

## What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

Are you wondering how to have conversations with your youngest learners about essential topics for today's classrooms? In *Rebellious Read Alouds*, Vera Ahiyya will support you every step of the way beginning with her accessible three-part framework—start small, be consistent, be constant. In each lesson, she skillfully weaves together literacy and social justice standards without losing sight of your primary focus—learners. Every rebellious read aloud includes key questions to spark conversation and action. With Vera whispering in your ear, you'll feel confident in taking steps toward “activating your young activists.”

—**Maria Walther**, Author

*The Ramped-Up Read Aloud and Shake Up Shared Reading*

I have spent decades promoting the art and function of read aloud experiences and have been a staunch advocate for revisiting books with a different lens to provide students opportunities to unearth nuance, shift perspective, build empathy, and take action. As I was reading *Rebellious Read Alouds*, I found myself nodding and saying, “amen,” a lot. If you believe that small children cannot be part of big conversations, this book is for you. If you find “hushed” topics uncomfortable, this book is for you. If you are searching for books that can spark interest and action for social justice, this book is for you. If you are searching for a way to bring read aloud, deep conversations, big thinking, and the growth of human potential into your classroom while addressing the “have tos” of school, this book is for you. As you read, you have Vera Ahiyya there with you, nudging, encouraging, and offering scaffolds to help you take the next step. The author has curated an impressive list of books around nine themes that are general enough to fit in almost any elementary classroom. She has developed 45 lessons (enough for each week of the school year with a bonus lesson within each theme) that are organized around a simple framework (start small, be consistent, keep constant) that can be generalized to any theme you may choose to pursue. I'll say it again, this book is for you.

—**Lester Laminack**

Educator, Author, and Consultant

I will be sharing Vera Ahiyya's book with all my preservice and early career teachers, who understand the importance of filling their classroom libraries with books that serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. Vera empowers us with manageable and engaging ways to use books as the springboard for the essential—though often tricky-to-start—conversations about race, ability, and so many other areas of identity. She encourages rebellion in the best possible way—to ensure that all children are seen and valued in classrooms.

—**Molly Ness**, Author

*Every Minute Matters and Think Big With Think Alouds, Grades K–5*

Vera Ahiyya has created something amazing for every stage of the rebellious reader's heart! The power of a great story is that it can be the catalyst to so much change. In *Rebellious Read Alouds*, Ahiyya beautifully breaks down stories, lessons, and ideas about books that inspire the most important conversations, the conversations about who we are. The framework of *Rebellious Read Alouds* effortlessly empowers educators and parents to start using literacy to better understand their world and themselves. This book is a must read for all.

**—Juan E. Gonzalez Jr.**

Elementary School Teacher, Speaker, and Social Media Content Creator

As I read the manuscript, I kept thinking to myself, this a book teachers need in their hands. So many teachers don't know how to read and talk about these topics and this is the guide to help them. The breadth of diversity is overflowing, and teachers can follow along with a sample scope and sequence *or* pick and choose topics and books as they see fit. Vera Ahiyya's passion for the subject rings through and her voice is loud and clear.

**—Matt Halpern**

Education Consultant, Speaker, and Author

One of the most important aspects of professional learning is that the experience not only explains *why* it's important to make an instructional shift but also *how* to do so. *Rebellious Read Alouds: Lessons to Invite Conversations About Diversity With Children's Books* is one of those precious gifts for teachers that is both inspirational and practical in a way that is empathetic and responsive to and supportive of the needs of teachers and students. Vera Ahiyya provides the *why*—rationale for being rebellious as a teacher and interviews with featured educators—as well as the *how*, with standards-based read aloud lessons that show teachers how to make necessary shifts to instructional practices that use a framework of *the small, the consistent, and the constant* as a scaffold. In these pages, we see what it looks like to partner with parents, administrators, and colleagues along the way, and how to make the journey both enjoyable and transformational for teachers and students as a community of learners.

**—Afrika Afeni Mills**

DEI Director, Educational Consultant, and Author

*Open Windows, Open Minds: Developing Antiracist, Pro-Human Students*

Are you ready to break free from the confines of what may sometimes seem like stale literature not representative of the world around us, but more important, the world of our children? *Rebellious Read Alouds* is a must-read for anyone and everyone lucky enough to stare into young eyes full of wonderment and a thirst to learn about their peers around them. Ahiyya Vera provides an invitation to venture into what many naively still view as uncharted territory in children's literature. *Rebellious Read Alouds* boldly—and responsibly!—provides title after title of literature that

serve as catalysts for dialogue and are rooted in topics that are beautifully a part of our children's lives: immigration, divorce, religion, LGBTQ+, and others, all while promoting an environment of celebration and appreciation of the beauty of our differences. As global educators, we have the responsibility to interrupt and dispel stereotypes and ignorant ideologies that often run rampant in the world around us, and instead instill awareness, compassion, and acceptance of others so that our children may engage with their community and beyond to make our planet more peaceful, sustainable, and equitable.

**—Hilda E. Martinez**

2020 San Diego County Teacher of the Year, Early Literacy Resource Teacher

*Rebellious Read Alouds* is a book that is needed right now and it's presented in a way that is simple, easy to use, and yet has a strong call to action for the urgency of this work in our world today. Children deserve to have teachers who honor the identity of all children in their classrooms and beyond and the author shows us how this is possible with read aloud books and powerful conversations. This book is an excellent entry point for brave teachers to do the work.

**—Katie Keier**, Kindergarten Teacher and Co-author  
*Catching Readers Before They Fall*

This beautiful and impactful guide will change the pedagogical approach of educators worldwide. Vera Ahyya's overall theme is to create a true safe space for students and all involved to come face to face with their deepest emotions, fears, and ultimately reflections in the mirror via read alouds. By doing this, educators, parents, and community members will be challenged to do the same as they learn the importance of taking time to connect with your students, embracing diverse perspectives to inspire change beyond the classroom through creative critical reflection, thanks to this text.

**—Darius Phelps**

GAEYC 2016 Childcare Giver of the Year, Educator, Writer, Poet, and Illustrator

Vera Ahyya is the QUEEN of books for a reason! This book is for any teacher who wants to center inclusiveness and diversity but isn't always sure where to start. The author has taken the time to carefully cultivate a list of books that you should be reading and walks you through how to tackle the lessons and topics that some might find controversial or intimidating.

**—Naomi O'Brien**

Founder of Read Like a Rock Star, Content Creator, and Author





# Rebellious Read Alouds



# Rebellious Read Alouds

**Inviting Conversations About  
Diversity With Children's Books**

**Vera Ahiyya**

**CORWIN** Literacy



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“They’re not too young to talk about race!” Infographic created by the Children’s Community School, based in part on information and ideas from Jillian Addler at FirstUp, Lori Riddick at Raising Race Conscious Children, and kiran nigam at the Anti-Oppressive Resource and Training Alliance. © 2018

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# CONTENTS

Prologue	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
About the Author	xvii



1

## **PART ONE: What Is a Rebellious Read Aloud?** 1

Why Rebellious Read Alouds?	3
What About Learning Standards?	5
How Do I Cultivate a Diverse Classroom Library?	9
Are Young People Developmentally Ready for These Conversations?	12



2

## **PART TWO: Rebellious Read-Aloud Lessons** 15

• Our Names Are Important	20
• Our Features Are Important	36
• Our Traditions Are Important	48
• Our Actions Are Important	60
• Our Families Are Important	72
• Our Identities Are Important	84
• Our Disabilities Are Important	96
• Our Foods Are Important	112
• Our Histories Are Important	124



## **PART THREE: Communicating With Parents, Administrators, and Colleagues**

**135**

<b>Epilogue: Wishes</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	
Additional Children's Book Selections	143
Sample Timeline	146
Recommended Resources	146
Additional Titles by Topic	147
Rebellious Read Alouds at a Glance: List of Books and Learning Standards	149
<b>References</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>161</b>



For downloadable resources, video interviews,  
and other materials related to  
*Rebellious Read Alouds*—including a bonus lesson set—  
visit the companion website at  
[resources.corwin.com/rebellious](http://resources.corwin.com/rebellious).

# PROLOGUE

I have a deep passion for teaching, having come from a long line of educators. There's a school in Balch Springs, Texas, named after my great grandfather, in fact. Many years ago, he was the janitor, bus driver, teacher, and principal at a small school outside of Mesquite, Texas. His strong work ethic inspired his nine children, which included my grandfather, to attend college, pursue a career they were passionate about, and keep family first. My grandfather, after a career in the military, retired and decided to follow in his father's footsteps. He became a math teacher, then later a high school assistant principal. My grandmother, his wife, attended Bowie State University in Maryland (an HBCU) and, after graduation, started her career in education. She began her career as a physical education teacher and later became a first-grade teacher. While teaching, she and my grandfather raised six children. Of the six, two pursued careers in education: my aunt, who was a math teacher, an elementary school principal, and later a college professor, and my mother, a high school English language arts teacher, who later became a coordinator for school improvement (assistant principal) and, before she retired, an executive director for Region 3 in El Paso, Texas.

My mother graduated from high school at age 15, then graduated from college at 18, and immediately began her teaching career. Because my mother was an English teacher, many of my childhood memories center around reading. I remember memorizing lines from various Shakespeare plays while my friends recited lines from their favorite cartoons. As an only child, there was very little that I wasn't allowed to get away with. I wasn't spoiled per se, but I did get what I wanted most of the time. And what I wanted most was books.

If I go back to my hometown of El Paso, many of my longtime friends reminisce on my love of books. "You would always be sitting in a corner with your nose in a book," they say. I was never a fan of the *Baby-Sitter's Club*; instead, I preferred books like *Fear Street* or *Goosebumps*. I loved reading scary stories mostly for the thrill of what could possibly happen next, the anticipation. But I think there was another reason I gravitated to these stories more than others: there was no real indication of the race or ethnicity of the characters. Yes, there was a cover that typically featured a white character, but spooky books never focused on the characters' race, just on how they would escape frightening or tense situations. I could be a part of the story because there was no reason why it couldn't be me running through my school trying to escape from an evil ventriloquist dummy.

So, while I devoured books, I can barely recall "seeing" myself in those books. When I became a teacher and read Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) quote about books being mirrors and windows, I knew that providing those experiences would be of the utmost importance in my classroom. I wanted to find a way for students to

feel the excitement and joy of reading *and* feel connected to the story. Students of marginalized groups should not have to pick one or the other. They deserve it all.

In this book, I want to show you how you can help the students in your classroom see themselves and their peers in the books you read together and independently—and I want to show you how adding diversity to your classroom read alouds can lead to deep, thoughtful conversations about race, gender, identity, religion, ability, and more. In this book, I share with you some of my favorite children’s books written or illustrated by people in traditionally marginalized populations: Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, LGBTQIA+, those who practice a religion other than Christianity, folks who live with disabilities, and more. And I’ll show you how you can invite, spark, and manage conversations around these books and their important topics with your elementary students.

This might seem overwhelming. I bet you’re a little nervous and your heart rate just went up a bit. Thinking about talking to young children about race (or any “hushed” topic) when you’ve never had these conversations before is intimidating. Here are a few steps to help you prepare:

\*Share these books with family and friends. Practice the potential conversations you’ll have with people you know and trust first, before inviting conversations with students.

\*Do a bit of research and reflection. Did you know young children can start to identify different races as young as three years old? Do you know the difference between gender and gender expression? How do you honor and celebrate different holidays and traditions in your classroom or at your school? What holidays does your school offer time off for, and what traditions does your school celebrate? Did you know that Black girls are often perceived as less innocent, and therefore maybe they are less likely to receive mentorship or leadership opportunities in school? When you begin to understand the ways gender, language, stereotypes, bias, race, and racism present in school and society—and how this affects children from an early age—you’ll begin to understand the necessity of these conversations.

\*Think of the small, the consistent, the constant. Consider how overwhelming it can feel to be awakened to the urgency of some of these topics, so break conversations into workable, meaningful chunks:

## Here are some great resources to lead you along the journey:

“Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race” (article by Erin N. Winkler, PhD):  
<https://bit.ly/3jQFUbI>

“Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood” (article by Rebecca Ebstein, Jamilia J. Blake, and Thalia González):  
<https://bit.ly/2Y5Hy19>

“Black Adolescent Girls: Do Gender Role and Racial Identity Impact Their Self-Esteem?” (article by Tamara Buckley and Robert T. Carter):  
<https://bit.ly/3whYyOt>

“Promoting Self-Esteem Among African-American Girls Through Racial, Cultural Connections” (article by Kim Eckart):  
<https://bit.ly/3CBICc7>

“Anti-Bias Education and Holidays: Making Thoughtful Decisions” (article by Louise Derman-Sparkes and Julie Olsen Edwards):  
<https://bit.ly/3nLNNQj>

“A Note on Language: The Gender Unicorn” (article by the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Service):  
<https://bit.ly/3jXZHWf>



- Start small. What did we learn from this story?
- Be consistent. Who is telling the story, and who do we not see?
- Keep constant. What's our plan of action? What do we do with what we've learned?

The lessons throughout this book are organized around the small, the consistent, and the constant. These questions can help guide your thinking and your conversations with children.

It's one thing to have a collection of books that feature diverse characters; it's another, maybe more important thing to engage your students in powerful conversations around what they just read. The following pages will prepare you for some of those conversations. We center our conversations around a picture book, and pull out all the best parts, so you can be sure you hit your learning standards, engage your students in new thinking, and help them start to take action to make this world a better place.

With our rebellious read alouds, we push against the traditional and create a new normal where we can help every student feel valued, seen, and respected. I dream of a time when we don't even use the word *diverse* to describe books written by and featuring traditionally marginalized people. In fact, when titling this book, I decided not to include the term *diverse books* because it inadvertently centers our gaze on white, heteronormative, ableist thinking. May the conversations around beautiful children's literature allow us all to take steps toward realizing that time when we can celebrate diversity simply because it's who we are, not because it's "other."



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- My mother. Thank you for putting books in my hands. Thank you for encouraging me to read anything that made me happy. Thank you for being the reason I am the person I am today.
- My friends. I am so lucky to know you. Each of you makes me better. Thank you for always supporting me, helping me, and encouraging me.
- My students. I hope each of you sparks your own rebellion. I want nothing more than for you to find your voice and use it to make the best kind of change possible. Each of you is my hope and inspiration for a better future. Be rebellious.
- To the authors and illustrators I have featured in this book, I could not have done this without you. Literally. Thank you for pouring your heart and soul into your work and sharing your gifts with all of us. Each of these titles means so much to me, and I am forever grateful for your talents.
- To Tori, Sharon, Nancy, and the rest of the (extremely supportive and wonderful) Corwin team. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for believing in me and this work. Thank you for the time and energy you poured into *Rebellious Read Alouds* to make it exactly the book I dreamt it could be.
- To you, the rebellious reader reading these pages, thank you for believing in a world where *every* child is seen, respected, loved, and cared for. Thank you for starting a rebellion in your classroom.

**Let's get rebellious.**



## **PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Vera Ahiyya** (née Corbett) was born in Germany and raised in El Paso, Texas. Originally a pre-med student, Vera realized her calling as an educator at Austin College in Sherman, Texas, a calling shared by many in her family, including her beloved Papa. For her BA, Vera majored in history and psychology, and she earned her MA in education. Vera has taught kindergarten and first grade for sixteen years in Texas, Massachusetts, and New York.

Vera's love for children's books has led to her becoming an Instagram book influencer, where she showcases her love of children's literature and highlights books and authors that discuss the necessity for and power

of diversity and voice in children's books. She uses her extensive online presence to advocate for teachers to be purposeful and always inclusive with their choice of text in their classrooms.

Following a video showing her discussing racism with her kindergarten class that went viral and was shown on *Good Morning America*, Vera was approached to write her first children's book, *You Have a Voice*, which published in December 2021. She has other titles in the works.

Vera lives in Brooklyn with her husband Lonnell and dog Mozi. You can find her on Instagram at @thetututeacher.