Lesson Plan: The Children's Crusade & the Role of Youth in the African American Freedom Struggle

Young activists faced firehouses as they marched to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama.
Drawing by Evan Bissell

Introduction
Young people played an essential role in the African American Freedom Struggle, participating in many of the major campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as initiating personal protests against racial injustice. From Barbara Johns leading a strike of her fellow students at Moton High in protest of the inequities between black and white education, to the children of Birmingham who were arrested en masse as they protested the city’s segregation policies, the contributions of young people were critical to the movement’s success.

As students learn about the role of youth in the movement, they will find that while Martin Luther King, Jr., was indeed a source of great inspiration for many people in the struggle, the movement was made up mostly of ordinary citizens who exhibited extraordinary courage and strength in their efforts to bring about social justice. Names like Barbara Johns, Claudette Colvin, and Mary Louise Smith will most likely be unfamiliar to your students. These young women participated in acts of resistance and civil disobedience before Martin Luther King, Jr., gained national prominence for his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Exploring their contributions to the movement not only clarifies King’s place in history, it reminds young people of their potential to affect change in the world.

Student Objectives
- To help students see beyond the dynamic leaders of the movement, and focus instead on the many contributions made by people who are not included in the history books.
To make connections between the role of youth in the African American freedom struggle and the role of youth in current struggles for justice and equality.

To encourage reflection on the events of the African American freedom struggle as they apply to our own lives

To evaluate and interpret primary source documents

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Grades: 6-8, 9-12
Teaching Standard: Era 9: Postwar United States, Standard 4a

**Essential Question**
What unique contribution did young people make to the Children’s Crusade specifically, as well as the broader African American freedom struggle?

**Lesson Activities**
Part One: Dividing Line
Part Two: No Easy Walk
Part Three: Domestic Views of the Strife in Birmingham
Part Four: Rethinking the Role of Youth in the Children’s Crusade

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**Part One: Dividing Line**

*Inspired by actual events: student demonstrators face fire hoses in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963*

Drawing by Evan Bissell
Instructions
To call on prior knowledge and to prime the students for the lesson, begin with the following “anticipatory set” activity, called “Dividing Line.” This activity invites the students to form an opinion about a provocative statement and to prepare a brief defense of it. Tell students that they are going to be learning about the role that young people played in the African American freedom struggle, specifically in the Birmingham campaign, and write Malcolm X’s statement: “Real men don’t put their children on the firing line,” on the board.

Have students write several sentences in response to the provocative statement followed by a number between one and ten reflecting their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement. Have students form a line across the room in numerical order and then split the line in half so that students are facing one another. The object here is to have the extremes of the line (ones and tens, twos and nines) pair off with one another for a brief exchange of their views. In addition to requiring students to take a stand, “Dividing Line” encourages them to back up their opinions with reasons and to defend them in a brief exchange with someone who likely holds very different views.

After students have had several minutes to discuss their positions, have some of the ones, twos, nines, and tens share their discussions with the class.

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Part Two: No Easy Walk

Instructions
Watch “Eyes on the Prize: No Easy Walk” segment on Birmingham and the Children’s Crusade. Have students address the following questions in small groups or in their journals.

1. Why did the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights make the decision to use children in the campaign?

2. Why were parents discouraged from posting bail for their children?

3. What do you think King meant when he stated that the demonstrations allowed children to develop “a sense of their own stake in freedom and justice?”

4. How might you have responded to the call to participate in the demonstrations?
5. What sacrifices would you be willing to make for a cause you care about? Be specific.

**Materials**
- PBS Documentary "Eyes on the Prize: No Easy Walk" (ca. 54 min)

**Part Three: Domestic Views of the Strife in Birmingham**

**Instructions**
In their journals, have students write a response to one of the cartoons, addressing the questions below. As an alternative, you may want to utilize Nationa Archives and Records Administration's cartoon analysis worksheet.

1. What is the author’s intent in creating this cartoon?
2. What does the cartoon tell us about the values and beliefs of the person that created it?
3. What does it tell us about the social and political climate of the period in which it was produced?
4. Briefly explain your response to the document. Is it effective? Why or why not? How might the issues addressed in this document be relevant to our current social and political situation?

Assignment: Ask students to create a political cartoon for an event from the movement involving children.

**Materials**
- Domestic Views of the Strife in Birmingham: Cartoons
- Cartoon Analysis Worksheet

**Part Four: Rethinking the Role of Youth in the Children's Crusade**

**Instructions**
Following is a brief overview of several of the youth-centered events that helped shape the modern African American Freedom Struggle. Teachers may use these to expand on
the Children’s Crusade unit, or they may wish to develop one of them further as a separate lesson. We have provided a list of suggested readings, links, and possible activities to help get you started.

**Barbara Johns and the *Brown v. Board of Education* Case (1954)**

On 23 April 1951, sixteen year old Barbara Rose Johns, a student at Moton High School in Virginia, organized an assembly at her school and encouraged her fellow students to participate in an attendance strike to protest the inequities between their school and the local white school. She told them that if they acted in solidarity the town jail could not hold them all. Johns stated, “We knew we had to do it ourselves and that if we had asked for adult help before taking the first step, we would have been turned down.”

Johns wrote a letter to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) asking for their help. The lawyers, who had planned to tell the children to go back to school, recalled, “These kids turned out to be so well organized and their morale was so high. We just didn’t have the heart to tell ‘em to break it up.” The case became one of the five school desegregation cases under *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Have students write a response journal to Barbara Johns’ quote, “It [suing for the end of segregation] seemed like reaching for the moon.”

**Suggested Reading:**


**Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith, Montgomery Bus Boycott**

Following the arrest of Rosa Parks, attorney Fred Gray and Jo Ann Robinson, leader of the Women’s Political Council, wrote a handbill calling for a boycott of the buses. The document mentions that there were previous arrests for the same action. Have students read the handbill and then ask if anything stands out about the hand bill. Given the history that most students have learned about the Montgomery bus boycott, are they surprised to learn that Rosa Parks was not the first person arrested for refusing to give up her seat?

Ask students to find information on Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith in their textbooks. Why aren’t they included in the history of the Montgomery bus boycott? How does this change the way they think about the teaching of history and the information in their textbooks?
Suggested Readings:


**The Little Rock Nine**

Following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ had no place in the field of public education, the Little Rock School Board developed a plan for the gradual desegregation at Central High School. However, on 2 September, the night before school was to begin, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called on the state’s National Guard to surround Little Rock Central High School and prevent the black students from entering.

On 4 September, eight of the nine students met Daisy Bates, president of the Arkansas NAACP, to face the violent mob they knew would be waiting for them. The ninth student, Elizabeth Eckford—who was only 15 years old—was unaware of the meeting and went alone. Eckford was greeted by an angry crowd shouting racial epitaphs and threatening physical violence. A group of whites screamed, “Lynch her! Lynch her!” and one woman spat on her. Finally, a white woman helped her board a bus away from the mob.

Mobs continued to attack any black person who approached the school, and the conflict made international news. The battle between state and federal power forced President Eisenhower to take action. He federalized the entire Arkansas National Guard and sent soldiers to Little Rock to ensure the students’ safety.

On 25 September 1957, the “Little Rock Nine” entered Central High under the protection of federal troops. While the battle had ended in the eyes of the media and the nation, the daily battles for the nine students continued.

1. Show the first film in the *Eyes on the Prize* series, “Fighting Back.”(ca. 58 min)

2. Letter from the Editor

   On 19 September 1957 Jane Emery, co-editor of the Central High School’s student newspaper, *The Tiger*, wrote a letter to her fellow students entitled "Can you Meet the Challenge." Bring a letter from the editor or an editorial from a current newspaper to class and introduce students to the basics of writing an editorial. *(You can find plenty of “How to write an editorial” sites on the Internet.)* Have students put themselves in the place of the editor of *The Tiger* and write a letter addressed to his or her fellow students. The letter may be addressed to just the white students, the “Little Rock Nine,” or both; and should reflect a familiarity with the events surrounding Little Rock’s integration.

Discussion: Share reactions and thoughts about the role youth played in the Birmingham movement. Were students familiar with the Children’s Crusade, or had they only learned a King-centered version of Birmingham? How does this change their perception of King, the movement, and the role of youth? Ask students where they
would place themselves on the “dividing line,” after learning about the Children’s Crusade.

While all of the above examples involve youth action, there were a number of different motivations and tactics used by the participants. While Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith acted alone, without any organizational support, Barbara Johns enlisted the help of her fellow students. In contrast, it was adults who primarily organized the Children’s Crusade, and their efforts were part of a larger campaign.

Have students compare and contrast the differences between the campaigns and events covered in this unit. Some questions to consider:

1. What similarities do you see between the various campaigns?
2. What differences do you see?
3. Which example did you find most interesting or inspiring? Why?
4. Could you see yourself participating in any of the campaigns or events above? Which ones? Why?
5. In what ways were specific campaigns a success? Where did they fall short?
6. Consider the various tactics used in the campaigns listed above. Which do you consider to be the most effective? Why?

**Materials**

- Arrest of Rosa Parks (Arrest Record For Rosa Parks, December 1, 1955)
- Boycott of the buses (Robinson, Jo Ann Gibson, *Don’t Ride the Bus*, December 2, 1955)
- *Eyes on the Prize* series, “Fighting Back.”(ca. 58 min)
- "Can you Meet the Challenge" (Jane Emery, September 19, 1957)