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# BEING *BORN A CRIME* DIDN'T ONLY HAPPEN TO TREVOR NOAH: A STUDENT INQUIRY PROJECT ON CRIMINALIZED IDENTITIES

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## **Abstract**

*Born A Crime*, a memoir by Trevor Noah, has been a common addition to high school curricula in recent years. This paper addresses how to effectively teach this complex text and incorporates a research project that allows students to personalize chosen topics. The students who completed the focus work were on-level 10<sup>th</sup> grade ELA students and the unit took eight instructional weeks. This class met three times a week for two 88-minute blocks and one 44-minute class. The unit was engaging, and the rigor was appropriate for normally developing or advanced 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. Modifications were made for support-seeking students and those notes are included in this paper. The focus standards for this unit are Common Core W.10.9, RL.10.6, and RI 10.6. Students had access to a variety of academic databases for the research project, their own school-issued computers, and a copy of the memoir.

**Keywords:** race, discrimination, *Born A Crime*, Trevor Noah, memoir, research, identity, writing, reading, ELA, high school

## **Introduction**

Integrating authentic, relevant, and diverse voices into the classroom is at the core of what many literacy educators care most about. Our district adopted Trevor Noah's memoir *Born A Crime* to represent one of these voices within our 10<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum. This memoir is realistic and raw, yet still a comical collection of stories that serve as a window into Noah's childhood in South Africa. Each chapter opens with a few pages of historically accurate information aimed at an audience who did not experience Apartheid, followed by a personal experience Noah had as a mixed-race person during (or shortly after) Apartheid. It is honest, funny, and engaging in a relatable way for 10<sup>th</sup> grade readers.

The first year my on-level 10<sup>th</sup> grade colleagues and I tried literature circles to promote personal connection and peer conversations about the topics presented in the text. Each week students would read one chapter, take annotation notes, and meet with reading groups. We did not

assign the full memoir to all students, hoping that reducing the amount of reading might help them dive a little deeper, but it was not fruitful. These literature circles were an epic fail. We noticed students struggling with the dense reading and even when prepared, the fact they were reading chapters out of order was confusing to them. Year two with this text demanded a new approach.

In order to better support our students, reading *Born A Crime* in year two took on a somewhat traditional, whole-class read approach, and it was effective. This approach allowed us to scaffold the way Noah pairs information and experience to reveal his purpose to the reader. My students are Noah’s target audience in many ways but needed help noticing that. We spent a few weeks reading much of Part I (Chapters 1-8) together. We journaled about connecting Noah’s curated background information with his real-life stories. I spent much of this time feeling like a part-time history teacher and part-time ELA teacher, but it worked. By the end of Part I, many students were reading more independently, and the broader understanding of Noah’s text was taking shape.

With Part I reading done, we began layering the research project into our reading of Parts II and III. This project was divided into the following activities and modified to meet the needs of all learners along the way.

### Research Project Activities

#### Activity #1: Brainstorming

This first step, and the foundation for the project, was modified from Inclusive Teaching materials found online through the University of Michigan (pabdo). Based on this content, I found it essential to begin with some ground rules, including revisiting the expectation of being kind and compassionate at all times. We then returned to a passage from chapter two in which Noah describes how he was truly “born a crime.” We then expanded our ideas to brainstorm about other times when leaders or other people criminalized the identities of others, like they had for Noah and other mixed-race individuals in South Africa. Students were offered key topics like gender, race, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation (pabdo). Students then completed a gallery walk in which they identified examples of other times when people were considered criminals just for being born. I got them thinking with examples like being female made it illegal to vote in America at one point in time or how being Jewish made it illegal to exist in parts of Europe during World War II, and soon, ideas started cropping up around the classroom. Before we left for the day, I had students explore topics around the room and start making a list of ideas they connected to or wanted to know more about.

#### Activity #2: Topic Selection

After letting the gallery walk ideas simmer for a few days, I asked students to try narrowing to a single idea. Using my own thoughts as a model, I shared an example of what topic exploration might sound like. General guidelines asked students to write what they knew about an idea, but also start to ask questions about the topic as a whole. Table 1 features some excerpts of student submissions from this part of the project:

Table 1. Student Excerpts

Student A	The topic that I chose for this project is the LGBTQIA+ community because I have a personal connection to it seeing as that I am gay... As I got older I learned from society that being homosexual was many things but easy was not one of them...The subtopics that I want to go more in depth into are the stigma and misconceptions about my community and how those beliefs have
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	detrimental effects on people specifically young people who are still trying to navigate the ins and outs of their own brain.
Student B	My starter idea is being born African American. Growing up as an African came with many struggles. These would relate to being put into unfair stereotypes. Growing up many people assumed that I would be troubled because of the way I looked so I think I could research on how many African Americans are criminalized by the way they look. Some frequent problems with being African American is you are always being seen as a villain and a threat rather than an actually human being. Instead of people speaking when they see you most of them get wide eyes and clutch their belongings
Student C	The topic I started off with was gender inequality, specifically opportunities. For as long as I can remember, men and women have been getting paid differently. Focusing on sports, men get paid a lot more than women do. As for me, I am thinking about playing tennis in the future and I'm aware of the difference in revenue.

I also feature final products from Students A and B later in this article. While race was a focal point for many of the conversations based on Noah’s text, now students were thinking about discrimination in a more complex and individualized way.

**Activity #3: Text Connections**

Before we went into more research, I wanted my students to find one page in Noah’s memoir that would connect with the developing topics. Surprisingly, together, we were able to connect all topics in a meaningful way. If they were looking at gender issues, students focused on passages about Trevor’s mother or the absent or abusive male figures he writes about. Race topics had lots of choices, but students were challenged to narrow to a meaningful passage they could connect to. At this step they merely stuck a post-it note in their books and described the connection to their topic on the post-it note.

**Activity #4: Research**

I have the luxury of amazing database support within the district as well as our school library. The bulk of the work for this project had students working through databases for more information on their topics. Students struggled to find what they wanted and had to pivot along the way. For example, the topic of female athletes earning equal pay was tricky, so we had to use some general research and make connections to more current events for that topic. Having done a variety of research projects in the past, this one was the perfect balance of direction-based work, like “complete these notes by the end of the week” and actual self-guided research. It can be so tempting to really spell it out for kids and set them up to easily find the right information, but this project forced many of them to grapple with their topics and expand or contract them along the way.

Students had access to a blank version of Assigned Notes Pages, and they added their research throughout the week (see Figure 1 for a screenshot of the assigned notes page from the topic shared by Student C in Table 1). Before students started, I showed them example notes I had done and walked them through my thinking process as I moved from one article to another. These notes allowed students to copy and paste key facts, yet also challenged them to paraphrase and connect to the information they found. At this stage, I asked for two sources and four facts from

each source. I chose to modify the number of facts for students needing support, but required all students to have more than one source for their projects.

Figure 1. Student “C” Assigned Notes Pages

**Directions:** Using the organizer below, record key facts and citations from TWO database articles.

**Background**

Please use this text box to write a brief 2-3 sentence overview of your topic:

Men and women have dealt with inequality for decades. The gender wage gap is a huge factor to this. It's the idea of men and women getting payed differently when working with the same skills. Men have typically been getting paid more than women and I'm focusing on the evidence behind it.

**Article #1**

**Insert Citation:** English, Ashley, and Ariane Hegewisch. "The Gender Wage Gap Needs to Be Remedied." *Social Justice*, edited by William Dudley, Greenhaven Press, 2005. *Opposing Viewpoints*. *Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EJ3010397248/OVIC?u=stil88526&sid=bookmark-OVIC&xid=d91bc72b. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022. Originally published as "Still a Man's Labor Market: The Long-Term Earnings Gap," *Research-in-Brief #C366*, 2008.

Fact #	Key Quote (Copy & paste)	Reflect (How does this connect to your social identity topic? Connect to Noah? What does it make you wonder more about)
1	"Women's labor force participation has risen rapidly; women have made progress in many occupations that previously were bastions of men; the wage gap has narrowed by more than one-third since 1960, from women earning 59 cents for every dollar earned by men, to 77 cents now."	In the past years, the wage gap was a significant problem. However, recently the issue has decreased worry. Women have expanded their career options and work equally as hard as men do. The dollar amount that women make now has increased more and more over the years.
2	"Women are much more likely than	The public uses excuses as to why women

**Activity #5: Final Product**

Students were challenged to design their own final projects using a tech tool of their choice. Final products included a topic introduction and rationale, synthesis of the information they found on the topic and a fleshed-out text connection. Students relied heavily on the notes taken during Activity #4 for the synthesis, and sticky notes from Activity #3 helped them develop the last part of the project. Figure 2 features a portion of the final product from Student B from Table 1. Student B chose to use a S'more template to design the work the way they wanted it.

Figure 2. Student “B” Final Product



**Topic Background**

In Trevor Noah's memoir, *Born a Crime* he discusses on how his own racial identity is considered a crime throughout his youth. These experiences and the lessons his elders taught him have shaped him into the man he is today. In many similar ways growing up African American has had similar situations worldwide. To this day African Americans worldwide are still facing discrimination and not having the same privileges as others.

**Research Article #1: African Americans in U.S History**

**Research Synthesis**

This article discusses the mistreatment of African Americans for years and years to come. The most surprising fact from this source was "Prior to 1865, the overwhelming majority of Black people were held as slaves in the Southern states. A brutal system of forced labor, slavery prevented African Americans from having even the most basic of human rights, including the right to marry, oversee the raising of their own children, or any expression of free will." Back then I believe that everybody should have the same rights I even still believe this today. It's truly sad that African Americans went through years of suffering and unfair treatment all because they looked different. This articles shares on how African Americans tried to fight back and end this era of oppression but, ultimately many attempts failed due to many white man with power still wanting blacks to be beneath them. Being raised in America and in the 21st century times have changed although some people haven't. In the present racism and discrimination isn't as bad as it was but it is still a very real issue that some people deal with everyday. Today most you will receive is either an unnecessary comment or a dirty look but, some will go to extreme lengths such as public outburst or destroying your property. There are some African Americans who still experience major discrimination and overtime it was changed on how they see the society they live in.



Newman, Jason. "African Americans in U.S. History." *American History*, ABC-CLIO, 2022, [americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/263176](https://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/263176). Accessed 29 Nov. 2022.

In order to help students needing writing or organizing support, I also provided a template-based final product option. This was generated through Google Slides, but this allowed students to focus on producing strong writing rather than getting lost finding pretty pictures online. Figure 3 features most of the final product from Student A from Table 1. This student used the slides template to really develop writing the way they wanted without having to design the work.

Figure 3. Student “A” Final Product Excerpt

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Gay Rights Movement</b></p> <p style="font-size: small; text-align: center;">Hamilton, Neil A. "Gay Rights Movement." American History, ABC-CLIO, 2022, americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/256031. Accessed 28 Nov. 2022.</p>	<p><b>Article #1 Synthesis</b></p> <p>In this article it discusses the trials and tribulations that many members of the LGBTQIA+ have faced in history and still face to this day. They begin with one of the most monumental moments in gay history with the police raid of the Stonewall Inn and the liberation movement that followed it. Police used their position of power to abuse and discriminate against the gay community "By 1920, more than 500 gay men were being arrested annually in New York City alone". The gay community were fed up with these constant abuses at the hand of the government so they formed the Gay Liberation Front and started demanding equal rights. A year after the Stonewall riots a parade was held to commemorate the anniversary of this movement and now every June thousand of queer people come together to celebrate their sexuality. Although many of the laws against the LGBTQIA+ community have been dissolved they still face countless hate crimes and have very harmful stigma and misconceptions being pumped into society usually by religious leaders.</p>
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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Gay Rights</b></p> <p style="font-size: small; text-align: center;">Hamilton, Neil A. "Gay Rights Movement." American History, ABC-CLIO, 2022, americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/256031. Accessed 28 Nov. 2022.</p>	<p><b>Article #2 Synthesis</b></p> <p>This article starts off with the many discriminations that the LGBTQIA+ community has faced throughout the centuries. They have been denied the same constitutional rights as everyone else up until the 1970's when they were finally starting to be seen as human beings. Many of these anti-gay beliefs have roots from hundreds of years ago in 1500's England "in England of the late Middle Ages. In 1533, Parliament passed a law that made intercourse between two men a capital offense punishable by hanging". Because of these laws expressing your sexuality openly was extremely dangerous and forced people to hide their true identity. Homosexuality was seen as a challenge to the patriarchy and the government believed that they could bring about the fall of the United States. False information spread and people began to associate homosexuality with deviant behavior, prostitution, and child molestation. Along with sodomy laws the LGBTQIA+ community was barred from government employment, were not given custody of kids, and were not allowed in bars. The government aimed to eradicate the community or at least force them into hiding to make themselves more comfortable. In today's society there are no laws specifically aimed at getting rid of gay people and it is much safer to be openly homosexual but the hate and discrimination are still very prevalent.</p>
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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Born A Crime Connection</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: small;">Create an MLA citation for <i>Born A Crime</i> here.</p>	<p><b>Born A Crime Connections</b></p> <p>In the 4th chapter "Chameleon" in Trevor Noah's book <i>Born a Crime</i> he talks about the feeling of not having a set place in society. He says "I became a chameleon. My colors didn't change, but I could change your perception of my color.". Although it is a very different situation, many people a part of the LGBTQIA+ community have a similar feeling of not fitting into one specific group. Because of the laws put in place against gay people and black people they were not allowed to take pride in their identity and express themselves as they saw fit. Having to adjust parts of your personality to fit into a society that was not designed for you is a feeling common to both black people and gay people. Many people have had to use this ability of "code-switching" to stay safe and Noah even stated that, "If I spoke like you, I was you". I have a connection to this on a personal level because the feeling of having to change something about yourself to be able to fit in or simply exist without judgment is something I know very well. Thankfully we live in a society where black and gay people can express their identity and take pride in their heritage with minimal recourse but homophobia and racism are still built into society and will take many more generations to break. Noah much like myself has used his life experiences to bring awareness to a topic that people have tried to sweep under a rug for hundreds of years.</p>
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**Outcomes**

These were fun and engaging to read along the way and students shared they really enjoyed the adjusted format (rather than traditional research paper). I had great student buy-in with this project, and students were motivated to stay on task and complete their work in a timely manner. Topics ranged from Civil Rights Events in American history to gender role expectations for men and women. A few students addressed various facets of religious discrimination. I think framing the project with their own ideas first and then connecting to the memoir and research allowed for students to feel in control of their work along the way. While this unit was not without its hiccups

and there were times in which I was WAY outside of my own comfort zone, it was a great learning experience for me and my students. I will certainly revisit this project again and seek to use it in years to come.

### References

Noah, T. (2017). *Born a crime*. John Murray.  
pabdo. (n.d.). *Social Identity Wheel*. University of Michigan LSA Inclusive Teaching.  
<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/social-identity-wheel>

### Author Biography

Amanda Durnal is a classroom educator in Overland Park, KS. Her career began in Missouri as a Mizzou Teaching Fellow in 2006 and she will complete her 16<sup>th</sup> year of teaching this May. Students have ranged from 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> graders during this time and currently she teaches on level 10<sup>th</sup> grade ELA and AP Language and Composition. She has been a member for the Greater Kansas City Writing Project since the summer of 2007 and will be one of the first Teacher Educators to complete the Graduate Certificate in the Teaching of Writing through the University of Central Missouri in August 2023. Outside of her teaching passion, she enjoys being outdoors, cheering on her two children at their various activities, brewery visits with her husband, and snuggle feasts with the family dog. Amanda (she/her) can be reached at [amanda.durnal@gmail.com](mailto:amanda.durnal@gmail.com).

