Youth in Action: The Role of Young People in the Civil Rights Movement

**Topic:** Youth in the Civil Rights Movement

**Grades:** 4 - 6

**Time Required:** 2 - 3 class periods

**Goals/Rationale**
By fighting for racial justice through a variety of nonviolent actions, including letter-writing and mass demonstrations, young people made significant contributions to the struggle for racial equality. In this lesson plan, students examine primary source material to identify ways in which young people made an impact during the civil rights movement.

**Essential Question:** Can young people make a difference in achieving social, political, and economic change?

**Overview**
This lesson guides students to examine primary source material to identify ways in which young people made an impact on the struggle against racial injustice. The lesson can be presented as a stand-alone project but students will benefit from having prior knowledge about the civil rights movement. Ideally, the lesson would be part of a unit on the civil rights movement. The activities can be used to motivate students to explore *1963: The Struggle for Civil Rights* in more detail, especially events related to the lesson: Project C, the President's Address on Civil Rights, The Bill, and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

**Connections to Curricula (Standards)**

*National History Standards*

Standard 1: Historical Comprehension
Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation
US History Era 9
Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties.

*Massachusetts History and Social Studies Curriculum Frameworks*

*Grade 3: Civics and Government*
Give examples of the different ways people in a community can influence their local government.

*Grade 5:* Observe and identify details in cartoons, photographs, charts, and graphs relating to an historical narrative.

*Common Core State Standards: Anchor Standards for Grades K-12*
English Language Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

English Language Arts, Reading Standard 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

English Language Arts, Writing Standard 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Objectives
Students will:

- Examine a photograph from the March on Washington and reflect on the role of young people at that event.
- Read a letter to President Kennedy from a fifth-grade student to see how a young boy in Brooklyn, New York responded to events in Birmingham, Alabama.
- Analyze a document from the US Department of Justice about high school students who participated in demonstrations in Birmingham and reflect on the implications for the young people involved.
- Write a journal entry from the perspective of a young person in 1963 to demonstrate their understanding of how young people made a difference during the civil rights movement.

Historical Background:
Young people were at the core of the civil rights movement. Key organizations such as SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and CORE (Congress for Racial Equality) were comprised of students; the energy, courage, and willingness of young people to put their lives on the line enabled these groups to take bold, direct action against segregation and racial injustice. College students endured abuse at sit-ins across the country, and risked their lives as freedom riders and field workers who organized voter registration drives. In addition to the indispensable contributions of college students, school-age students participated in the struggle, too.

One of the most significant and dangerous examples of elementary, middle, and high school students contributing to the fight against segregation occurred in Birmingham, Alabama in May 1963 during what is now called the Children's Crusade. In April, Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth, leaders of the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), launched a campaign targeted at businesses, such as department stores and lunch counters: commercial establishments that accepted money from black consumers but did not afford them equal treatment. Their goal was to inspire large-scale demonstrations that would provoke mass arrests, filling the jails and forcing what seemed at the time an impossible transformation: the end of segregation in Birmingham. But Project C (for Confrontation) was faltering. Civil rights leaders were not able to convince enough black citizens to join the demonstrations. On April 12, 1963, King, Shuttlesworth,
and Ralph Abernathy purposefully defied a restriction by Police Chief Bull Connor, hoping their arrest would inspire others to take action.

Even with the arrests of these civil rights leaders, adults were still reluctant to demonstrate; they did not want to risk losing their jobs, rock the boat, or lose what privileges they had. James Bevel, an activist who had been enlisted by King to help the initiative, made the controversial decision to call on children to fill the streets to protest segregation.

On May 2, as many as 800 students, elementary-age to high school, were counted absent from Birmingham schools. They made their presence known as they rallied at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, singing, shouting slogans, and marching throughout the streets of Birmingham. More than 600 of these young protesters were arrested and jailed by the end of the day. The next day, more than double that number (over 1,500 young people) joined the demonstrations. The police and fire department met the young activists with force: German shepherds were brought into the crowds, threatening and biting protesters. Firemen using hoses with over 100 pounds of pressure knocked over the students. Anyone who watched the news that week or read a newspaper witnessed the brutality of the scene. It was a pivotal moment in American history: millions of Americans were no longer willing to tolerate segregation and other forms of racial injustice.

Up until that time, President Kennedy had been cautious in his approach to civil rights. He was reluctant to lose southern support for legislation on many fronts by pushing too hard on civil rights legislation. But on June 11, 1963, he took a bold stand. Earlier that day, Alabama Governor George Wallace had attempted to block two African-American students from entering the University of Alabama. The president federalized the Alabama National Guard and the governor finally stepped aside, allowing the students to enter the University. That evening, the president delivered an historic message: segregation and other forms of racial injustice must end and he would submit legislation to work toward that goal. Citizens of all ages and backgrounds, including elementary students, wrote to the president to express their opinion about what his administration should do to address the problem while others wrote decrying his speech and intentions.

Almost three months later, on August 28, 1963, over 200,000 people converged in Washington, DC to march for racial equality and promote support for the civil rights legislation. After months of demonstrations across the South, whites and blacks traveled from all parts of the country to show massive support for legislation to end segregation and to propose specific policies to improve racial and economic equality. Demonstrators of all ages joined the march. Photographs and film footage clearly show that these young people helped make the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom the largest peacetime demonstration in United States history up to that point in time.

Materials
(Note: See Document Interpretation section for more information on source material.)
Photograph of a sit-in held at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina (included at the end of this lesson plan.)

Photographs from the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, including one of three children near the Washington Monument

Video footage from the March on Washington

Telephone log documenting call from Assistant Deputy Attorney General Joe Dolan

Statement from Robert Kennedy, May 3, 1963

Letter to President Kennedy from Miss C. Rosen, fifth grade teacher in Brooklyn, New York

Letter to President Kennedy from Robert Adler, a student in Miss Rosen’s class

Response to Miss Rosen from Lee White

Graphic Organizer for Youth in Action (Handout 1)

Procedure

The lesson starts with an introductory activity during which students compare two photographs, one from a February 1960 sit-in at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina (photo is included at the end of this lesson plan), and one from the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom that took place on August 28, 1963. The discussion of the two photographs prepares students for the series of activities to follow. First, they will investigate sources concerning the Birmingham Children’s Crusade; next they will examine a June 19, 1963 letter to President Kennedy, and finally, they will investigate additional photographs and video footage of the March on Washington. By analyzing these historical materials, students can develop an understanding of the role young people played in the civil rights movement, as well as gain knowledge of key events that occurred in 1963.

Part One: Comparing Two Photographs

1. Have students examine the photograph of three children on the grounds of the Washington Monument and the one of four young men sitting at a lunch counter.

   Use the following questions to discuss their observations of each photograph:
   - What is going on? What do you notice?
   - Who is in the photograph?
   - What are the individuals in the photograph doing?
   - How are they dressed?
   - What else do you see in the photograph?
   - What might have happened before or after the photograph was taken?
   - What else would you like to know about the photographs or the people in them? How might you go about finding this information?

2. Ask students about similarities and differences between the two photographs. You may use a Venn diagram, either as a class or in small groups, to record similarities and difference in the two images.
3. Use the following questions to guide a discussion of their findings:
   o What do you think is the most important difference?
   o What is the most important similarity?
   o How does each photograph make you feel?
   o Which photograph do you think was taken first?

4. Provide information on each photograph from the Document Interpretation section of this lesson plan. Explain that the photographs are historical evidence and show that young people had a role in the civil rights movement. They will examine a variety of ways that young people contributed to ending racial injustice in the United States in the 1960s.

**Part Two: The Children’s Crusade**

1. Have students examine the Telephone Log from May 17, 1963. Refer to Document Interpretation for additional information about the source material.

2. Have students think about basic document questions. What kind of document is it? Who wrote it and why?

3. Use the following questions to guide a discussion of the document. Explain that the document has information about several cities and towns but that they will focus on the first section which is about Birmingham.
   o According to the source, what did students do?
   o How many students took part in the protests? How do you know?
   o How does the Birmingham School Board respond to their actions?
   o What are the possible consequences for students who participated in the demonstrations?
   o How many Negro students were absent on May 6? Where were the students?
   o What does the author or Mr. Dolan think the school board will do?
   o Why do you think so many students participated in the demonstrations? Why or Why not?
   o Do you think they should have to face consequences for skipping school? Why or why not?
   o Do you think they should have participated in the demonstrations?
   o To find out more about the demonstrations, have students read the introductory essay on Project C. The book, *We've Got a Job* by Cynthia Levinson, written for upper elementary and middle school students, provides an engaging, detailed account of the Children’s Crusade (citation can be found in the bibliography section of this lesson plan.)

4. Optional: Read and discuss Robert Kennedy's May 3, 1963 statement that includes the sentence “School children participating in street demonstrations is a dangerous business. An injured, maimed or dead child is a price that none of us can afford to pay.” Do they agree? Should young people be allowed to
participate in demonstrations? What happened to the young people who took part in the Children's Crusade? Have students imagine that it is May 1963 and they have witnessed the scenes of the demonstrations and police response in Birmingham, Alabama. Have them write a letter to the editor of the Birmingham News to express their opinion about children’s participation in the demonstrations.

Part Three: Writing to the President

1. Read the letter from Robert Adler, a fifth grade student from Brooklyn, New York.

2. Use the following questions to discuss the letter:
   o Who wrote the letter?
   o To whom is it written?
   o When was it written?
   o Where does the author of the letter live?
   o Why did the author write the letter?
   o What does the author of the letter want President Kennedy to do?
   o What does the letter reveal about the author?
   o Do you think the letter had an impact? Why? Why not?

3. Have students explore the site to find two civil rights events that occurred a week before the letter was written (Integration of the University of Alabama, President's Address on Civil Rights.) What affect might these events have had on the author of the letter?

4. What steps did Robert Adler and his classmates take to try to effect change, to end segregation?

5. Share information from the Document Interpretation section about the letter from Miss Rosen, Robert Adler’s teacher, and the response she received from Lee White, an advisor to President Kennedy. Miss. Rosen wrote a letter to President Kennedy and included Robert’s letter, along with 20 additional letters written by his classmates, to President Kennedy. (You can access transcriptions of letters by Miss Rosen and Robert Adler by selecting these documents in The Civil Rights Bill section of the website.) Lee White, an advisor to President Kennedy, sent a response to Miss. Rosen.

Part Four: The March on Washington

1. Have students review the photograph of three children on the grounds of the Washington Monument and their observations of the image. Explain that the image was taken on August 28, 1963, almost three months after the Children’s Crusade, and just over two months after Miss Rosen’s class wrote letters to President Kennedy following the June 11 integration of the University of
Alabama and the president’s Television and Radio Address to the Nation on Civil Rights.

2. Show students additional photographs from the March on Washington, particularly those that show the size of the crowd, and explain that they were taken the same day. You could also use a jigsaw strategy: students work in small groups and each group uses the guiding questions to help them examine a different photograph. Have each group share their observations with the whole class.
   - How does the information from these photographs help them understand what the children were doing that day?
   - What would it have been like for the children in the original photograph to have been there?
   - Why did so many people come? What did they want to achieve?
   - What do you think the children understood about their participation that day?

3. Watch the video footage from the March to see young people participating. (The first 45 seconds shows many young marchers singing and walking together).

4. Have students read the site’s introductory essay on the March on Washington to learn more about the event.

Assessment:

- Have students refer to the source material to complete the graphic organizer: Youth in Action. See Handout 1.

- Revisit the essential question: Can young people make a difference in achieving social, political, and economic change? Have students refer to the historical evidence in the lesson to discuss whether or not they think young people made a difference in the fight for racial equality. How did young people make a difference? What impact did they have? What changes occurred because of their participation?

- Have students write a persuasive essay on whether or not young people made a difference during the civil rights movement. Did their participation help the struggle for racial equality? The essay must include evidence from source material they examined in the lesson.

- Have students write a one-page (or longer) journal entry, drawing on information from at least one of the primary sources in the lesson and written from the perspective of a young person at the time. Possible perspectives include:
  - Robert Adler, or one of his classmates
  - A student who marched in Birmingham in May 1963
  - A child who participated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom
Journal entries should include the following:

- The young person’s name
- Age
- Where the person lives
- Why the young person participated or took action
- What impact the person hopes to have
- What s/he gained from the experience
- Any consequences the person will face because of the action

Extensions

- Have students research SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), key civil rights organizations with student leaders and activists.

- Have students imagine they are young people in 1963. Have them design a pamphlet to recruit young people to participate in an upcoming demonstration. What information do they need to include to make sure participants will practice nonviolence?

- As a class, identify an issue of concern. Have students research the issue and discuss actions they can take to address the issue. Use the following questions to help them create an action plan:
  - What is their concern?
  - What demand (or objective) can they achieve to address the concern?
  - What steps do they need to take to achieve their objective?
  - Who do they need to involve?
  - What individuals can help?
  - What action can they take?
  - Where will it take place?
  - How will it happen?
  - What role will each of them play?
  - When will the action take place? What is the timeline?
  - How will they know they achieved their objective?

Based on the discussion, design an action plan and monitor students as they implement it.

Document Interpretation

This photograph was one of many taken by the US Information Agency of Information on August 28, 1963 to document the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In an organizing manual for the March, it was recommended that children under 14 years of age not attend, and those over 14 should be accompanied by an adult. However, as evidenced in the photograph, elementary-age children joined the massive demonstration. The children in the photograph are clapping and appear to be singing with the crowd assembled at the Washington Monument. The image captures the excitement of the moment as throngs of people eagerly anticipate the beginning of the mile-long walk from the Washington Monument to the rally site at the Lincoln Memorial. Access additional photographs of March on Washington in the downloadable materials section of the lesson plan.

**Photograph of Four Students staging a Sit-In at a Woolworth’s Lunch Counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, February 2, 1960.**

On February 1, the day before this photograph was taken, four students from the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina took direct action to protest segregation at the lunch counter at Woolworths in Greensboro, North Carolina. The students in this photograph are (l. to r.) Joseph A. McNeil, Franklin E. McCain (both of whom participated in the first day of the sit-in), William Smith and Clarence Hudson. Many students joined the protest over the next six months until the lunch counter was officially segregated. This bold action inspired similar sit-ins across the country; it is seen as a pivotal event in sparking nonviolent direct action during the civil rights movement. (This photograph is included in the lesson plan. A smaller version appears on the timeline section of the website.)

**Telephone log, dated May 17, 1963.**

Dated May 17, 1963, this document provides unique historical evidence about the students who participated in demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama during the first two weeks in May 1963. It includes data on the number of students who were absent from school during the nationally televised protests and the actions the Birmingham School Board planned to take against those who participated. The log documents several civil rights-related updates that were reported that evening, including news of a busload of children from Birmingham en route to New Jersey to attend a rally, a rumor that students from a white high school are planning an attack on the “negro section” of a Birmingham bowling alley, and possible actions in Baltimore, Maryland and Wilmington, North Carolina. *The information could stimulate further discussion but the focus for this lesson plan is on the first entry under the 8:35pm heading about possible consequences for students who “skipped classes to take part in massive racial demonstrations.”*

**Statement from Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, May 3, 1963.**

On May 3, the day after hundreds of young people filled the streets of Birmingham in massive demonstrations, Attorney General Robert Kennedy (who is also President Kennedy’s younger brother and trusted advisor) issued a statement on an increasingly dangerous situation. He clearly affirms the injustice that African Americans faced at that time and asserts that continuing to deny equal rights to all citizens will escalate the crisis. However, he is critical of holding mass demonstrations to solve the problem, especially if
children are involved, and states that it is the responsibility of city leaders to find a peaceful solution.

**Letter from Miss C. Rosen to President Kennedy dated June 19, 1963.**
Miss C. Rosen, a fifth-grade teacher at P.S. 16 in Brooklyn, New York, sent President Kennedy this correspondence, along with a packet of twenty-one letters from her students. Rosen explains how her students were motivated to write the letters after making connections between her social studies curriculum about slavery and “current events discussions about the troubled South.” (Access a transcription of the letter by selecting the document in The Civil Rights Bill section of the website.) It is interesting to note that Miss Rosen received a response from Lee C. White, Assistant Special Counsel to the President, dated August 5, 1963. White was responsible for coordinating many civil rights activities in the Kennedy administration, including responding to related correspondence from citizens and government staff. Miss Rosen and her students did not receive a unique letter written just to them. White's response is a form letter that was sent to several student groups. The letter does, however, inform Rosen of the President Kennedy's stand on civil rights: “This Administration is taking steps to assure the rights of its citizens and to eliminate discrimination.” In the letter, Lee White mentions that he is enclosing a publication which noted at the bottom of the letter as “Enclosures: P’s Message to Congress.” (You can access the President’s Special Message to Congress on Civil Rights in The Civil Rights Bill section of the website.)

**Letter from Robert Adler to President Kennedy, dated June 18, 1963**
This is one of the twenty-one letters sent to the president from fifth-grade students in P.S. 16 in Brooklyn, New York. Robert expresses his concern about events in Alabama and poses this question to the President Kennedy: “The Negroes in Alabama want integration, so why don’t you make the white people mix with the Negro people?” It is interesting to learn that it was Robert who had the idea of writing to the president. The entire packet of letters can be accessed from John F. Kennedy Library digital archives in John F. Kennedy's Presidential Papers, White House Central Files, Human Rights: 2: Equality of Races: General, 1 August 1963 (Folder 4 of 4) [http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHCSF-0364-004.aspx](http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKWHCSF-0364-004.aspx)

**Bibliography for Students**


> An excellent history of the August 28, 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Haskins traces the civil rights events leading up to the March, gives background information on key leaders of the event, and relates the experiences of people who were among the 250,000 participants.


> Told through the stories of three young students who participated in the Children’s Crusade, this engaging account makes the complicated events of
Project C accessible to upper elementary and middle school students. The author includes a variety of perspectives and includes important details not found in other accounts. Photographs and documents allow students to examine historical evidence from that time.

*Based on interviews with adults who were children and teen-agers during the civil rights movement. These first-person accounts paint a vivid picture of living with segregation and what it was like to participate in sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, and other demonstrations.*

*In this history of the modern Civil Rights Movement, the author focuses on the monumental events that occurred between 1954 and 1968. Many significant people are profiled, and many historical photos are included.*

*March on Washington*
*Articles focus on King's role in key events in the Civil Rights Movement. Includes games, information on music of the era, and a bibliography.*

See the Teachers section of *1963: The Struggle for Civil Rights* for a complete bibliography for young readers.
Youth in Action: The Role of Young People in the Civil Rights Movement

Use the primary source material from our study to complete the chart below.

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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type of Action</th>
<th>Age of Young Person</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Goal</th>
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# Youth in Action: The Role of Young People in the Civil Rights Movement
(Possible answers.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type of Action</th>
<th>Age /Grade</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Goal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photographs and video footage</td>
<td>March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom</td>
<td>Elementary School age</td>
<td>Washington, D.C.</td>
<td>Support civil rights legislation, end segregation, fight for economic equality</td>
<td>Largest peacetime demonstration up to that point in U.S. history. The television and newspaper/magazine coverage had a positive effect on people in the US and the rest of the world who saw ordinary Americans protesting peacefully for racial equality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letter from Robert Adler and his teacher, Ms. Rosen</td>
<td>Letter to the President</td>
<td>5th grade</td>
<td>Brooklyn, New York</td>
<td>Asked President to &quot;make white people mix with the Negro people&quot;. Organized class to write letters.</td>
<td>Made views known. President (or advisors) hear where people stand. Received response. Developed leadership skills.</td>
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