

Our Dreams for Equality

Rationale

This lesson provides an opportunity for upper elementary students to watch and discuss Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and to explore civil rights issues during the Civil Rights era as well as today. Students will also write original poems about their own dreams for equality.

Objectives

- Students will learn about Martin Luther King Jr. and his contribution to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.
- Students will listen to and analyze parts of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.
- Students will explore civil rights and the impact of activism during the Civil Rights era.
- Students will identify rights that still need to be realized in order to achieve equality.
- Students will express their own dreams for equality through the writing of poems.

Age Range

Grades 3–5

Time

Approximately 2 hours or 2 class periods

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [Martin Luther King Facts \(National Geographic Kids\)](#), one for each student
- "I Have a Dream" speech video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vDWWy4CMhE (short 5-minute version)
- [Image of Segregated Water Fountain](#) (International Center of Photography)

Other Material:

- Chart paper and markers
- WiFi, internet, computer, screen or LCD projector, speakers (to show video clips and images)
- Example of a poem stanza

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Access and prepare Image of Segregated Water Fountain to be projected for viewing (see Part II #4).
- Write an example of a stanza on a piece of chart paper (see Part IV #2).

Techniques and Skills

analyzing speeches, connecting past to present, cooperative group work, critical thinking, forming opinions, historical understanding, large and small group discussion, persuasive speaking, reading skills, poetry writing, oral history, interviewing, constructing timelines, biography writing

Key Words

Activism
Boycott
Civil Rights
Desegregation
Discrimination
Equality
Injustice
Nonviolent
Oppression
Passive (or passive resistance)
Segregation
Sit-in

[NOTE: Explain to students that "Negro" and "colored" are the words people used during the era of the Civil Rights Movement for Black people, but they are not used today.]

Procedures

Part I: Martin Luther King, Jr. and His Famous Speech (35 minutes)

1. As a warm-up invite students to go around the room and taking turns, say the first word that comes to mind when they hear the name Martin Luther King, Jr.
2. Ask students to share what they already know about Martin Luther King, Jr. Distribute a copy of [Martin Luther King Jr. Facts](#) to each student and read aloud as a class.

ALTERNATIVE: Prior to the lesson invite students to read a children’s book about Martin Luther King, Jr. Most classroom and school libraries contain books about Martin Luther King, Jr. and suggested children’s books are listed in the Resources on the Civil Rights Movement and the Voting Rights Act.

Make sure to highlight these important facts about King’s life:

- Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. His father, Martin Luther King, Sr., was the pastor of a Baptist church and hated the South’s segregation laws that kept white and Black people separated.
 - Martin Luther King, Jr. was very bright and entered college when he was 15 years old. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to do as a career but he knew he wanted to help people. After college, he attended a theological school in Pennsylvania and after that earned a doctorate degree. In college, he read an essay by Henry David Thoreau who believed that people had the right to disobey any law they thought was evil or unjust. He also read about Mahatma Gandhi, a great leader of India, who believed in nonviolence as a way to bring about change. Both of these men had a major influence on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s thinking.
 - In 1953, Martin Luther King, Jr. married Coretta Scott and they settled in Montgomery, Alabama, where King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.
 - In 1955, a Black woman named Rosa Parks, who was a community leader and activist in Montgomery, refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white person. In those days, white people sat in the front and Black people had to sit in the back of the bus or stand if there was no room in the back. If the front of the bus was full, then they also had to give up their seats for white people to sit. Rosa Parks was arrested on the spot and the news of this occurrence spread quickly throughout Montgomery. Montgomery’s Black leaders met in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s church to discuss what to do and agreed to a one-day boycott of the buses as a protest. They later extended the boycott, which lasted 381 days (a little more than a year), and ended in victory when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation of the buses was illegal.
 - Martin Luther King, Jr. became the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), whose goal was to win equality for all people. They won many victories using nonviolent techniques such as boycotts, marches and sit-ins and ultimately brought about the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
 - Martin Luther King, Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He is praised for calling for peaceful resistance to discrimination against Black people.
 - In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech at the historic March on Washington to demand “jobs and freedom.” About 250,000 Americans of all races came to Washington, D.C. to listen to speeches by many civil rights leaders, especially Martin Luther King, Jr.
 - On April 4, 1968, at the age of 39, Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot and killed by an assassin. Since 1986, his birthday has been a national holiday in the United States.
3. Ask students has anyone ever heard the “I Have a Dream” speech by Martin Luther King, Jr.? Have students share what they know about the speech.
 4. Explain to students that Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech is one of the most famous speeches in history. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered this speech at the March on Washington, D.C. in 1963 that was held to protest racial discrimination and to demand civil rights laws in Congress. There were 250,000 people in attendance. The event is now remembered as one of the most important symbols of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.
 5. Show the short 5-minute version of the [“I Have a Dream” speech](#) to students and discuss it.

NOTE: The entire speech is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=smEqnnkIfYs. If you do not have the capability to show the video, you can play the audio version at www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm.

6. After watching the speech, ask the following questions for group discussion:
- How did you feel while you were listening to the speech?
 - What was his overall message?
 - What was the reaction of the people listening to the speech in Washington, D.C.? How do you know?
 - What do you think Martin Luther King, Jr. was thinking and feeling while he was delivering the speech? How do you know?
 - What are some words you would use to describe Martin Luther King, Jr.'s personality and character?
 - How does his voice change as the speech moves along? What does this communicate?
 - Is the speech hopeful or hopeless? What makes you think so?

Part II: The Civil Rights Movement (15 minutes)

1. Explain to students that in his speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about civil rights. Ask students what are civil rights? Invite students to share their responses aloud. Explain to students that civil rights are the rights of individuals to receive fair treatment in a number of settings, including education, employment, housing, voting and more. Discrimination occurs when the civil rights of an individual are denied or interfered with because of their identity group (e.g., race, religion, gender, etc.).
2. Ask students for some examples of civil rights. As students respond, make a list of some of the civil rights we have in the United States. Students may share the following examples (and you should include these if they do not):
 - The right to vote.
 - The right to go to school and get an education.
 - The right to practice the religion you want
 - The right to be treated fairly in applying for jobs and a place to live
 - The right to express yourself (i.e., "free speech").
3. Ask students - did people always have these rights? Explain that during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Black people fought in a variety of ways to have the same rights as white people. Follow-up with the following questions:
 - During the Civil Rights Movement, what are some of the rights for which people fought?
 - What actions and strategies did they use to win those rights?
4. Explain to students that during this period, there were some regions of the country where Black people and white people were segregated by law; there were "whites" and "colored" domains (as in the bus example) and in most cases, the "colored" domains were inferior. For example, the image of a [segregated water fountain](#) shows that the water fountains for Black people were older and dirtier than the ones for white people. Also, laws were passed that made it more difficult for Black people to vote. When these laws were passed, the number of Black voters dropped dramatically which meant that they were not able to participate in the process of electing their representatives.
5. Explain that during the Civil Rights Movement, there were organized activities and strategies aimed at overturning or changing these laws, often called "activism." Before sharing the following examples, find out what students already know about them.

NOTE: If you want to make this a longer unit and time permits, students can read background information about these events prior to discussion.

- *Example 1: Montgomery Bus Boycott*

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a Black woman who was a community leader and activist, refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery bus. She was arrested and fined. The boycott of public buses by Black people in Montgomery began on the day of Parks' court hearing and lasted 381 days. Instead of riding buses, Black people walked, took cabs, drove their own cars, rode mules or traveled on wagons pulled by horses. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, in which Black people refused to ride city buses in Montgomery, Alabama, to protest segregated (separate) seating, took place from December 5, 1955, to December 20, 1956, and was the first large demonstration against segregation in the United States. The U.S. Supreme Court finally ordered Montgomery to integrate its bus system, and

Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the leaders of the boycott, emerged as a prominent national leader of the American Civil Rights Movement in the wake of the action. (Read more about [Rosa Parks](#)).

- *Example 2: Woolworth's Lunch Counter*

On February 1, 1960, four Black college students sat down at a “whites-only” lunch counter at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, and politely asked for service. The staff refused to serve them, but they stayed until closing time. The next morning, they came with twenty-five more students. On the third day, sixty-three students joined their protest. Their peaceful sit-in demand helped begin a youth-led movement to challenge racial inequality throughout the South. In Greensboro, hundreds of students, civil rights organizations, churches, and members of the community joined in a six-month-long protest. This led to the desegregation of the F. W. Woolworth lunch counter on July 25, 1960.

- *Example 3: Ruby Bridges Desegregates Elementary School*

In November 1960, a six-year-old named Ruby Bridges became the first Black child to desegregate an elementary school. When Ruby was in kindergarten, she was one of several Black students in New Orleans who were chosen to take a test to determine whether she could attend a white school. She lived five blocks from an all-white school but attended kindergarten several miles away at an all-Black segregated school. In 1960, Ruby's parents were told that she was one of only six other Black children to pass the test and would attend the William Frantz School, near her home. Although she only lived a few blocks from school, federal marshals had to take Ruby to school because of angry groups of white people who did not want her to attend the school. For a whole year, she was the only student in her class because white parents would not allow their children to attend the school. By Ruby's second year at the school, everything had changed. There were no more federal marshals and Ruby walked to school every day by herself. And there were other students in her second-grade class.

6. Lead a whole group discussion, using the following questions:

- For each of the examples previously discussed, what was the civil right for which the person or people were fighting?
- How did they go about trying to obtain those rights?
- What do all three of these examples have in common?
- What personality traits enabled them to succeed?

Part III: Activism (20 minutes)

1. This portion of the activity is to identify rights that still need to be achieved and ways students can take action to achieve those rights. Begin this discussion by asking the questions that follow. Record their responses on the board. They may include a wide range of issues, some that are civil rights and some that are other kinds of rights or privileges that they want in school or their community.
 - What are some rights and freedoms that you have in your family, classroom, school and community?
 - Do you know if those rights always existed?
 - As a society, have we achieved full equal rights yet?
 - Are there ways in which things are still unfair—in school, your community or the country?
2. After coming up with a long list of ideas, narrow the list down to four or five. Have students choose one of the rights and work in small groups for 10 minutes to brainstorm ideas they must achieve that right. Remind them of what they learned about the Civil Rights Movement and the activism that people engaged in to achieve equality. The ideas should include actions by individual people, activism by groups of people and laws that can be changed or passed to achieve that right or freedom.
3. After completing their small group work, invite each group to present their ideas to the whole class.

Part IV: Poetry Writing (30 minutes)

1. Have students pair up and talk about some of their dreams for fairness, justice and civil rights, based on what was discussed in the lesson or other thoughts they have. Have students take notes for each other while their partner speaks.

2. In a large group discussion, have students share some of their ideas aloud with the whole class. Tell the students they will be writing poems about their dreams, and each stanza of the poem should begin with “I have a dream....” similar to the way Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech used those words in his speech. Explain that a stanza is an arrangement of a certain number of lines which form a division of a poem. Their poem should consist of 3–5 stanzas.

Share an example of one stanza by either writing one of your own in advance or use the following stanza as an example:

*I have a dream that someday
No one will have to beg on the street for food
No child will ever go to bed hungry
Fresh water plentiful in all countries*

3. Give students 10–15 minutes to work on their poems.

Optional: As a follow-up or for homework, have students illustrate their poems. Publish the poems in a book, a bulletin board display or create a website/blog with all the poems.

4. In closing, invite students to share their poems with the class.

Extension Activities

- **Oral History:** Create an oral history collection (audio, video and/or written) of people’s stories who lived during the Civil Rights Movement. Begin the project by identifying a person to come into the classroom for a group interview with the students. The interviewee can be a teacher in the school, a grandparent or someone living in the community. With the students, create a list of questions prior to the interview. Decide whether it will be audio or videotaped. Conduct the interview and have the students ask questions and record the speakers’ responses. After the interview, have each student identify someone they can interview about that time period—someone in their late 60s, 70s, or 80s (a grandparent would work well). They can use the same interview questions and record the interview using video or audio and take notes. Each student will write up their interview and they can all be compiled into a book or a videography about that time period.
- **Timeline:** Have students create a timeline with important dates and critical points in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. For each of the dates, they will write 2–3 sentences about what happened during that time and then illustrate the event with photos they find online or original pictures they create. (For an example, see [Martin Luther King, Jr. Timeline](#) which includes a list of the dates as well as the physical timeline.) As an alternative, create a class timeline in the form of a large mural that can be displayed somewhere in the school. Assign groups of 2–3 students certain blocks of time, each working on their own period, and then put it together as a class and display in the school.
- **Biography:** Invite students to learn more about other civil rights leaders during that time period. Create a list of possible people, including Ruby Bridges, Medgar Evers, Andrew Goodman, Fannie Lou Hamer, Jesse Jackson, John Lewis, John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall and Jackie Robinson. Have students pick which person they will investigate further. Using children’s books, non-fiction books and internet sources, students will conduct research to learn about the person they choose. Each student will then draw a portrait and write a 3–5 paragraph biography about that person.

Children's Resources on Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement

Print Material

Turner, Cory. "[How Do You Teach the Civil Rights Movement?](#)" NPR, June 17, 2013.

Children's Book Lists

ADL

[https://www.adl.org/books-matter?keywords=martin%20luther%20king&sort by=search_api_relevance&keys=martin%20luther%20king%20jr](https://www.adl.org/books-matter?keywords=martin%20luther%20king&sort%20by=search_api_relevance&keys=martin%20luther%20king%20jr)

Provides a listing of children's books on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Barnes & Noble

www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/kids/not-just-long-weekend-7-books-talking-kids-dr-martin-luther-king-jr/

Seven books for talking to kids about Martin Luther King, Jr.

Scholastic

<https://shop.scholastic.com/teachers-ecommerce/teacher/subject/holidays-celebrations/martin-luther-king-jr-day.html>

Provides a bibliography on Dr. King, those who inspired him, and the civil rights movement.

WETA's Reading Rockets

www.readingrockets.org/booklists/books-martin-luther-king-jr-day

Children's books about Dr. King, fiction and nonfiction books about ordinary people who stand up for what's right, and stories about helping others and giving back.

Websites on the Civil Rights Movement

History Channel

www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement

Provides a history of the Civil Rights Movement.

National Civil Rights Museum

www.civilrightsmuseum.org

The National Civil Rights Museum, the site of the Lorraine Motel where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, provides lessons, exhibitions, collections and more on the Civil Rights Movement.

PBS

www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/mlk/

PBS's American Experience TV channel featured a documentary, *Citizen King*, exploring the last five years in King's life by drawing on the personal recollections and eyewitness accounts of friends, movement associates, journalists, law enforcement officers, and historians, to illuminate this little-known chapter in the story of America's most important and influential moral leader. This website provides a Teacher's Guide to using the film, transcripts, primary resources and other valuable content on Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. The DVD of the documentary is available at Amazon.com.

Smithsonian American Art Museum

<https://americanart.si.edu/education/oh-freedom/resources/glossary>

Provides glossary of terms related to the Civil Rights Movement.