Middle School Lesson

The Struggle for Voting Rights

Rationale

This lesson provides an opportunity for middle school students to watch and analyze Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and identify the use of metaphor in the speech. Students will learn about the struggle for voting rights over the years and learn about the current quest for voting rights.

Objectives

- Students will listen to and analyze Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.
- Students will identify and describe the ways in which Martin Luther King, Jr. uses metaphor to convey his message and point of view.
- Students will explore the history of the struggle for voting rights for African Americans.
- Students will consider the impact of voter suppression laws and the recent Supreme Court decision which struck down provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- Students will reflect on whether there is still a need for the Voting Rights Act.

Age Range

Grades 6–8

Time

Approximately 2 hours or 2 class periods

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:
- The Life and Words of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Scholastic)
- I Have a Dream Speech video (17.5 mins., YouTube)
- *Using Metaphor to Convey a Message in "I Have a Dream" Speech 1–6* (copies for small groups)
- (Optional) *Using Metaphor to Convey a Message Vocabulary Words*
- New York Times Room for Debate: Is the Voting Rights Act Still Needed? (six articles)
- "Dreams" by Langston Hughes (Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. 1996)

Other Material:
- Internet access (to show video clips)

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Make a copy of each of the *Using Metaphor to Convey a Message in "I Have a Dream" Speech* handouts so that each small group will have a different excerpted paragraph of the speech (see Part II #3).
- Print out enough copies of each article from "New York Times Room for Debate: Is the Voting Rights Act Still Needed?" so that pairs of students will be able to read a selected article together. Try to have each pair select different articles. If you determine these articles are not the right reading level for your students, as an alternative have them read "Supreme Court Strikes Down Part of the Voting Rights Act" (NBC News/Politics). (See Part III #5.)
- Prepare the Langston Hughes' poem "Dreams" as a PowerPoint slide or a handout to be distributed to students (see Part III #7).

Key Words

Constitutionality
Discrimination
Disenfranchised
Metaphor
Nonviolence
Poll Tax
Segregation
Voter Fraud
Voter Suppression
Voting Rights Act

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

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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, use of metaphor, analytical reading, using evidence to strengthen argument, poetry writing, biography writing

Procedures

Part I: Analyzing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech" (35 minutes)

1. Ask students who was Martin Luther King, Jr.? Have them share what they know about Martin Luther King, Jr. and what they want to know more about his life. Together, read parts of The Life and Words of Martin Luther King, Jr. or have students read it prior to the lesson.
2. Have students watch Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Students can take notes while watching it.
3. After watching the speech, ask the following questions for group discussion:
   - How did you feel while listening to the speech?
   - What was the main message of the speech?
   - What was powerful and/or motivating about the speech?
   - How did the tone of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s voice affect the speech?
   - What was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream?
   - Why did he use the idea of a dream in the speech and what does it symbolize?

Part II: Using Metaphor to Convey a Message (20 minutes)

1. Ask students what is a metaphor? Explain that a metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase meaning one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest a similarity between them. An example would be "life is a rollercoaster." Life is not literally a rollercoaster yet it can be compared to one because it has ups and downs like a rollercoaster does. Ask students for other examples.
2. Explain that Martin Luther King, Jr. uses a lot of metaphors in his "I Have a Dream" speech. Ask students how the metaphor of a dream is used in the speech and what it symbolizes? Tell students that they will be divided into small groups of 4–5. Each group will get a copy of one of the paragraphs from the speech and will have 10 minutes to read the paragraph, discuss it and respond to questions about King's use of metaphors.
3. Distribute one of the *Using Metaphor to Convey a Message in "I Have a Dream Speech"* handouts to each small group. Some of the words in the excerpted paragraphs of the speech will be unfamiliar to the students. Have them try to figure out the words by using context clues or looking them up in the dictionary. If needed, refer to *Using Metaphor to Convey a Message Vocabulary Words* for a list of the words and their definitions. Remind students that "Negro" is the word people used during that time period for African American or black person, but it is not used today.
4. After doing their small group work, have students present their paragraphs to the whole class by reading the paragraph aloud and explaining how Martin Luther King Jr. used metaphors in that section of the speech.

Part III: Voting Rights and Voter Suppression (35 minutes)

1. Tell students that they are going to discuss civil rights and specifically voting rights during the Civil Rights era and today.
2. Ask students when was the last time they voted for something? Then ask what opportunities did they have to vote, in the last year? If they do not have any ideas, tell them it can be something they voted for in school, online or between friends. Examples may include: student council elections, opinion polls or voting for a contestant on a reality show. Discuss further by asking the following questions:
   - Why did you vote?
   - How did you feel while you were casting your vote?

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- How would you feel if you wanted to vote for something and could not?
- What is the purpose of voting?

3. Share the following background on Voting Rights:

   Prior to the Civil War, African Americans were almost totally "disenfranchised" throughout the states. Being disenfranchised means preventing a person or group of people from voting. Other groups of people (Latinos, Native Americans, women and Asian Americans) faced similar barriers to voting in different parts of the country. Even after the enactment of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1870, which gave all men regardless of race, color or previous condition of servitude the right to vote, many states continued to use various methods to prevent people of color from voting. Some states, in an effort to prevent blacks from voting, required voters to pass literacy tests. There were also poll taxes to prevent poor blacks from voting as well as the disenfranchisement of former inmates, intimidation, threats and even violence. People would challenge the laws in the courts and the courts would strike them down one by one. The problem was that by the time the cases made their ways through the court system, the states had already passed new laws to disenfranchise voters of color in other ways.

   A major voting rights campaign, including marches and demonstrations that received national attention, led to Congress passing the Voting Rights Act (VRA) in 1965, which sought to protect the voting rights of people of color. The Voting Rights Act prevented states from passing laws that would discriminate against people of color. Another part of the law required certain states (with a history of voting discrimination) to get approval from the federal government before making changes to their voting laws or procedures, no matter how small. This was called the preclearance provision. The Voting Rights Act had an immediate impact. By the end of 1965, 250,000 new black voters had been registered. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was readopted and strengthened in 1970, 1975, 1982 and 2006. It is considered to be one of the main achievements of the Civil Rights era and has been hailed as one of the most effective pieces of civil rights legislation in history.

4. Explain to students that over the past few years, many states have introduced and passed laws that may keep some Americans from voting, sometimes known as "voter suppression laws." These laws make it harder for Americans—particularly African Americans and other people of color, the elderly, the poor, students and people with disabilities—to exercise their right to vote. Proponents of these laws say they are to prevent voter fraud but studies of voter fraud consistently find that it is very rare. Out of the 197 million votes cast for federal candidates between 2002 and 2005, only 40 voters were indicted for voter fraud, according to a Department of Justice study outlined during a 2006 Congressional hearing. A 2007 study, The Truth About Voter Fraud, by the Brennan Center for Justice found that "by any measure, voter fraud is extraordinarily rare."

   There are four main ways in which states have tried to prevent people from voting:

   - Require voters to present government-issued photo ID in order to vote (11% of Americans lack such ID)
   - Require proof of citizenship in order to register to vote (7% of Americans do not have such ID)
   - Shorten early voting time frames (30% of all votes cast in the 2008 election were cast before Election Day)
   - Make voter registration more difficult by not allowing Election Day registration and make it more difficult for third-party (such as non-profit) organizations to register voters

   In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court heard a case called *Shelby County* v. *Holder*, which was a challenge to the constitutionality of parts of the Voting Rights Act. In June 2013, the Supreme Court struck down key components of the Voting Rights Act, freeing nine states (and other regions), mostly in the South, to change their election laws without advance federal approval. Less than 48 hours after the Supreme Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, six of the nine states that had been covered under the law's "preclearance" formula had already taken steps toward restricting voting. For example, North Carolina passed a number of measures including strict new voter ID requirements, eliminating same-day voter registration and shortening the early voting period by seven days. Texas immediately put into effect two voting rights laws—a voter ID law and a redistricting plan—that judges had found to be discriminatory one year before.

5. Provide copies of the "New York Times Room for Debate: Is the Voting Rights Act Still Needed?" and have each student select one to read. Each article represents a different point of view about the need for the Voting Rights Act. After reading the article, have each student discuss the article they read with a partner who read the same article. Allow for whole class questions and discussion.

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NOTE: If the Room for Debate articles are not the right reading level for your students, as an alternative have them read "Supreme Court Strikes Down Part of the Voting Rights Act" (NBC News/Politics). After reading the article, they should summarize the article and based on it, take a position as to whether they think the Voting Rights Act is still needed, using quotes and information from the article to support their opinion.

6. *(Optional)* For homework, or if time permits in class, have students write a three-paragraph essay that summarizes the author's point of view about the Voting Rights Act and the extent to which they agree or disagree with that opinion. For a more extensive writing assignment, have students conduct additional research about the Voting Rights Act and provide evidence and quotes from other sources that supports their point of view.

7. Display or distribute to each student a copy of the poem "Dreams" by Langston Hughes and read aloud. Explain that Langston Hughes was a famous African American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright and columnist who died in 1967.

8. After reading the poem, lead a whole group discussion using the following questions:

   - How did you feel while listening to it?
   - What metaphors are used in the poem?
   - What do the metaphors represent?
   - What do dreams represent in this poem?
   - What do you think the poem means?

9. As a closing, have students share their dreams for fairness, justice and civil rights.

Dreams

By Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

From Langston Hughes, *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. 1996). Poem included for educational purposes only.

Extension Activities

- Research on Voter Suppression Laws: Have students conduct further research on voter suppression laws in different states. Assign specific states to individuals or small groups of students and have them find out what voter suppression laws exist, which of these laws have been challenged in court, which have been overturned and what actions have taken place to change the laws. After conducting all of the research, create an infographic using a map of the United States as the graphic and insert relevant information in each state. This can also be done on large mural paper and displayed in the classroom or school. In addition, students can develop a public awareness campaign about voter suppression laws by creating print materials, using social media and making a public service announcement.

- Dreams Poetry: Many famous poets have written poetry about dreams. Following up on the Langston Hughes poem, have students find 3–5 other poems which use dreams as a metaphor. After reading the poems, have students write their own poems about their hopes and dreams. Students can illustrate the poems and publish them in a book or online.

- Biography: In small groups of 4–5 students each, have students create a biography book about an important person who was prominent during the Civil Rights Movement. As a class, develop 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. Students can select which group they will participate in and each student in the group should have an assigned part of the biography (e.g. introduction, early years, career, family life, important contributions, etc.) to write. The book can be illustrated and will then be put together and presented as a group.

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Using Metaphor to Convey a Message in "I Have a Dream Speech" #1

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. What metaphor(s) does Martin Luther King, Jr. use in the paragraph?

2. What do the metaphor(s) stand for?

3. What is the overall message of the paragraph and how is the metaphor used to convey that message?

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Using Metaphor to Convey a Message in "I Have a Dream Speech" #2

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. What metaphor(s) does Martin Luther King, Jr. use in the paragraph?

2. What do the metaphor(s) stand for?

3. What is the overall message of the paragraph and how is the metaphor used to convey that message?

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Using Metaphor to Convey a Message in "I Have a Dream Speech" #3

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. What metaphor(s) does Martin Luther King, Jr. use in the paragraph?

2. What do the metaphor(s) stand for?

3. What is the overall message of the paragraph and how is the metaphor used to convey that message?

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Using Metaphor to Convey a Message in "I Have a Dream Speech" #4

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. And there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. What metaphor(s) does Martin Luther King, Jr. use in the paragraph?

2. What do the metaphor(s) stand for?

3. What is the overall message of the paragraph and how is the metaphor used to convey that message?

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Using Metaphor to Convey a Message in "I Have a Dream Speech" #5

But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. What metaphor(s) does Martin Luther King, Jr. use in the paragraph?

2. What do the metaphor(s) stand for?

3. What is the overall message of the paragraph and how is the metaphor used to convey that message?

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Using Metaphor to Convey a Message in "I Have a Dream Speech" #6

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

1. What metaphor(s) does Martin Luther King, Jr. use in the paragraph?

2. What do the metaphor(s) stand for?

3. What is the overall message of the paragraph and how is the metaphor used to convey that message?

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Using Metaphor to Convey a Message Vocabulary Words

Defaulted: failure to act; inaction or neglect; failure to meet financial obligations

Degenerate: to fall below an acceptable or desirable level in physical, mental, or moral qualities; deteriorate

Desolate: barren or laid waste; devastated

Discontent: not content; dissatisfied

Discord: disagreement; difference of opinion

Gradualism: the principle of achieving some goal by gradual steps rather than by drastic change

Hallowed: regarded as holy or sacred

Invigorating: fill with life and energy; energize

Jangling: to produce a harsh, discordant sound, as two comparatively small, thin, or hollow pieces of metal hitting together

Legitimate: according to law; lawful

Luxury: a material object, service, etc., usually a delicacy, elegance, or refinement of living rather than a necessity

Magnificent: making a splendid appearance or show; of exceptional beauty, size, etc.

Manacles: shackles for the hand; handcuffs

Promissory: containing or implying a promise

Prosperity: a successful, flourishing or thriving condition, especially in financial respects; good fortune

Threshold: the entrance to a house or building

Tranquility: quality or state of being tranquil; calmness; peacefulness; quiet; serenity

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