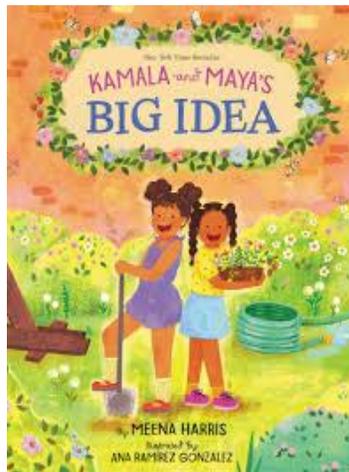


## First Opinion: BIPOC Children's Power and Brilliance

Harris, Meena. *Kamala and Maya's Big Idea*. Illustrated by Ana Ramirez Gonzalez. New York: Balzer+Bray, 2020. Print.



*Pennie Gregory*

Surviving dual pandemics: COVID19 and racial injustice has caused many BIPOC to explore ways to make positive social change within our communities. For generations, we have been taught Eurocentric values, history and norms in educational institutions. However, in recent months, with social unrest on the rise, many educators including Dr. Bettina Love, Akiea Gross, and Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, have gained national recognition while calling for a complete interrogation of our education systems. The idea of abolishing racist educational practices and replacing them with “woke” education as a way to cultivate the genius in Black, Indigenous and children of color is gaining traction nationally.

As the idea of school and education is questioned and transformed, we are also just days away from the inauguration of Kamala Harris; America’s first female, first Black and South Asian Vice President. It is imperative that we recognize this moment as a telling sign of monumental power shifts that will certainly impact children of color for generations to come. Yet during these exciting times, Black, Indigenous and children of color may be wondering what can I do? Where do I fit in? The answer comes in ten words written by Kamala’s niece Meena Harris on the bottom of a page illustrating the power of the greater good, “No one could do

everything, but everyone could contribute something” (unpaged). These words embody the ideals of community and perseverance that is ubiquitous in Harris’ book. It is now more important than ever for Black, Indigenous and children of color to know they hold the power to impact positive change in their respective communities.

Starting with the beginning conversation between two sisters about what is needed in their community and extending to the involvement of various members of their community, it is clear that big ideas can originate from necessity and a simple discussion. The characters are both relatable and likable. Children will be able to see someone from their own community represented in this book.

It is important to note after Kamala and her sister Maya’s big idea they went to their mother for advice, further normalizing that ingenuity and excellence can be found *within* communities of color. It could be symbolic of the power of the Black family to support, sustain, and uplift itself in methods unmarred by white supremacist ideals. The ‘white saviour’ is often a theme in many children’s books. This is a great point where educators can revisit and ask what prompted Kamala and Maya’s big idea? What steps did they take to act on their big idea? Who did they involve?

The power of the pen is highlighted when Kamala and Maya write a letter to the landlord. When that letter incites an immediate “no,” the girls go back and write a longer letter. Empowering children to write for change is needed. The letter written to the landlord is illustrated on a separate page by itself as a powerful example of simple wording stating the problem and possible solutions. Parents and educators can easily use this letter as an example for students to create their own letters as a way to fulfill their civic duty.

The road to sustainable change is never easy and the author allows readers to experience the obstacles faced when trying to turn a No into a Yes. After their first disappointment, Kamala and Maya did not give up, “That night the sisters tried to think of ways to turn a no into a yes” (unpaged). The sisters realize right away that they need to solicit help from their family and the community, even when their ideas were met with resistance, the sisters still forge ahead. This inspires others to help them. Galvanizing the efforts of their neighbors is what eventually caused their big ideas to become a reality that benefited an entire community. Even through many disappointments and barriers. This could lead to a discussion with children about the usefulness of rejection or failure. What is rejection? What is failure? How did Kamala and Maya deal with

being told no? They persisted! We need books that show the power of children persisting. Persisting within their own beautiful and brilliant communities where no one can do everything, but everyone can do something. “Kamala and Maya had an idea. It was a very good idea and a very big idea. And with a lot of help they made it happen. Hooray for Kamala and Maya! Hooray for the per-sisters!” (unpaged).

### **Works Cited**

Harris, Meena. *Kamala and Maya’s Big Idea*. Illustrated by Ana Ramirez New York: Balzer+Bray, 2020. Print.

### **About the Author**

**Pennie Gregory** has over 20 years of experience as an educator. She began her career as a third-grade teacher in Baltimore City Public Schools. She has previously served as a Lead Special Education Specialist for Indianapolis Public Schools and as the Coordinator of Exceptional Learners for Tindley Schools Charter Network. Ms. Gregory earned her undergraduate B.S. degree from Ball State University and a Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership from Marian University. She is an executive member of the Indiana Council of Administrators of Special Education and the Capacity Events Director for Melanat ED Leaders, an organization created to support educational leaders of color. Currently, she proudly serves as the Assistant Director of Special Services for MSD Wayne Township in Indianapolis, IN.