

Session 2 Case Study

Addressing Race with *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Ms. Larson is an energetic and engaging language arts teacher who always looked forward to teaching Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As part of her teaching style, she frequently asked students to perform the stories they read in class in order to bring them to life. Christian, one of the few African American students in Ms. Larson’s class, was an avid thespian and usually loved participating in these performances.

After assigning the first 40 pages of the novel as homework, she was excited to hear her students’ reactions and begin the live-reading. In order to set the scene, she always began the performances with a group discussion by saying, “Let’s establish the dialect, time period, and culture.” She knew this was a risky conversation to have with *To Kill a Mockingbird* due to the vocabulary of the story, but felt it was important to talk about. After all, you never know how a room full of high school students will react to the n-word.

But despite her belief in the discussion, she felt uncomfortable about addressing it herself and didn’t want to draw extra attention to it. She reminded herself that she had a similar discussion with them before starting the book talking about how it represents a different time in the United States and convinced herself that was sufficient.

Proceeding with class, she asked for volunteers to participate. Multiple students raised their hands and Ms. Larson began to point to Christian out of habit, but, to her surprise, Christian had his arms folded and was slouching into the back of his chair while looking out the classroom window.

Ms. Larson called on a few students who walked to the front of the room with varying levels of excitement. With just one character remaining and no more raised hands, Ms. Larson looked at Christian and asked “Would you like to read today?” Christian glanced at Ms. Larson, quickly shook his head, and then shifted his focus back to the window. Surprised by his behavior, Ms. Larson tried to find out what was wrong and asked, “You usually love doing this, and it is such a good novel. Didn’t you like it?” “Not my favorite,” he replied. “It doesn’t need to be your

favorite to appreciate it. Listen closely and maybe you'll pick up on some things that you like about it on a second read."

The lesson began. Max, one of Christian's white classmates and best friends, was reading the part of Scout where she's having a conversation about a name that Atticus was called. Kyle, another one of Christian's white classmates and good friends, was reading the part of Atticus. Both were trying their best to speak with an accent they thought represented their character and made the class giggle a few times with their exaggerated performances.

Ms. Larson noticed that Christian was becoming restless and was constantly moving without following along in the book. "Christian, is everything okay?" "This book sucks." "Come on, Christian. Give it a chance. We've just started!"