

Can I Touch Your Hair- 6th grade lesson plan

1. This lesson plan is built on the book *Can I Touch Your Hair*. A full reading can be found at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2LGcD5bV-k
2. The underlying message from the book is that through conversation, we can understand each other, appreciate our similarities and see the value of our differences.
3. A key note to call out is that the authors of the book are a white woman and a black man. The illustrators are also a white woman and a black man. This will be a key call out as you discuss some of the poems and highlight the importance of understanding each individual's experiences.
4. An additional key note: this lesson plan was written by a white person. As such, it should be acknowledged that there may be holes in the discussion that can best be filled by open discussion with individuals who are black.

Background/Important Story information

1. The foundation of the story is this: a teacher assigns a poetry project that needs to be done in pairs. Irene doesn't get paired up with her friend, and ends up with Charles; a boy that she isn't really excited to work with. She is a white girl and he is a black boy. There is no overt racism built into their relationship—however, there are tensions that exist through a lack of exposure and understanding. The rest of the book goes through the poems that they write—one from the perspective of Irene and the other from the point of view of Charles, building to a level of understanding between them.

Discussion Questions: (Students can write out answers or these prompts could be used to lead a discussion. *Responses in italics are only ideas and are not meant to be a comprehensive list of possible answers). Pick the questions that work best for your students or discuss them all.*

1. Compare and Contrast: Assign one student to read *Hair* and another to read *Strands*. How were the experiences around their hair different? *In part, for her to select to create an afro was a choice. His experience was something that he couldn't change.* Why do you think they had such a different experience? *Because his hair is different, Dennis has a curiosity about it. Though his curiosity isn't inherently wrong, invading the space of another and treating him as different is damaging.* How could Dennis have handled his curiosity better? *He could have developed a relationship, asked and waited for the answer and respected it, etc.* Does Irene's history of wanting an afro mean that she is racist? *No. She does need to be careful about cultural appropriation—but the best way for her to manage that is through asking questions and understanding how her changing her hair for 'novelty' could make others feel.* Why do you think Charles was bothered when his hair was touched without his permission? *It may have made him feel as though he were a circus side-show, similar to what Irene's brothers called her when she did her hair that way.* How are their experiences similar? *Each felt minimized by how others treated their hair. Each seems to acknowledge that their hair is a part of their identity.*
2. Assign students to read *Forgiveness and Apology*. Discuss: Using the text and/or the images, who is having this conversation? *Charles and a white classmate.* What can you infer from the story happened between these two boys? *The white classmate seemed to reject Charles because he didn't fit the boy's stereotype of what a black boy would be like.* Why do you think that the white student treated Charles that way? *His exposure to black people may only have*

been through media/TV/internet/music, etc. At the end, we discover that he learned through interacting with other black individuals that we should be accepting and kind toward others, and that we can't know all of the particulars of individuals lives. Irene feels badly about what happened historically to Black Americans. Is it a problem that she only felt comfortable leaving the note in Shonda's book? No. It would be better for her to understand how things impact Shonda specifically, but feeling bad is a good first step to starting a conversation. How do you think Shonda would have responded to receiving the note? Open to interpretation. It is likely, though, that it would have made her feel good to know that one of her classmates cares. How would her response have been different if Irene would have talked to her face to face? This is a difficult question. If they aren't already friends and have a good relationship, it could feel insincere. It could also make her feel supported. So much depends on their relationship. The important note, here is that the conversation is the initial goal—and seeking to create that conversation is important. Doing it quietly is likely the best first step, so that Shonda and Irene both can feel comfortable talking to each other.

3. Perspectives: The original cover of the book calls it "A Conversation". How is this book set up to be a conversation? *The same topics being covered by each person allows them to see through each others eyes and create an understanding.* Who is having the conversation? *Irene and Charles.* Assign a student to read *Dear Mrs. Vandenberg*. What has happened to Irene and Charles through their "conversation"? *They have started to understand each other a little better. They've discovered that their similarities far outweigh their differences.* How can this book help us to be accepting of other people's differences? *It can help us to understand that all people go through challenging things. It helps us to recognize that the things that make us different don't have to be things that make us unkind or unfriendly toward each other. We can recognize that we share many of the same experiences, and when we do, we see that our lives are a lot more similar than they are different.* Sometimes we can 'accept' people without getting to know them at all. Is that a problem? *It can be.* If so, why? *It tends to make us ignore other people's reality and never really learn about how things impact them. Those things might be things that we are doing that are unintentionally hurtful.* How can it help us to come to accept people by talking to them, asking them questions, and learning about their lives and experiences? *It helps us to be kinder, better friends and classmates, be more open and accepting, and will help others to feel heard, respected and appreciated.*
4. Additional Discussion: This book was written by a white woman and a black man. It illustrated by a black man and a white woman, as well. Why is it important that the book was written and illustrated this way? *It helps to make sure that the individuals are speaking from experiences that are more real than imaginary. It helps to make sure that the voices of the students are more accurate to what the students in the story might have been experiencing.*

Other Activities:

One of the authors, Charles Waters, reads many of the poems on YouTube. This can be helpful to have a different voice/tone to the poems that are his in the book: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjyAykknbUs&list=PLMwELqLRVaq7wkZ2GVcDbTwm3c81qFb6R>