did individual students notice different things? Why might this be?
- What did the teacher notice that the students didn't notice? Why might this be?
- What have you learned about labels and your perspective?
- Does this information challenge any assumptions you may have had?
- What can you change in your classroom and school to reflect this new information? (Taken from: <http://www.tolerance.org/activity/social-boundaries-activity-map-it-out>)

After students have examined the school's climate and mapped it out, they will follow the steps (links) below for planning the *Mix It Up at Lunch Day*.

1. [Create a planning group](#)
2. [Determine a lunchtime activity](#)
3. [Make it festive](#)
4. [Publicize the event](#)
5. [Capture the day with pictures and video](#)
6. [Evaluate, debrief and follow up](#)

After the event is over, students, teachers and administrators will get together to see how this event helped ease the social tensions/climate at the school and to discuss further steps of action. Hopefully this would ignite a flame that will be forever burning in the school for students to actively respond to messages both visual and print that they encounter throughout their interactions with pop culture.