

Understanding the American Civil Rights Movement

Lesson Plan

Grade Level: 6-8

Curriculum Focus: American History

Lesson Duration: Two class periods

Student Objectives

- Understand that beyond the famous leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, ordinary men and women struggled for their beliefs.
- Create *A Children's Encyclopedia of the Civil Rights Movement* to share the stories and contributions of these individuals with first graders.

Materials

- Video on *unitedstreaming: Free at Last*
- Search for this video by using the video title (or a portion of it) as the keyword.

Selected clips that support this lesson plan:

- MLK Assassination
 - Emmett Till
 - Medgar Evers
 - Voter Registration
 - Cost of Freedom
 - Selma March to Montgomery
 - Viola Liuzzo
 - Vernon Dahmer
- Reference sources about individuals involved in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s (see Procedures for names)

Procedures

1. Explain to students that forty and fifty years after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, some participants are very well remembered and some less so. Some participants have been written about frequently; others, even some who lost their lives in the struggle, have received little recognition. Tell students that for a class project they are going to do research and create a single book to be titled *A Children's Encyclopedia of the Civil Rights Movement*. The book, which will be for first-graders, will include alphabetical articles about some of the leaders and the ordinary people who made a difference in the movement.
2. Ask students to describe the characteristics of an encyclopedia that they use in the classroom, in the library, or at home.
3. Ask students how they will have to modify the characteristics of an encyclopedia so that first-graders can understand and enjoy one. For example, explain that the writers of the *Children's Encyclopedia* won't be able to use a term such as *poll tax* without defining it.
4. Ask students to suggest names of people they think belong in their encyclopedia. Start a list, which eventually may include some or all of the following names. The asterisks indicate people about whom much material exists; it will be harder but not impossible to find information about the people without asterisks. (You may want to set maximum word counts for entries on the more well-known and well-documented subjects.)
 - Ralph Abernathy
 - Oliver Brown
 - James Chaney*
 - Eldridge Cleaver*
 - Medgar Evers*
 - Andrew Goodman*
 - Fannie Lou Hamer
 - Martin Luther King Jr.*
 - Viola Greg Liuzzo
 - Malcolm X*
 - Thurgood Marshall*
 - James Meredith
 - Huey P. Newton
 - A. Philip Randolph*
 - Rosa Parks*
 - Michael Schwerner*

- Bobby Seale
 - Fred Shuttlesworth
 - Emmett Till
5. Assign subjects to students. If you want students to work together in small groups, you can consider giving several subjects to each group.
 6. Discuss with your students where they can find biographical information about their subjects, such as: textbooks, nonfiction books, encyclopedias, videos, and Web sites. Indicate that wherever possible students should check more than one source for each person they are researching.
 7. Go over the fundamentals of taking notes from other sources. Stress that the sentences and paragraphs in the students' encyclopedia will have to be original – not quotations from other sources. In addition, students should cite the sources they use.
 8. Another factor to consider before writing begins is format for the encyclopedia articles. In doing research, students will have found more biographical details about some subjects than others; they will have to decide whether to use blanks or question marks to indicate missing information. When birth and death dates and places are reported, consider the option of setting them off instead of running that information into the prose of the article. You may use the following format, for example:

Martin Luther King

- Born [place] [date]
 - Died [place] [date]
 - [Main text of encyclopedia entry begins here.]
9. Looking at encyclopedias you have available, discuss with students the option of writing a short phrase under the person's name, such as:
 - American cleric committed to nonviolent tactics during the Civil Rights Movement.
 10. Set up a revising-editing-proofreading system so that both students and you have a chance to improve articles for the encyclopedia. Then consider having all the articles typed or word processed in the same type style and size, with the same line length, and paginated so that when bound, the end product will look polished. Ask your students for suggestions for the cover of the encyclopedia. If possible, make a copy of the finished encyclopedia for each student in your class. Work with first-grade teachers to create an opportunity for your students and the younger ones to meet and share the encyclopedia.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does racism still exist? What are some of the steps that would be necessary to eliminate racism, not only in the United States, but also in other parts of the world?

2. Why was segregation still practiced in southern states in the middle of the 20th century, despite the passage of constitutional amendments prohibiting segregation following the Civil War? To what extent were things different in northern states, and why?
3. What was the impact of the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* on life in the United States? Discuss the implications of this decision for the martyrs of the civil rights movement. Consider whether this decision continues to have an effect on civil rights in America.
4. The families of civil rights martyrs like Medgar Evers and Vernon Dahmer played an important role in their efforts. Analyze their participation, and consider the extent to which you would have offered similar support had your family members been involved in this way.
5. The Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, is said to have separated “the world of what was from the world of what could be.” Looking back, it is easy to see why – the bridge was a symbol of the hugely unequal and highly segregated worlds of blacks and whites on different sides of the river in Selma during the 1960s. Looking ahead to the 21st century, consider what separates “the world of what was from the world of what could be” in the United States today. What are the obstacles we face, and what changes could help provide a “bridge” to a better, more equal society?
6. The Reverend Jesse Jackson said, “Freedom is more valuable than life. . . . Dignity was more important than a comfort zone.” Explain what he meant by this statement. To what extent do you agree or disagree with it?
7. Many of our country’s civil rights heroes have commented that hate is destructive. Compare the role that hatred has played in the civil rights movement in the United States and in human rights violations around the world, such as in Kosovo, Chechnya, and Sierra Leone. (You can find information at the Web site of the Human Rights Watch: <http://www.hrw.org>.) Analyze the role of hatred in these arenas, and discuss possible ways for resolving some of the issues you discover.
8. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Given the lengthy period of time it took to convict some of the murderers in the civil rights movement, evaluate whether justice was actually served. What are the effects of a long delay in prosecution on the victims’ families, the perpetrators, and society?
9. Many people see protecting civil rights as a political problem, but many of the causes of racism and prejudice are personal and societal as well as political. Compare the strengths and weaknesses of personal, societal, and political solutions to civil rights problems. Which are most effective and why?

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- 3 points: Student’s encyclopedia entry includes comprehensive content (based on available sources); coherent and unified paragraphs; error-free grammar, usage, and mechanics.
- 2 points: Student’s encyclopedia entry includes adequate content; paragraphs occasionally lacking coherence and unity; some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.



- 1 point: Student's encyclopedia entry does not include sufficient content; weak paragraphs; many errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

Vocabulary

civil rights

Definition: The nonpolitical rights of a citizen; the rights of personal liberty guaranteed to U.S. citizens by the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution and by acts of Congress.

Context: The civil rights movement was an effort to establish citizenship rights for blacks — rights that whites took for granted, such as voting and freely using public facilities.

discrimination

Definition: The act, practice, or an instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually; prejudiced or prejudicial outlook, action, or treatment.

Context: The 15th Amendment prohibited racial discrimination in voting.

hate crime

Definition: Any of various crimes (as assault or defacement of property) when motivated by hostility to the victim as a member of a group (as one based on color, creed, gender, or sexual orientation).

Context: Federal hate crime laws were used to bring some of the murderers in the civil rights movement to justice, since state criminal courts had failed to do so.

martyr

Definition: A person who sacrifices something of great value and especially life itself for the sake of principle.

Context: Perhaps the most famous martyr of the civil rights movement was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose life was taken so early.

poll tax

Definition: A tax of a fixed amount per person levied on adults.

Context: The poll tax was a voting fee charged to reduce the number of blacks that were eligible to vote.

segregation

Definition: The separation or isolation of a race, class, or ethnic group by enforced or voluntary residence in a restricted area, by barriers to social intercourse, by separate educational facilities, or by other discriminatory means.

Context: The state-sanctioned segregation in the South was intended to keep the races apart, particularly in Alabama, where Birmingham was the most segregated city in the South.

Academic Standards



Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- U.S. History – Postwar United States: Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties.
- U.S. History – Contemporary United States: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.
- Civics – What are the Basic Values and Principals of American Democracy: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society.
- Civics – What are the Basic Values and Principals of American Democracy: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life.
- Language Arts – Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts; Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process; Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching social studies. To view the standards online, go to

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Time, Continuity, and Change
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Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the Discoveryschool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>

