The Children’s Crusade: Taking a Stand for Social Justice

GRADE LEVEL: 4-8

INTRODUCTION

Children became a visible and significant part of the Civil Rights Movement in the South during the early 1950s. Individuals as young as six years old consciously decided or were ushered into the spotlight of desegregation battles. The words and images of these children were key to the monumental struggle to provide equal education to all Americans regardless of race, integrate lunch counters and libraries, and sit on buses without regard to race. They demonstrated determination, courage, and an awareness of basic fairness and social justice, and mobilized participation in the Civil Rights Movement by the nation at large.

This lesson explores the Civil Rights Movement from this alternative perspective. Instead of figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks holding center stage, the focus shifts to what children accomplished as primary players in the Civil Rights Movement. Students will analyze images and interpret the words of children who faced intimidation, threats of violence, and even death to end segregation and inequality in America.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1954 the United States Supreme Court handed down the historic Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision which affirmed that separate but equal schools are unconstitutional. This ruling in turn initiated the integration of schools, particularly in the southern United States. Although only applied to education, the Brown decision effectively opened the door to a fundamental transformation in race relations in America. As a result of this decision, the Civil Rights Movement received a great deal of momentum from activists of all races and ethnicities, challenging white supremacy and black inequality.

Children were central to the Brown decision. Although many adults made the decision to send their children to newly integrated schools, children were the ones who braved angry mobs and death threats and climbed the steps of those previously all-white institutions to receive an education and transform their destinies and the destinies of all African Americans. The following offer just a few examples of their courage.

Little Rock Nine:

Perhaps the most well known Civil Rights case involving children occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1957 Central High School became the first school in the state to be integrated despite fierce opposition from parents all the way up to the governor, Orval Faubus.
It took weeks before President Eisenhower, sworn to enforce the law, sent troops to Central High School and federalized the Arkansas National Guard to allow the nine black students, Thelma Mothershed, Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Gloria Ray, Jefferson Thomas, Melba Beals, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls, and Ernest Green, into the school. Throughout that first school year, the nine recounted stories of intimidation and violence. At year’s end, the lone African American senior, Ernest Green, graduated in a solemn ceremony. In the fall of 1958, Governor Faubus closed all the public schools in Little Rock rather than integrate them. They remained closed for an entire year.

Ruby Bridges:

In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges became the first African-American child to attend an all-white elementary school in New Orleans. For months Bridges endured the walk to her new school amidst crowds of angry whites who gathered to taunt her. Federal marshals escorted her to school every day. The parents of white students kept them home so Ruby sat in a classroom alone, with her white teacher, to receive a first grade education. Eventually white students returned and the mob gradually disappeared.

Greensboro Student Sit-Ins:

On February 1, 1960 four students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technological State University, Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil, staged a sit-in at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina that reverberated throughout the South. Woolworth was open to all customers regardless of color, but the restaurant was for whites only. The students, however, sat down at the lunch counter and asked for food. Although they were refused service and asked to leave, their courageous actions inspired 54 sit-ins in 15 cities in 9 states by February 7th.

Birmingham Children’s Crusade:

When the Southern Christian Leadership Conference decided to fight for equality in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, they did not choose an easy location. Birmingham was filled with racial tensions, and was alternatively known as "Bombingham" because of the many black churches that were bombed.

While in Birmingham, Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed for the thirteenth time on April 12, 1963, for disobeying a court order to discontinue his protests. Movement organizers decided to use children in an effort to counter the strong resistance to change that flourished in the city. On May 2, over 1,000 African-American children marched in the Children’s Crusade. They were sprayed with water from high-power hoses that could blast off clothing, and were also attacked by dogs. By the end of the first day the police had arrested over 900 boys and girls. Images of the attacks were shown on national television and in newspapers. Those pictures conveyed powerful messages, and many Americans were horrified by what they saw.

THEMES:
social justice, leadership, courage, commitment
LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Following this activity, students will be able to:

1. Understand the daily injustices against African Americans and the pervasiveness of racial segregation during the 1960s.
2. Comprehend what it means to have courage and be a leader.
3. Appreciate the role that children can play to change their community and the world.

NEW JERSEY STANDARDS:

6.1 U.S. History: America in the World. All students will acquire the knowledge and skills to think analytically about how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage. Such knowledge and skills enable students to make informed decisions that reflect fundamental rights and core democratic values as productive citizens in local, national, and global communities.

6.3 Active Citizenship in the 21st Century. All students will acquire the skills needed to be active, informed citizens who value diversity and promote cultural understanding by working collaboratively to address the challenges that are inherent in living in an interconnected world.

MATERIALS:

Appendices A1 - A3: Central High School 1957, Little Rock, Arkansas
Appendices B1 – B3: Ruby Bridges going to William Frantz elementary School 1960.
Appendices C1 - C3: Birmingham, Alabama Children’s Crusade, 1963
Appendix D1: Greensboro Student Sit-in 1960
Appendix D2: Woolworth sit-in, Jackson, MS, May 28, 1963
Appendix D3: Lunch counter sit-in Nashville, TN 1960
Appendix E: Ernest Green’s reflection on attending school at Central High School
Appendix F: Ruby Bridges reflections on attending Frantz elementary

DETAILS OF ACTIVITY:

PART 1 (15 mins.):

Ask students what they think of when asked about the Civil Rights Movement. Most will discuss well-known people, events, and ideas: Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, marches, non-
violence, the March on Washington, President John F. Kennedy, etc. Let students know that this activity is designed to encourage them to think of movement from the bottom up. In other words, it will explore how the actions and initiative of ordinary Americans—including children—can make important social changes.

Then ask students the following framing questions:

1. How do you define courage and leadership?
2. Is courage something you have to be born with or can you develop it? What about leadership?
3. How do you become a leader? What is required of leaders?

PART 2 (30-35 mins.):

Divide the class into four groups and provide each with a set of photographs representing four different movements or events: Little Rock (Appendices A1-A3), Ruby Bridges (Appendices B1-B3), the Children’s Crusade (Appendices C1-C3) and Sit-ins (Appendices D1-D3). After the photographs have been distributed, provide a brief synopsis of each event using the information in the Historical Context section above.

Introduce students to the SIGHT method developed by Dr. Edward T O’Donnell (Holy Cross College) to encourage them to talk about what they see and how images make them feel.

S scan for important details
I identify the conflict or tension
G guess the creator’s intent or message
H hear the voices
T talk about your observations

The following questions should guide students’ discussion in small groups:

1. How old are the children? What are they doing?
2. What are the other people in the images doing?
3. How do you think people responded to these photographs at the time? Would they have responded the same way if the photographs were of adults?
4. Are you surprised children are in the scenes facing segregationists alone without adults?

PART 3 (30 mins.):

In the last part of this exercise students apply what they’ve learned to their present day lives. Distribute Appendices E and F and have students take turns reading them aloud. Ask them why
these activists took the stand they did, what they sought to accomplish, and how their lives and the lives of others were transformed by their actions.

Students can then divide up into those same four groups and think about something that they would be willing to take a stand for despite the consequences. Once they have selected a topic, have them role play the situation. After each improvisation, have a discussion about what important principle or issue was at stake. How well did the individual stand up? What could he or she have done better? What did you learn from this?

**Follow-Up Activity:**

What does it take to show courage and stand up against peer pressure? As a class, discuss the kinds of peer pressure that exist at your school and what makes it difficult to resist those pressures. Develop a list of strategies for resistance and compile them into a written pamphlet for students of your school.

**REFERENCES AND WEBSITES:**

Parts of this lesson plan were adapted from the following sites:

“Fight for Civil Rights” by Kelley Dawson Salas and Bob Peterson in *Rethinking Schools* Online: http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/18_03/kide183.shtm -“Teaching Ideas: Kids.


For additional information about the Civil Rights Movement, see:


http://www.crmvet.org/images/imgcoll.htm: Contains dozens of images of the participants in the civil rights movement. Many of the images are of children.


http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/18_03/acti183.shtml: A special edition of the online journal *Rethinking Education Online*, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown* decision.

http://www.tolerance.org/teaching-kits: This website contains a DVD on the Birmingham, Alabama movement: *Mighty Times: The Children's March*. This special teachers' edition of the Academy Award-winning documentary film and accompanying resources tell the heroic story of the young people in Birmingham, Alabama, who brought segregation to its knees.

Appendix A1: Central High School 1957, Little Rock, Arkansas

Integration at Little Rock, Arkansas

With chants such as “Two-four-six-eight, we ain’t gonna integrate,” angry crowds taunted Elizabeth Eckford (shown here walking past white students and National Guardsmen) and eight other black students who tried to register at the previously all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, on September 4, 1957. The court-ordered integration proceeded only after President Eisenhower reluctantly nationalized the Arkansas National Guard to protect the students.

Francis Miller, LIFE Magazine, © Time, Inc.

http://www.hist.umn.edu/~bywelke/littlerock.htm

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Appendix A2: Central High School 1957, Little Rock, Arkansas

http://www.hist.umn.edu/~bywelke/littlerock.htm

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Appendix A3: Central High School 1957, Little Rock, Arkansas

http://aam.govst.edu/projects/mwysocki/images/littlerock/Little_Rock_Nine_Escorting.jpg
Appendix B1: Ruby Bridges going to William Frantz Elementary School 1960

Appendix B2: Ruby Bridges going to William Frantz Elementary School 1960

Appendix B3: Ruby Bridges and Classmates at William Frantz Elementary School

Appendix C1: Birmingham, Alabama Children’s Crusade, 1963

http://www.crmvet.org/images/imgbham.htm
Appendix C2: Birmingham, Alabama Children’s Crusade, 1963

http://www.crmvet.org/images/imgbham.htm
Appendix C3: Birmingham, Alabama Children’s Crusade, 1963

http://www.crmvet.org/images/imgbham.htm
Appendix D1: Greensboro Student Sit-in 1960

http://www.crmvet.org/images/imgcoll.htm
Appendix D2: Woolworth Sit-In, Jackson, Mississippi, 
May 28, 1963

http://www.crmvet.org/images/imgcoll.htm
Appendix D3: Lunch Counter Sit-In Nashville, Tennessee 1960

http://www.crmvet.org/images/imgcoll.htm
Appendix E: Excerpt from Ernest Green’s Reflection on Attending School at Central High School in 1957

In the spring of 1957, students at Horace Mann High School—the segregated school I attended—were asked to sign up if they were interested in transferring to Central High School the next year. Well, I signed the sheet of paper. I was aware that the Brown decision represented a fundamental change occurring in the South. It meant expanded opportunities, better jobs. I was aware of the Montgomery bus boycott and the role that Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King played. And I was taking a course in Negro history in 11th grade at Horace Mann. We talked about slave insurrections, protests. We talked about Jackie Robinson breaking into baseball. So I had some consciousness that things didn’t have to be the way they were. The other thing that always struck me was that change was only going to occur if the African-American community was willing to step forward, that it wasn’t going to be handed to you. And I saw Central High School as an educational institution. They had more courses, more reference books, more science labs than we had at Horace Mann. I saw this as an enhancement for my own personal education....
I’m proud to have been part of the Nine. Fifty years later to see your name in a history book or have a teacher come up to you and say they use *Eyes on the Prize* (a documentary on the civil rights struggle) as a teaching tool for young people, it makes you feel good. What Little Rock represents is trying to be prepared to take advantage of a moment. It’s about us pursuing what most people would think an admirable goal: a decent education.

This excerpt appeared in the Fall 2007 edition of the *American Educator*. Taken from the website of the American Federation of Teachers:  http://archive.aft.org/teachers/bh-littlerock.htm
Appendix F: Excerpt from Ruby Bridges’ reflections on Attending Frantz Elementary in 1960

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: I wish there were enough marshals to walk with every child as they faced the hatred and racism today, and to support, encourage them the way these federal marshals did for me. I know there aren't enough of you, but I do hope that I have inspired some of you today to join me again by dedicating yourselves to not just protecting but uplifting those you touch because that will enable us to rise together as a people, as a nation, and as a world.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT(interviewer): Here with us now is Ruby Bridges Hall, and welcome. You were six years old when you went into that school. Did you have any idea at that age what you were getting into?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: No, I really didn't. I remember that morning my mom saying to me, "Ruby, you're going to a new school today. I want you to behave." I remember the federal marshals driving up in the car and us being in the car driving to the school. I also remember the conversation that was going on in the car. Federal marshals were explaining to us how we should get out of the car and how to walk once we arrived in front of the school.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: Nobody prepared you for that?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: No. And I kind of feel like that was a good thing because it's--it would have been very frightening for me as a six-year-old to hear what I might actually see once I got there. ……..

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: You talked about the three things that sustained you during that time: prayer, faith was one, your family, and friends.

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: Yes. That was very, very important. I don't think that my parents could have gone through what they did without the whole community coming together. We had friends that would come over and help dress me for school. Even when I rode to school, there was people in the neighborhood that would walk behind the car. I actually didn't live that far from school, and so they would actually just come out and walk to school with me.

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT: What impact did that experience have on your life?

RUBY BRIDGES HALL: It took me a while to really realize just how important that sacrifice was that my parents made….

See the PBS Online Newshour interview “A CLASS OF ONE” on February 18, 1997. For the full text of this document:  http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/race_relations/jan-june97/bridges_2-18.html