



# Reading Heals the World: A Case for Literacy and Environmental Justice

by ISLAH TAUHEED

*By creating spaces within our classroom that allow students to engage in meaningful conversations around environmental justice, we elevate their voices and begin to lay the groundwork for empathy and equity in our students.*



## **LITERACY CHAMPION: ISLAH TAUHEED**

Islah Tauheed has been an elementary school teacher for 14 years. She is a courageous advocate for teachers. She works toward change by creating spaces where young people can let their guard down, express their true selves, and experience freedom as learners. She is currently a fifth grade teacher in the Bronx, NY, where she integrates a variety of curriculums and projects that reflect the diverse background of students in the

school community. Islah is a graduate of Teachers College, Columbia University, and a former Heinemann Fellow. Pronouns: she/her

## **One to Know**

If this pandemic has taught us anything, it's that school is not located in a physical structure. Education happens everywhere. Reflecting on the premise of The Freedom Schools project of the 1960s, school should be a place where students have a chance to explore their own histories in addition to traditional core subjects, by addressing complex, real-world problems. This cross disciplinary approach will provide students with the intellectual and practical tools to take action on issues they care about long after the school year is over.

Using strong literacy practices, we can guide our students to become engaged agents of change. Studies about the environment are not only relevant but accessible to students of all backgrounds and ages. Young people are filled with a desire to make a difference. By guiding and supporting students through research on key environmental issues, you are giving them

an opportunity to solve these problems. Units built around civic engagement also open up the possibilities to new forms of assessment as students are allowed to demonstrate and articulate key concepts, skills, and knowledge in a multitude of ways beyond the traditional exam or five paragraph essay.

Furthermore, this exposure to content through multiple perspectives, allows opportunities for students to develop a sense of empathy, as students begin to question their own biases around the role human beings play in partnership with the land. This cycle of reflecting, monitoring, and assessing texts, may lead to young learners to revise their beliefs as they develop a deeper understanding of their newly acquired knowledge.

## What to Do

### Discovery

Take your students outside! Walk around the neighborhood. Go on field trips. Have students make observations. Interview people in the community. How can services be provided that effectively reduce transaction costs between the environment and local residents? Identify an issue that is affecting the local community. Some issues you may choose to address are: air pollution, water pollution, food insecurity, deforestation, fast fashion, or composting. Pick a topic and fully immerse in texts. Examine a variety of texts. Go beyond nonfiction books and have the students learn from poetry, picture books, song lyrics, videos, and artwork. By providing students with multiple entry points, you are granting access to a wide variety of learners.

### Collaboration

Taking on environmental justice issues pushes students to become active learners, thoughtful community members, and engaged citizens. These topics interrupt individualism and create a shift from thinking about self to the global community. As students communicate and invite multiple voices into the conversation, they develop ways to apply what they're learning to the world around them. Together, students take their understanding of the content and apply it to pioneering solutions for climate issues.

Beyond the collaboration students will do with each other, they will begin to explore their experience with the earth. Once we change how we see the land and how we talk about the land, we change how we see ourselves in relation to the land.

### Action

Engaging with texts about environmental justice helps students develop a voice for interaction with people in powerful positions. Write letters. Form a social media campaign. Address politicians at town halls. Students will become aware of how their actions can have a significant impact in the community and people around them. They are equipped with the tools to really make a change in the world.

Know that engaging in this work is anti-racist education. Though the US Environmental Protection Agency requires that “no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental and commercial operations or policies”, it’s important to point out to students that substantial

inequities exist between Black and Brown children and their lack of access to a clean and healthy environment, especially in urban settings. As advocates for environmental justice, youth can play an important role in contributing to the discussion of “why” and originating policy solutions. That’s when we begin to engage in a true revolutionary pedagogy of resistance.

## More to Know and Do

- **Elevate Indigenous voices** Indigenous voices are crucial to this work. Indigenous activists have been at the forefront of environmentalism, yet sadly are the ones whose land has been the most disrespected. Indigenous land practices are vital for environmental change. Center their voices while collecting text options.
- **Stay informed locally** Push back against government decisions that don’t honor traditions, practices, and important rituals of the local residents in the community. This is especially important if you are an educator who works in a community different from the one you live in. Advocate for your students and their families.
- **Stay informed globally** Disrupt American exceptionalism by studying what other countries are doing to end our climate crisis. Most countries are further ahead in the Green Movement and many of the innovations were created by scientists of color.
- **Follow young people who are advocates in this work** From Mari Copeny in Flint, Michigan, to John Paul Jose in India, young people are leading this work. Use them as mentors for your studies.

## How to Reach Islah Tauheed

You can follow Islah on Twitter [@izzieteaches](https://twitter.com/izzieteaches).