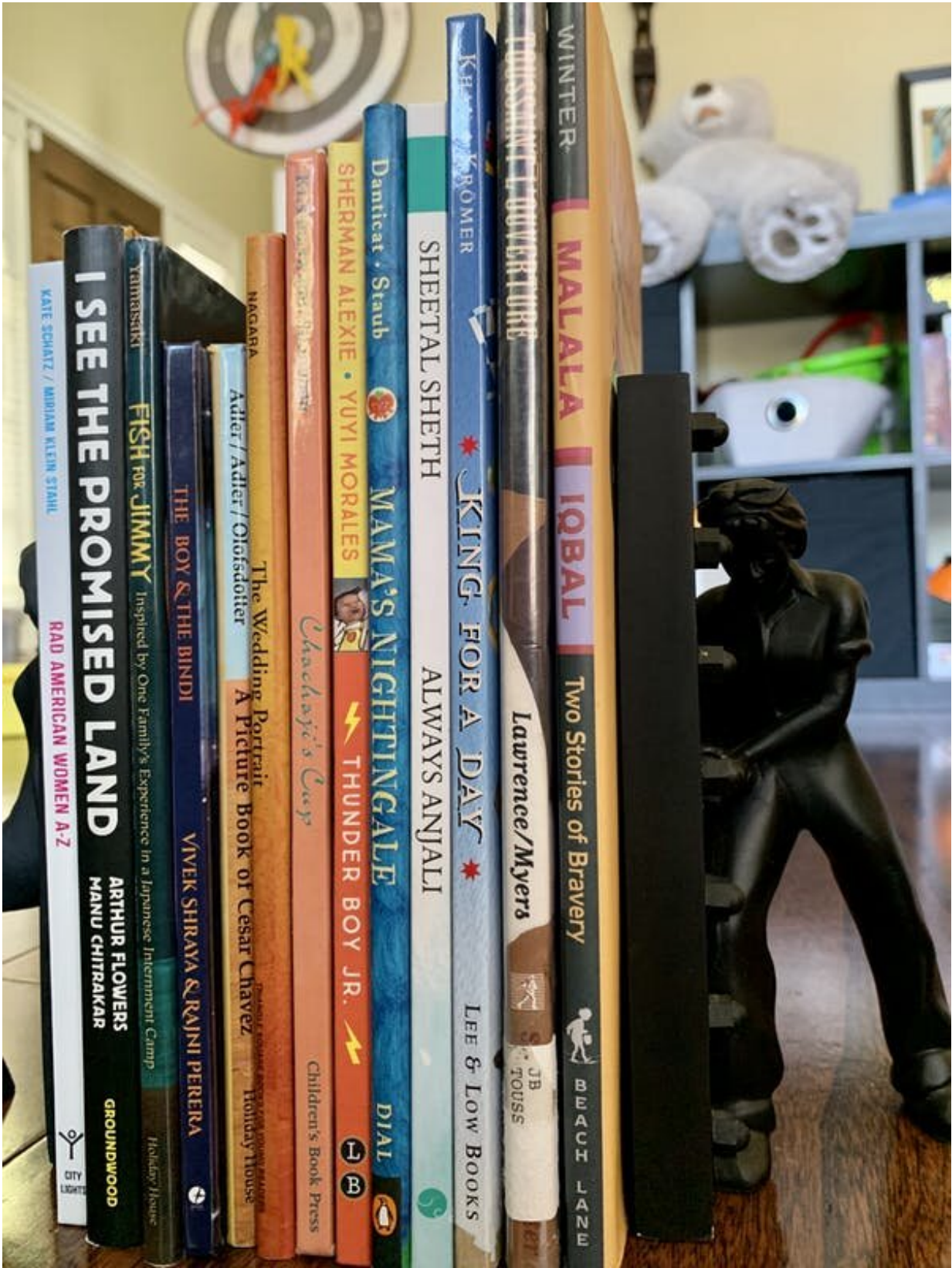


For parents of color, schooling at home can be an act of resistance

May 11 2020, by Monisha Bajaj



Sampling of books at the author's home. Credit: Monisha Bajaj, CC BY-ND

My six-year-old hates the British. To be more specific, the British Empire that ruled over up to [a quarter of the world's land](#) by the early 1900s. Hates that one of the biggest diamonds in the world, [found in India](#) over 1,000 years ago, now sits in the queen's set of crown jewels. Hates that they [drew up borders quickly](#) and exited South Asia in the 1940s, resulting in the [death of millions](#), and making his grandfather and great-grandparents refugees in the newly formed nation of India.

How does my 6-year-old know all about this? Well, because we talk about it and have a lot of books at home. We have always read [books about South Asian culture and history](#). And now that we have more flexible schedules since we have to work at home—and the kiddo has to do school at home—we have even more time together. He naturally gravitates to the books with characters that look like him.

As a [scholar of multicultural education](#), I know that children are able to understand complex issues, like [racism](#), if they are broken down and explained in a way that they can grasp. So, when books talk about subjects like segregation, slavery, colonialism or sexism, my partner and I explain those terms as best we can.

A different worldview

Conversations about world history in our home go a little like this:

Parent: "People from Europe really liked the spices and cloth from South Asia, so they wanted to go there to buy stuff."

Kiddo: "Even Christopher Columbus was lost and trying to find India,

right?"

Parent: "Right! Europeans went to South Asia, first to trade and buy things. But then they wanted more power, and the British decided to take over and bully people around."

Kiddo: "How did they bully them?"

Parent: "They made people give them money (land-taxes), didn't let them make their own clothes to wear, and didn't even let them make salt out of the water in the sea next to where they lived!"

Books like "[A Taste of Freedom](#)," which recounts Gandhi's famed [Salt March](#) to protest British rule, and resources like the website and podcast "[Parenting for Liberation](#)," certainly help with these conversations.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought on a lot of hardship and heartache to families everywhere, and it has also made it easier for parents like us to spend more time with our children. For parents of color, this means a chance to educate our children as we see fit. We have an opportunity to offer counter-stories that focus on people who look like us, as opposed to having our children forced to learn from narratives written from a European or white perspective.

Our family traces our origins to different parts of South Asia, and we are using this time at home to read about anti-colonial and anti-caste activists like [B.R. Ambedkar](#) and [Dakshayani Velayudhan](#), people my son wouldn't ever encounter in his school curriculum.

Racism in schools and society

There's no shortage of examples of inaccurate textbooks like the one in Texas that made headlines a few years ago for referring to enslaved

people as immigrant "[workers from Africa](#)."

There is also a cultural mismatch between America's teachers and students – [80% of America's teachers are white](#), but [more than half](#) of the nation's students are children of color. And this mismatch matters: [Studies show](#) that [black students](#) are more likely to graduate from high school if they have an African American teacher in elementary school.

No matter the teacher's ethnic identity, research shows that students are [more interested in school and do better](#) when they feel like they can relate to what's being taught and when the lessons reflect their own heritage and history. This is where schooling your children at home can make a difference. That is, parents can select lessons on historical or contemporary issues that do reflect their children's history and heritage.

Hard histories

No doubt, some social justice education can get to be too much and provide too early an exposure to graphic images of violence and suffering. For example, a friend's son at age 5 watched a video at a neighbor's house that showed the targeting of an African American boy by the police—something that is part of a larger [documented issue of police violence against black Americans in the U.S.](#) Afterward, the child would get quiet and scared whenever he saw a police officer.

"[The talk](#)," or discussions African American parents have with their children about the police, is both necessary and real. But, all forms of racial justice education have to be done with nuance and from a [place of liberation](#) rather than fear.

Earlier this year, when my son and I read a book about abolitionist and Civil War hero Harriet Tubman, we listened to some songs on YouTube from the movie "[Harriet](#)," but I didn't let him see the video. Studies

show that early exposure to graphic violence can [cause trauma and distress](#), so home-based social justice education has to be delivered with care and attention. That means carefully preselecting videos and clips to watch with children to screen for excessive violence, and taking time to explain tough concepts and issues.

In search of liberation

In reading and discussions in our family, we focus on movements and activists. Educator and TV legend Fred Rogers famously said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, '[Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.](#)'" I would modify that Mister Rogers quote slightly for parents of color to say "When you see injustice, look for the people who are resisting. You will always find people who are resisting."

While my kiddo still hates "the British," he also knows about the [British abolitionists](#) who helped former slave, activist and author Frederick Douglass fight for an end to slavery in the 1800s.

Schooling at home provides a unique chance for children of color to build up their knowledge of their histories and larger struggles for social and racial justice locally and globally. Perhaps this moment can be an opportunity, a place of possibility within the overwhelming and daunting task of parenting during the pandemic.

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