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Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching

Washington, DC: Teaching for Change and the Poverty & Race Research Action Council

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Review by Mara Sapon-Shevin

When my daughter, Dalia, was in second grade, she came home one day in January with a four-page coloring booklet about Martin Luther King Jr. Since the school didn't have "multicultural" crayons, she had colored MLK Jr.'s face with a black crayon, obliterating most of his features. Excited that the school was teaching about civil rights' issues, I asked her what she'd learned. "Not much," she replied. I examined the booklet that said, blandly, that Martin Luther King Jr. had been a famous man who had preached to many people about making a better world and that he had "died" (sic) at a young age. Eager to seize this teachable moment for social justice with my young daughter, I asked her if she wanted to know more, and, when she said yes, explained that MLK Jr. had worked for civil rights for people who were treated unfairly based on their skin color, that he had organized political actions like sit-ins and boycotts to challenge prejudice and discrimination, and that he had been killed because of his strong political positions and actions.

"He spent his whole life," I told her, "working for peace and justice to make the world better."

"Oh, no," she replied.

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Because," she answered, "that's what I wanted to do!"

I reassured her that the bad news and the good news were that there was still plenty left to do, and that there was no shortage of peace and justice work that would require her energy and attention throughout her life.

There is, indeed, much left to do, and we need all the help we can rally to convey the significance of the Civil Rights Movement to the

next generation. We need ways to help people see that the struggle is not over, and in some ways, barely begun. As we mark the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, a time when there are daily new assaults on our civil liberties, we must challenge our ahistorical tendencies and short memories to insure that we neither forget where we came from nor lose sight of how far we have yet to go to achieve equality and justice in our own country.

Had ***Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching*** existed when my daughter was young, I could have found dozens of ways to explore issues of civil rights, political change and justice with her and her classmates. The mimeographed coloring booklet could have been replaced with powerful articles, engaging simulations, role-plays and readers' theatre. First person accounts of civil disobedience, an analysis of hip hop music and its relationship to social justice, poems about the Soweto uprising, and interactive theater activities about farm workers would all have been easily available to me. Perhaps I could have sent some appropriate activities to Dalia's classroom teacher or volunteered to come into the class to do some additional teaching.

This book is a treasure—long awaited and very necessary. The largest compendium ever of materials and lessons about the civil rights' movement, there is something here for everyone. Although the book is designated as a resource guide for K-12 classrooms, this sells the project short; I found materials and lessons here that would be appropriate for the graduate level courses I teach as well as ideas for talking to the very young people in my life about civil disobedience, making a difference and working to change unfair rules and policies. As I write

this review, I am teaching a new cohort of Master's level students in an initial certification program, and only two of twenty-four had heard of Ruby Bridges and her role in school desegregation. I am certain that graduating high school should not constitute the end of our teaching and learning responsibilities about civil rights issues, particularly for those who will themselves become teachers.

The editors had stringent criteria for selecting the materials in the book, including strong academic content that met or exceeded national standards for history and language arts, useful background information and or classroom-tested lessons for teachers. The included material needed to be framed by an interdisciplinary approach that used one of the following six lenses for interpreting and understanding the Civil Rights Movement: (1) women; (2) youth; (3) organizing; (4) culture; (5) institutional racism; or (6) the interconnectedness of social movements. Moving far beyond a heroes approach to understanding Civil Rights, the book strives to present empowering narratives of people making a difference and standing up to oppression, and to avoid focusing on individuals without reference to their allies, supporters and fellow freedom fighters.

In addition to an introduction and a final section entitled, "Looking Forward," the book is organized into five sections: Reflections on Teaching About the Movement; Citizenship and Self-Determination; Education; Economic Justice; and Culture. Each section includes both historic writings by famous Civil Rights' leaders, reflections on various aspects of the Civil Rights' Movement, photos and other images, and specific lessons plans for teaching, designated as elementary, middle school or high school level. Although the lesson plans are labeled in that way, I am eager to use some of the elementary lessons with my pre-service and in-service teachers as examples of what *they* can do with *their* students.

I read the book like a child in a candy store, nearly overwhelmed by my choices and possibilities. Sometimes I was so excited by what I was finding that I could scarcely contain my enthusiasm or my eagerness to find the right group with whom to try the lesson or share the information. What did I find?

- A first-person account by Bayard Rustin of his non-violent civil disobedience in which he refused to leave his seat on a bus from Louisville to Nashville, including powerful photos of activists learning to protect themselves when they were being kicked and abused as part of political actions. The article includes a poster of Bayard Rustin with this quote "Take power away from those who misuse it—at which point they become human too."
- An article by Herb Kohl analyzing the Rosa Parks' Myth perpetuated by children's literature—that she was a tired woman on her way home on a bus—replacing it with the fact that she was a trained political activist strategically positioned to draw dramatic attention to injustice.
- A poem by Pablo Neruda written as an ode to Paul Robeson—haunting and powerful: "You, Paul Robeson, were not silent when Pedro or Juan was put out into the street, with his furniture in the rain. Or when the fanatics of the millennium sacrificed with fire the double heart of their fiery victims, as when in Chile wheat grows on volcanic land. You never stopped singing" (p. 485).
- An antiwar comic book about Vietnam by Julian Bond (illustrated by T.G. Lewis), making the racial politics of that war explicitly visible and understandable: "One out of every ten young men in American is a Negro. But two out of every five men killed in the

war in Vietnam is a Negro. The United States says that this is because Negroes are very brave, but most people know it is because we do more of the dirty front-line fighting than we should” (p. 165).

- First grade teacher Maggie Nolan Donovan’s lessons on the Underground Railroad, boycotts, and the politics of sit-ins. She describes two girls, one black and one white, writing a story after her lesson. She is annoyed when the children ask her to spell “sit up” and “ketchup,” certain that they are writing about gym and lunch rather than about her intended content; “Finally they were finished. They seemed very pleased with their work and called me over to see it. Each girl had written, ‘The students held sit-ups at lunch counters. People poured ketchup and mustard on them.’” (p. 241).

In addition to the specific, designated lessons, I immediately thought of ways to create lessons of the *other* included material, and I suspect many readers would do the same. The full color plate of political buttons, for example, made me want to ask students to discover when and where the buttons were from and what they meant: “Write in Dick Gregory for President” or “San Quentin Six” or “U.S. Out of North America.” Perhaps we could go on a scavenger hunt for other, more recent political buttons and analyze these in terms of continuing and changing struggles. Or students might study the political murals included in the book and then investigate their own neighborhood’s murals to learn about their origins and their effects on the communities where they were painted. The book provides a seemingly unlimited source of information, vision and hopefulness about the change process.

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Who will find this book useful? Teachers at any level, pre-school through university who are interested in finding exciting, participatory, constructivist ways to teach about civil rights are a natural audience. Parents who want to fill the gaps in their own and their children’s understanding will also be delighted by the range of information provided. And any citizen concerned about current losses in our civil rights struggling to preserve democratic principles and ideals will find inspiration and strategies for effecting change. I am torn between lending this book to everyone I know and keeping it all for myself so that I can dip into it at will. I think I will simply have to recommend that others buy their own copies—and then we can talk.

A portion of Leonard Peltier’s “A Message to Humanity” embodies the goals of the book best:

“To heal will require real effort, and a change of heart, from all of us. To heal means that we will begin to look upon one another with respect and tolerance instead of prejudice, distrust, and hatred. We will have to teach our children—as well as ourselves—to love the diversity of humanity” (p. 536). This book helps us in this critical quest.”

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