

# A Pathway to **ACTIVISM** and **ENGAGEMENT**

## Moving from book clubs to teen advisory boards

By **Julia E. Torres**

**O**NE OF my favorite middle grade novels is *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* by Janae Marks (HarperCollins). In the book, a young woman finds her way to The Innocence Project after deciding to solve the mystery of whether her father has been wrongfully imprisoned. More than five million children in the United States have a caregiver who has had first-hand experience with the criminal (in)justice system. Schools are often hesitant to discuss or encourage students to read books about incarceration and criminal (in)justice. This presents a disconnect between what students need and what they receive.

Young people can be supported to seek answers to some of society's biggest challenges at school. Books provide pathways for conversations that will plant seeds of discovery in the hearts and minds of our youngest generation. These seeds will eventually blossom into ideas for building a better future. When we defend a young person's right to read and support partnerships with libraries, we move toward what Paulo Freire called "education as a practice of liberation" rather than education as a practice of domination.



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## “An increased responsibility”

Historically, schools have been places where young people come to learn doctrines and teachings of previous generations. It is a rite of passage to learn time-honored traditions, read texts, and hear stories. Stories, however, are just one way humans share information.

Living in today’s information age, people have more ways of sharing and creating knowledge. We also have an increased responsibility to empower young people with the tools to navigate information and stories around them and to equip them with the ability to make the world a place where they can realize humanity’s highest potential.

We can move from reading books and book clubs toward youth activism and community engagement through teaching the model of transformative resistance. In the *Democracy & Education* article “Building the Dream: Transformational Resistance, Community-Based Organizations, and the Civic Engagement of Latinos in the New South,” a group of young Latine students “confronted and attempted to transform educational practices that kept them subordinate.” Similarly, students at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Early College in Denver, CO, created a podcast called Know Justice, Know Peace to host conversations about how the dynamics of race impact their community. These are just two of many examples of young people using story and media literacy skills to shape their world through youth-led activism.

In libraries, many young people form Teen Advisory Boards (TABs). These boards serve to advise adults about everything from library use policies to the types of programs and book clubs that should be held. TABs offer an opportunity for young people to cultivate leadership skills while learning to work and communicate with each other. By pursuing a common goal, students share the experience of engaging in activities like inviting their favorite author to speak, raising funds, designing and building a community garden, organizing novel-themed mystery parties, and more. Sometimes TABs

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just get together to play Dungeons and Dragons and be in community with one another.

In every case, youth activism and engagement begins and ends with young people and their communities. The very realistic goal is youth empowerment.

## “Free to be themselves”

One of the most liberating characteristics of a library is that it is a third space. It neither serves as a school nor a museum, though libraries do have characteristics of both. Although books and other materials in a library should be cared for, the space exists as a place where young people are free to be themselves. Their participation in programs is not judged or evaluated by its outcomes, and adults are present to facilitate rather than enforce healthy reading habits. One of the first places Zoe Washington goes when she’s looking for information about her father and how to help him is the library.

How do we empower young people to engage in transformational resistance? How do we give them the tools and resources to make the world and their environments places where they want to be? We can start by using our adult resources,

power, and privilege to create spaces where they can imagine and dream. We share stories with them of how others have engaged in positive social transformation. We support them when they come together in groups. We listen to, capture, and share their stories. ■

## FURTHER READING

- Activism and Organizing, a booklist from Social Justice Books: A Teaching for Change Project ([socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/organizing](https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/organizing))
- *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research: Transforming Inquiry With Researchers, Educators, and Students* by Nicole Mirra, Antero Garcia, and Ernest Morrell (Routledge)
- *Radical Love as Resistance: Youth Participatory Action Research for Transformation* by Rachel Radina and Tammy Schwartz (Sentia)



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