

Lonnie Chavis of *This Is Us* Writes about Racism

Compelling Question: In what places and spaces does racism show up?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	4-5	45 Minutes	Reading: R1, R2, R3 Writing: W3 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL5 Language: L4, L6
MS	HS		



Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [Black Lives Matter: From Hashtag to Movement](#)
- [Casting of 'The Little Mermaid' Brings Pride and Prejudice](#)
- [Experiences with Race and Racism](#)
- [Hair, Identity and Bias](#)
- [On-Screen Diversity: Why Visibility in Media Matters](#)

Other Resources

- [Challenging Biased Language](#)
- [Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#)
- [How Should I Talk about Race in My Mostly White Classroom?](#)
- [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)

Key Words

claiming	portray
detained	profession
dismissed	publicist
harassment	racial profiled
laws	racist
ordeal	targeted
perceived	threat
policies	witnessed

LESSON OVERVIEW

In June 2020, Lonnie Chavis, the twelve-year old actor who stars in *This Is Us*, wrote and published an essay called “America Needs to Change” about his experiences with racism. He wrote the essay in the wake of an ongoing public conversation and reckoning about the ongoing issue of police violence against Black people and systemic racism. Chavis has a unique point of view as a Black actor and as a young person who speaks directly to other young people and whose words may resonate more powerfully in that role.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to understand the definition of racism and reflect on specific examples of racism from Lonnie Chavis’ experiences as well as their own.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand the definition of racism.
- Students will explore the concept of racism by reading an essay by a child actor.
- Students will analyze the interpersonal and institutional ways that racism shows up in Lonnie Chavis’ life.
- Students will reflect on their own experiences with or witnessing of racism and write an exploratory essay about that experience.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- Board/Smart board, markers
- Post-it® Notes (2–3 per student)
- Prepare the definition of racism on the board/smart board or as a PowerPoint slide (see steps 2&3 in the “Information Sharing” section).
- [This Is Us Star Lonnie Chavis, 12, Shares His Experiences with Racism: 'America Needs to Change'](#) (one copy for each student)

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing: What is Racism?

- Begin the lesson by asking students: *What is racism?* Record notes on the board/smart board with some of their responses. Ask: *How do you define racism?* Have students work in pairs and come up with a definition together. Have students share their definitions aloud.

2. Elicit the following definition of **racism**:

Racism: The disrespect, harm and mistreatment of people of color based on made up ideas that white people deserve to be in charge and treated better.

Use the following notes for exploring the definition in more detail and answering any questions students have:

- First, underline or highlight the words “**people of color.**” Ask students what “people of color” means. Explain that “people of color” include people who are Black, Latinx, Asian and/or Native American. Clarify any misunderstandings.
- Next, underline or highlight “**disrespect, harm and mistreatment.**” Ask what those words mean and who might be doing the mistreatment. Point out that mistreatment, harm and disrespect can be done on purpose by people or by groups, and sometimes there is harm caused even when it's not on purpose. People can experience harm based on where they live, their experiences with police, by a doctor, by pollution in the air and water, by their experiences at school. Harm can be done on purpose by a person, but groups and organizations can also cause harm by not helping people of color or not allowing them to get what they need.
- Next, underline or highlight “**made up ideas.**” Ask students if they've heard of ideas like, “white people deserve better treatment” or “white people deserve to be in charge.” Ask: *Where have you heard this?* Students might talk about the past like slavery, segregation, not being allowed to vote, etc. and that “back in the day people believed that...” Tell students that even though many people would disagree with this made up idea today, the idea can still cause harm. Sometimes we aren't even aware of all the ways that harmful ideas get rooted in our world, even if out loud, most people would say that those ideas are wrong.

3. Ask students: *How is this definition of racism different from what you thought the definition was previously?*



Reading Activity

1. Explain to students that we are now going to read an essay by Lonnie Chavis, who is a prominent actor. Share a photo of him and ask if anyone recognizes him. Explain that Lonnie Chavis (at the time this lesson was written) is a twelve-year old actor who currently plays one of the young Randall characters in the TV show, *This is Us*. He has been in a variety of other TV series as well as a movie.
2. Distribute the essay, “[This Is Us Star Lonnie Chavis, 12, Shares His Experiences with Racism: 'America Needs to Change'](#)” and give students ten minutes to silently read the essay. For younger students, you may choose to read the essay aloud, or have students take turns reading it aloud.

Distribute a few Post-it® Notes to each student. While students read the essay silently or listen to it being read aloud, have them jot down (on the post-its) words or phrases they find meaningful or memorable. In addition, have them underline words or phrases that they don't understand, have questions about, or want to know more about.
3. After reading, have students bring their post-its (with the memorable and meaningful words and phrases) to the front and paste on the wall or board. Read aloud the words and phrases or have each student read their words and phrases aloud. Ask a few students to share the words they underlined that had their questions about or want to know more about.
4. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What is the essay about?
 - When you read the first sentence, “My life matters but does it?” what did you think?
 - What thoughts and feelings came to mind when you were reading the essay?
 - What does Lonnie Chavis mean when he says, “At this point, I knew by experience that this nation will never take it easy on me, and that all Blackness could be perceived as a threat in America?”
 - What experiences that Lonnie Chavis shared could you relate to? Which experiences couldn't you relate to?
 - What did you learn about Lonnie Chavis by reading this essay?

- In the end, what does Lonnie Chavis say about the things in America that need to change? Why does he pick those things?
- Based on the essay and what you already know, what things do you think need to change?
- What questions do you have for Lonnie Chavis?

Note to Teacher: If you have any questions for Lonnie Chavis, please tweet them to @ADL_Education and we will try to get them answered.

Writing Activity

1. Explain to students they are going to write their own essays about racism. They can choose to write about an experience they shared in their small group discussion earlier, or another experience. This can be something they experienced personally, something they witnessed or something they heard or read about. In the essay, they should include what happened, how they felt, what was done or what they wish someone had done, and the way in which the example contributes to racism in society.

Note: If time permits, you can share one or more of these stories by young people in [First Encounters With Racism](#) as additional examples before students begin writing.

2. Provide time for students to begin writing their essays in class and ideally also provide time for them to conference with you and each other to get feedback. Assign the completion of the essay as a homework assignment.

Closing

Have students share something new they learned or realized after reading Lonnie Chavis' essay.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“15 Classroom Resources for Discussing Racism, Policing, and Protest”](#) (Education Week, June 2, 2020)
- [“A Missouri woman asked Merriam-Webster to update its definition of racism and now officials will make the change”](#) (CNN, June 12, 2020)
- [“First Encounters with Racism”](#) (*The New York Times*, August 2, 2017)
- [“What Students Are Saying About Experiencing Racism...”](#) (*The New York Times*, February 13, 2020)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
R3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
Writing
W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

***This Is Us* Star Lonnie Chavis, 12, Shares His Experiences with Racism: ‘America Needs to Change’**

PEOPLE's Voices from the Fight Against Racism will amplify Black perspectives on the push for equality and justice

By Lonnie Chavis June 17, 2020 12:00 PM



PHOTO: VALERIE MACON/AFP VIA GETTY

*Known for his role on the Emmy Award-winning NBC drama series *This Is Us*, actor Lonnie Chavis captured hearts as '9-year-old Randall,' the younger version of Emmy-winning actor Sterling K. Brown. Here, the 12-year-old anti-bullying advocate — who has launched a campaign, IGTV show and hashtag around #FixYourHeart — shares what started as a letter to his mom about growing up in the U.S. as a Black boy and struggling to find words to reflect his feelings about the tragic death of George Floyd.*

My life matters, but does it? America paints a very clear picture of how I should view myself. America shows me that my Blackness is a threat, and I am treated as such. I actually didn't learn about being Black and what that would mean for me until I was 7 years old. I thought I was a peach man, so my parents educated me on being a Black man really quick with long talks, books and movies like *Amistad* and *Malcolm X*. I was overwhelmed with confusion, fear and sadness. I had to lean on my faith in Christ for hope, protection and understanding.

Being a young Black boy in Hollywood made it even more fearful. I can recall the time when I realized there are not a lot of people that look like me on these Hollywood sets and asked my mom where all the Black people were. I also remember being invited to events but then being treated very poorly by security or entrance checkers, like I wasn't supposed to be there, until I had a publicist to announce me. I think of going to Hollywood events with

other actors and actresses where I was constantly asked if I'm the boy from *Black-ish* or the boy from *Stranger Things*. I guess we all look alike since we are all Black. Can you imagine being confused for any other Black kid just because you all share the same profession? I can.

I can recall a time on set when I started crying listening to an actor portray a racist grandmother toward my character. The director and writers told me that they didn't need me to cry for the scene. However, it was hard for me not to cry as I witnessed what I had just learned was my reality. I wasn't acting, I was crying for me. Can you imagine having to explain to a room full of white people why I couldn't hold back my real tears while experiencing the pain of racism? I can.



The Chavis family (L-R): Najah, Ryan, Lonnie, Andrew, Tyler and Lonnie Sr.

PHOTO: LONNIE CHAVIS

It didn't stop there. I was racially profiled at a restaurant in San Diego while visiting one of my young Black costars. Her Black cousins and I were accused by a young white girl working the cash register of trying to steal the few tips in her tip cup. It was a huge ordeal that almost led to police being called on us while we were with our parents — until some wonderful fan who happened to be white told them that I was a professional actor on two television series currently airing and argued that he doubted I would need to steal her few dollars. My mother never played the “he's an actor” card. She definitely knew and argued that we were being targeted merely because we were a group of young Black children. Can you imagine someone thinking you are a thief just because of the color of your skin? I can.

At this point, I knew by experience that this nation will never take it easy on me, and that all Blackness could be perceived as a threat in America. My mother was taking me to work one morning, just blocks from the Paramount Studio lot, when she got pulled over in our new BMW. The white cop approached my mother's window and asked her, “Whose car is this?” — not about her license and registration, or even why he pulled us over. I had been taught about how to behave if ever getting stopped by the police, but nothing prepared me for this. My mom was

guilty of driving while Black. She had to go to her trunk for more paperwork, and I watched the cop hold his hand on his gun as if my mom was a threat. I was scared for her; I was scared for me. I didn't know what to do in that backseat, but just to get on the phone with my dad. It became clear to me that the other three times we were pulled over in Hollywood/L.A. areas after that were because we were Black in a nice car. Can you imagine it being normal to start recording with your cellphone as soon as your mother is pulled over for a traffic stop? I can.

If you don't understand what's going on in the world, then understand this: This is what the world looks like for me. A 12-year-old Black boy. This is my America. Policies need to change, laws need to change, the police need to change, Hollywood needs to change, hearts need to change, America needs to change. Change has got to happen for unarmed Black citizens to not live in fear of being murdered. Can you imagine being me in 2020 and wondering what the future holds? I can't.

To help combat systemic racism, consider learning from or donating to these organizations:

- *Campaign Zero (joincampaignzero.org), which works to end police brutality in America through research-proven strategies.*
- *ColorofChange.org works to make the government more responsive to racial disparities.*
- *National Cares Mentoring Movement (caresmentoring.org) provides social and academic support to help Black youth succeed in college and beyond.*

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