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Why does racism exist? That essential question prompted me to learn more about the Civil Rights Movement. To that end, I read *Free at Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* by Fred Powledge.

The Civil Rights Movement is usually condensed into a few short pages in a school textbook, often highlighting Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks; the stories not being told include the countless, and often nameless, activists who made great personal sacrifices to ensure civil rights for all African-Americans.

The Movement Begins

Many textbooks point to Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of the bus (and the ensuing bus boycott) as the start of the Civil Rights Movement. But returning black veterans of World War II probably had more influence than present-day citizens realize. After fighting for their country and watching their comrades die in battle, veterans no longer wanted to be treated like "second-class citizens" (Hampton & Fayer, 1990, p. xxv). And when the Supreme Court came out with the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that declared segregation in education unconstitutional, African-Americans finally had the legal backing that helped propel the Movement forward.

When Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955, many African-Americans were poised and ready for some sort of action. Parks' arrest was not unusual; many other blacks had been arrested or kicked off public buses. What made Parks' arrest newsworthy was the fact that she was the secretary of the Montgomery branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Powledge, 1991) and had connections with people who knew how to publicize her plight and draw attention to its injustice. Leaders quickly

organized a bus boycott; their demands: “courteous treatment of all passengers, first-come-first-served segregated seating and the hiring of some black drivers” (Kasher, 2007, p. 35). It took nearly twelve months before the Supreme Court ruled segregation of Montgomery buses illegal (King & Osborne, 1998). During that time, thousands of workers walked or pooled rides to their places of employment. For it was “the maids, the cooks...that really and truly kept the bus[es] running” (Hampton & Fayer, 1990, p. 29). Leaders then turned their attention to the integration of schools.

In 1957, nine teenagers were chosen to integrate Little Rock’s Central High School. But their integration did not go smoothly and was met with great resistance. Melba Pattillo Beals, one of the “Little Rock Nine,” spoke of the indignities she suffered while attending Central High School.

Teams of students appeared to be assigned specific kinds of torture. One team concentrated on slamming us into lockers, while another focused on tripping us up or shoving us down staircases; still another concentrated on attacks with weapons. Another group must have been told to practice insidious harassment inside the classrooms. Still others worked at entrapment, luring the boys into dark corners or the girls into tight spots in isolated passageways. Some continued to use the showers as a means of abuse. (Beals, 2007, p. 143)

Beals’ experiences as a 16-year-old are a perfect connection for present day students. Students today can draw parallels to present day occurrences; bullying continues today in many school hallways and playgrounds.

Sit-ins – The Nonviolent Protests

College students also wanted to do their part during the Movement. On Feb. 1, 1960, four black college freshmen sat down at F.W. Woodworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, and ordered coffee and doughnuts (Kasher, 1996). The waitress refused to serve them at the "white" counter. They sat all day without being served and left quietly at closing time. Word of their "sit-in" spread at their campus and the next day, thirty students showed up at the same counter. Students from all over caught on to this nonviolent, direct action protest; by the end of February, "thirty-one communities in seven states had sit-ins" (Kasher, 2007, p. 66).

I think it is imperative for all students (and present voters) to realize that there is power in numbers; however, those numbers are built by individuals. The young adults that participated in sit-ins and protests were not politicians or important business people. They were idealistic, enthusiastic, and passionate young people who were tired of the status quo; they no longer wanted to sit in the back of buses, drink out of separate water fountains, be arrested with no probable cause, passed over for jobs, and be economically and socially oppressed. But it took great courage to initiate change. Diane Nash, a young idealistic college student who participated in a 1960 Nashville sit-in, remembers thinking:

We are going to be coming up against men who are white Southern men who are forty and fifty and sixty years old, who are politicians and judges and owners of businesses, and I am twenty-two years old. What am I *doing*! And how is this little group of students my age going to stand up to these powerful people?

(Powledge, 1991, p. 209)

What a powerful statement! I think this reflection can spur a wonderful discussion and writing exercise for students to imagine being one of those students dedicated to a peaceful sit-in experience.

And peaceful they were - at least on the part of the African-Americans sitting at the counters. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) helped ensure that peace by sponsoring workshops for nonviolence [other organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the student-formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) did the same]. Gordon Carey, the man who ran a 1960 workshop in Miami said, "The object was to train people in the techniques of nonviolence so they could go back to their communities and do it right" (Powledge, 1991, p. 220). It worked. The nonviolent nature of the sit-ins and protests became one of the most effective tools for public sympathy; the nonviolent protestors made the whites who abused them look like the racists they were.

Freedom Rides and Violence

But violence did erupt. In 1961, a Freedom Ride was designed to challenge interstate transportation segregation in bus terminals (buses being the most popular mode of transportation for African Americans at the time). A route was planned from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans with two public buses. As the first bus traveled on a road to Birmingham, Alabama, a white mob of about one hundred men (some Ku Klux Klan members), slashed the bus tires and destroyed the bus with a flaming device. Twelve riders were admitted to the hospital for smoke inhalation (Powledge, 1991).

The second bus also met with an angry mob. Police jailed *the riders* under the guise of protective custody or on charges of conspiracy (Powledge, 1991). Some made bail; others remained in jail. Determined to finish the trip, new CORE volunteers traveled from Birmingham

to Montgomery. When the bus pulled into Montgomery, however, a mob descended upon the passengers. At one point, “ten to fifteen whites were beating one Negro who was lying on the ground. When an ambulance arrived to carry off the injured, the mob chased it away” (Powledge, 1991, p. 263).

The complete lack of police protection was not only the norm, but police themselves often instigated the attacks or knew about them ahead of time. Sergeant Cook of the Birmingham police were quoted (by a FBI mole) as saying to the imperial wizard of the Alabama Klan, Robert Shelton, and ‘Bull’ Connor, the Birmingham Public Safety Commissioner:

We’re going to allow you fifteen minutes to beat, bomb....You can beat ‘em, bomb ‘em, maim ‘em, kill ‘em, I don’t give a -----...There will be absolutely no arrests. You can assure every Klansman in the country that no one will be arrested in Alabama for that fifteen minutes. (Powledge, 1991, p. 274)

And that is exactly what happened; police did not arrive until well after the rioting began – even when warned by the federal government that additional police protection was warranted.

This appalling degree of corruption, however, had few consequences. Finally, Attorney General Robert Kennedy ordered 600 federal marshals to guard the Freedom Riders. Alabama state troops escorted the riders to the Mississippi border where state troops there took over. However, riders were treated no better in Mississippi. They were arrested, convicted and sent to jail (for violation of segregation laws). Jail sentences were long and abusive and often included “tortures such as beating, electric shocks from cattle prods, food deprivation, overheating by day and freezing by night, and solitary confinement. Singers of freedom songs were singled out for extra maltreatment” (Kasher, 1996, p. 76).

Present-day students can aid their own learning of these atrocities by combing books and websites for primary source photographs and documents. Compiling these items into a classroom learning aid would visually help students make a connection to the violence young adults were victims of during these times. They could also research the various civil rights that were violated during those times.

But the Freedom Rides achieved their goals. In September of 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission banned segregation in interstate bus and rail terminals. However, the Movement was far from over; organizers set out to register voters in order to obtain economic and political justice.

Overcoming Fear with Education and Voter Registration

The biggest obstacle organizers faced, however, was fear. Repression in the south was deeply engraved into the lives of both blacks and whites. SNCC's workers and volunteers quickly realized that they could not simply take voters to the courthouse and help them register – potential voters were just too scared to do so. Volunteers needed to study a community, interview people, and develop personal relationships within the community. This was “easy” for SNCC workers because they had no money or means – they “*had* to live with families in the community” (Powledge, 1991, p. 344).

The best way to garner support, however, was through local churches. Black religion, which was almost exclusively Baptist and Methodist in the south, was the only institution controlled completely by blacks.

...it was much more attuned to dealing with real-world problems, such as how to transport several thousand people a day during a bus boycott, or how to get a hundred children out of jail by nightfall, or how to get two hundred potential

demonstrators together to give them the details of a planned protest and the spirit and courage to undertake it. (Powledge, 1991, p. 30)

SNCC volunteers enlisted the support of the religious leaders within a community and held meetings and rallies in churches. Leaders and supporters used music to inspire followers and rally support. I think present day students would enjoy listening to the music used during the movement and compare it to their music choices today; they could compare the similarities and differences and perhaps compose their own historical song. Of course, many of the Civil Rights Movement leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., were ministers. Their charisma and preacher “cadence” inspired followers; they also became targets for violence.

It was during the push for voter registration that workers and volunteers realized that they were in for a long haul. Relationship building took time and there were many people standing in their way. They received little to no help from local authorities, state leaders or the federal government. So they went door-to-door, asking people to register, offering assistance to fill out forms, and walking with voters to register. The SNCC and other Movement groups quickly discovered that voters did not just need help on registering to vote; they needed help with basic literacy. Soon, classes were organized to educate blacks on the rudiments of reading and writing. Hollis Watkins, a former SNCC activist was quoted in 1988 as saying that the SNCC greatest contribution during the Movement was “to educate, motivate, and inspire people from those different areas to get up and do something and take some initiative upon themselves” (Powledge, 1991, p 471). Students today could do the same thing! A powerful citizen action lesson would entail students designing a public service announcement informing voters where, how, and when to vote in their areas (Schulte, 2008a).

As the work continued with educating and registering voters, peaceful demonstrations were also held in conjunction with those efforts. During one such demonstration in Birmingham, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested. It was in jail that King wrote one of his most studied writings, the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In it, King reaffirmed and defended his choice of peaceful assembly and protest.

One who breaks an unjust law must do it *openly, lovingly* (not hatefully as the white mothers did in New Orleans when they were seen on television screaming, “nigger, nigger, nigger”), and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law. (Washington, 1986, p. 294)

I think today’s students could have a spirited debate on the question “When is it okay to break the rules?” They could study not only King’s letter but also some of the works of Socrates and Thoreau, tying in the work of the Civil Rights activists and demonstrators.

What made the Birmingham demonstrations of 1963 even more noticeable was that protestors included school children. Boys and girls were jailed by the hundreds. Criticism rained down heavily on protest leaders. King defended his position by stating, “Where had these writers been, we wondered, during the centuries when our segregated social system had been misusing and abusing Negro children?” (Kasher, 1996, p. 94). I think students today would be very interested in learning more about the children involved during protests during that time period; they could participate in a literature project using the children’s text, *Oh Freedom!*, and complete

several activities using the interviews compiled in the book as their basis for learning (Schulte, 2008b).

March on Washington

Capitalizing on public sentiment, movement leaders planned a “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” (Kasher, 1996, p. 118). Supporters hoped that the march would help with the passage of the civil rights bill that was making its way through Congress. Planners projected 100,000 people; the actual crowd size was estimated at over 200,000 (Powledge, 1991). It was on that day that Martin Luther King Jr. made his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. He ended his speech by stating:

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children – black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants – will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”

(Washington, 1986, p. 220)

I think that students should be given the opportunity to not only view this speech, but also study it in its entirety with a hard copy. King was a masterful orator and his use of alliteration could also be studied for the purpose of a language arts lesson.

Observers of this peaceful gathering were deeply impressed. Russell Baker, a writer for the New York Times wrote: “No one could remember an invading army quite as gentle as the two hundred thousand civil-rights marchers who occupied Washington today....The sweetness and patience of the crowd may have set some sort of national high-water mark in mass decency” (Kasher, 1996, p. 121). This crucial point, I feel, cannot be studied enough. *Peaceful*

demonstrations and protests against overwhelming odds and hateful resistance were much more effective than any war or violence could have ever accomplished. On July 2, 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed by Congress. The act banned racial discrimination in public facilities and in voting rights. But it was not the end of the Civil Rights Movement; it was merely another step forward.

Freedom Summer of 1964

During the summer of 1964, dubbed Freedom Summer, voter registration drives increased. But so did efforts to keep blacks from registering to vote. On June 21, 1964, three young civil rights workers were shot to death by Cecil Price (Neshoba County deputy sheriff) and Ku Klux Klan members (Powledge, 1991). Ironically, the deaths received national attention because two whites – Northern whites – were the victims. That summer, according to one accounting, “White violence resulted in thirty-five shootings, in which three persons were injured; thirty homes and businesses were bombed; thirty-five churches were bombed or burned; and there were at least eighty beatings” (Powledge, 1991, p. 583). Activists responded by increasing their efforts to educate and provide assistance to voters to enable them to pass literacy tests and other deterrents that kept them from voting.

But it was the march in Selma, Alabama and resulting violence that finally outraged the country enough to spur government leaders into action. On March 7, 1965 a group of about 600 marchers crossed the Pettus Bridge where they were met by “a blue wall of troopers, while a mounted posse and assorted thugs were lurking in the wings. The troopers had gas masks on their belts and were brandishing clubs” (Kasher, 1996, p. 166). (Governor Wallace had prohibited the march.) Marchers were violently beaten by police; seventeen were hospitalized with injuries and another forty were given emergency treatment and released (Hampton & Fayer,

1990). That night, ABC interrupted a film about Nazi racism to show Alabama police attacking American citizens on the Pettus Bridge (Hampton & Fayer, 1990). (The irony of that cannot be dismissed – students need to understand that so often we do *not* learn from mistakes made in the past!) Marchers reorganized and completed their protest march later that month. Viewers were appalled by the violence and government leaders responded; hearings began soon after and on August 6, 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law.

Prior to the Voting Rights Act, law suits trying to eliminate discriminatory election practices were brought to the Department of Justice case-by-case. The Voting Rights Act, however, “applied a nationwide prohibition against the denial or abridgment of the right to vote on the literacy tests on a nationwide basis” (U.S. Dept. of Justice, n.d.). The number of black voters registered to vote “leaped from an estimated 23% of voting-age blacks in this country in 1964 to 61% in 1969. In Mississippi the increase in the same period was from 6.7% to 66.5%” (Kasher, 1996).

The Organized Movement Ends

Soon after the Act was passed, the Movement became deeply split. CORE and SNCC workers started to advocate armed self-defense (in response to the Watts riots of Los Angeles), and the militant Black Panther Party began its “Black Power” marches while the SCLC and NAACP still advocated a peaceful approach to change. Martin Luther King Jr.’s criticism of the Vietnam War alienated him from his powerful allies and the majority of the American public. While attempting to secure better employment conditions for Memphis sanitation workers, King was shot to death on April, 4, 1968. His death “triggered riots in over one hundred U.S. cities; forty-six deaths were reported nationwide, all but five of them black” (Kasher, 1996, p. 225).

Without a united cause and purpose, the Movement lost its momentum and focus. Times had changed and the nation had become embroiled in the controversy of the Vietnam War. While many activists became community and government leaders, the push that was the “Movement” ended in the late 1960s.

Conclusion

This fascinating time period has a wealth of lessons for present day students. I think a great culminating activity would be a Living History project. Students could research the ordinary people involved in the Movement or some of its dynamic leaders (i.e. Diane Nash, James Meredith, James Farmer, Elizabeth Eckford, Dorothy Tillman, etc.) and write an essay about them. Students could then present a small portion of their essay to the entire school body dressed up as their character. I think this performance could serve to educate their peers and schoolmates.

For me, this has been a powerful experience. First, it has given me a wealth of knowledge about the time period and confidence in my ability to teach it. But more importantly, it has given me the drive to learn more about other topics and periods in history; I need not wait to take a college course to learn or depend upon a single textbook for my learning. This has been the most fun I have *ever* had writing a paper and learning about a topic!

References

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- Hampton, H. & Fayer, S. (1990). *Voices of freedom, an oral history of the civil rights movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. New York: Bantam Books. This book is a companion to the PBS series *Eyes on the Prize*. The book is based on oral history archives of almost one thousand interviews of activists, politicians, reporters, FBI informants, and hundreds of ordinary people who took part in the movement. The first-hand accounts make history ‘real’ and give the reader a glimpse of what the times were like during the struggle. (692 pages)
- Kasher, S. (1996). *The civil rights movement: a photographic history, 1954-68*. New York: Abbeville Press. This incredible book is filled with striking photos of the people and events of the south during the civil rights movement. Narratives are included in each chapter but the real power of this book lies in its pictures. (255 pages)
- King, C. & Osborne, L. (1998). *Oh, freedom! Kids talk about the civil rights movement with the people who made it happen*. New York: Scholastic, Inc. This is the book I used for my children's literature Wiki lessons. It is a compilation of interviews from a civil rights movement project by St. Anthony's Grade School in Washington, D.C. Each year, students were asked to interview people who were part of the civil rights movement and record their conversations. The conversations were written down verbatim and accumulated over time. (138 pages)

Levine, E. (1990). *If you lived at the time of Martin Luther King*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

This children's book (ages 9 – 12) focuses on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his involvement and contributions in the civil rights movement. It would be a good source for a children's project on this important leader. (72 pages)

Powledge, F. (1991). *Free at last? The civil rights movement and the people who made it*.

Boston: Little, Brown & Co. This is the book that I read cover-to-cover and based most of my unit off of. It covers the movement from the beginnings – from the 1954 Brown decision to about 1968. It delves into the political, economic, social and legal background of segregation. It draws upon dozens of interviews, sources, and the author's own personal experiences. It is brutally honest, admittedly biased at times, and incredibly thorough. It chronicles the major organizations of the movement and their activities, struggles, mistakes, and growth. There is a small inset of pages with photographs included in the book. (711 pages)

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Washington, J. (1986). *A testament of hope: the essential writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: Harper & Row. This book is an excellent resource of the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. It is arranged by topic and then by date. It includes all of King's writings (essays, sermons, interviews, speeches) about a variety of topics (nonviolence, civil disobedience, social policy, struggle for integration, etc.). (676 pages)