

The Rosa Parks "Myth": A Third Grade Historical Investigation

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Revisiting a Page of History

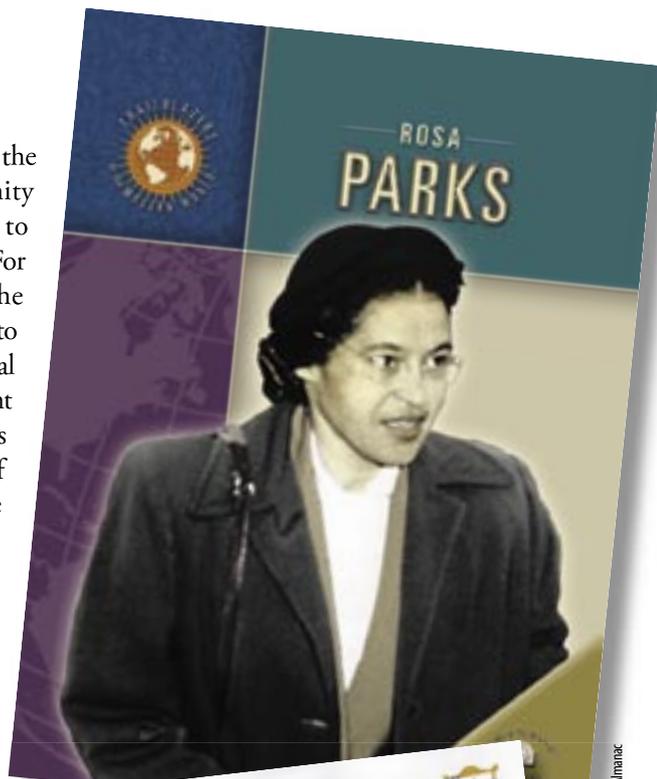
Why use Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott as a case study of the Civil Rights Movement? The choice is a natural one for the elementary grades because of the wide variety of developmentally appropriate primary and secondary sources now available on the topic. The case is especially powerful because the story of Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on the segregated bus is firmly rooted in American social and political consciousness. But in their effort to simplify history for young readers, have the authors of trade books and textbooks brushed over essential aspects of that event?

In an essay "The Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott Revisited," author and social critic Herbert Kohl describes why investigating the historical details of that boycott could lead students to a radically different understanding about the nature of civic responsibility and action.¹ Kohl first repeats a typical version of the Rosa Parks story using some popular children's trade books and textbooks published from 1976-1991. According to Kohl, there is now a myth, embedded in our national cultural consciousness and perpetuated in children's trade books, that Rosa Parks was merely a tired seamstress who, in spontaneous outburst borne of frustration, refused to give up her seat to a white commuter. Kohl then provides facts about Parks' life experience that are not generally known and that cast a different and revealing light on her famous moment of protest.

Rosa Parks had a long background of service and commitment to promoting the rights of African-Americans, and was

part of an ongoing effort by the African-American community in Montgomery, Alabama, to resist Jim Crow segregation. For example, she was among the first women in Montgomery to join the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and was soon elected the secretary of the Montgomery chapter. She also worked closely with E.D. Nixon, who was then president of the Alabama NAACP.

Rather than being a shy, anonymous seamstress who suddenly decided that she had "had enough," Rosa Parks was well known to the Montgomery African-American community for her long-standing activism against segregation. Since the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, Rosa Parks had worked tirelessly on desegregating the Montgomery city schools. In December of 1954, a few months before the boycott, she attended an interracial meeting on school desegregation at the Highlander Center in Tennessee, a center of community organizing known to activists throughout the South. At that meeting, Rosa Parks indicated that she intended to soon take action



World Almanac

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Discovering the History of Rosa Parks Using Several Sources

A. EXPERT TEAMS

Meet with your expert team for 20 minutes. Each expert team studies one book on the topic of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Your goal on the expert team is to work together so that each member becomes thoroughly knowledgeable about that one book:

1. Take turns reading one page of the book aloud until it is finished (if you are listening to a tape, just listen and take notes).

2. Try to answer this question as a group: “Why did Rosa Parks decide not to give up her seat that day on the Bus?” As you discuss the problem, each student should play one role:

- **FACILITATOR:** Make sure each person has an equal voice in the group.
- **SCRIBE:** Record and summarize the comments of members of the group.
- **MANAGER:** Make sure the group is following the directions of the assignment. Also help to make sure group members understand one another’s comments.
- **CONDUCTOR:** Keep track of the time and makes sure that the group stays focused to finish the assignment.
- **COMMUNICATOR:** Talk with the teacher if the group has a question.

3. Individually, complete a history frame, using your book as the source of your information. If you don’t know what should be written in any part, leave it blank.

B. HOME TEAMS

Return to your home team and meet for 10 minutes. Members of the home team compare and contrast the information they have gathered from all five books. Your goal back at your home team is to work with your teammates to put together the most accurate story of Rosa Parks that you can, using information from various books.

1. Members should choose a role (from among those listed above).

2. Then, discuss the question “Why did Rosa Parks decide to resist that day on the bus?” using all of the information available to the group from all of the books studied. Try to come to an agreement on a group answer to that question. If you can’t come to an agreement, write down the conflicting answers in a sentence of two.

3. Individually, complete a second history frame, this time using knowledge from all of the books (from everybody in the group) as your source of information.

Sample History Frame

Title of event: _____

Problem or goal: _____

Participants: _____

Where and when: _____

Key episodes or events: _____

Outcomes: _____

Theme/Lesson/“So What?” _____

against segregation.² Over the next few months, it was the coordinated efforts of E.D. Nixon and Rosa Parks that made her brief protest so effective.

When the story of Rosa Parks is described as a community effort to overthrow injustice, claims Kohl, it is a story that all children can relate to. Not everyone will rise to national media attention as a hero or heroine, but everyone can imagine him or herself as a participant in a boycott, joining with many other people to make justice happen at one specific time and place. It is this kind of empowerment that Kohl considers both lacking and most needed for children.

Beginning the Lesson

We observed Jennifer Morrow teach a 50-minute lesson about Rosa Parks to her third grade class at Coral Ridge Elementary School in Miami, Florida.³ Before the class began, Morrow placed five pictures of Rosa Parks (copies of book jackets) around the classroom, each framed by a sheet of construction paper of a different color—blue, green, yellow, orange, or red. As students entered, she played a tape of popular music from the 1950s. Once students were seated, she asked them to pair up and interview each other for five minutes using several questions:

- “Was there ever a time when you took a risk to stand up for what you thought was right or fair?”
- “If so, what was going on at that time?”
- “What made you decide to say or do something about the unfair situation?”

A few students volunteered to describe their partners’ experiences to the whole class. (It is not necessary for every pair to report to the class at this point.)

After students had returned to their seats, Morrow led the class in a transition to the body of the lesson by likening historians to detectives. She stated, “Historians are like detectives because they find clues about the past and paste together these clues to create the most likely story of what happened. Your job as historians is going to be to find clues about the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott,

Sit-Down Protester: Experience Wanted

In 1955 E. D. (Edgar Daniel) Nixon, president of the Alabama NAACP, interviewed Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old black woman, who had been arrested for violating the city’s segregated bus seating ordinance, but, believing she was not mature enough to withstand the pressure, decided against using Colvin for a test challenge.

When Montgomery NAACP secretary Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955, in a similar incident, Nixon rushed to the city jail to post her bond, putting up his home as security. Over the next few days, Nixon and other local leaders conferred with Parks and decided to use her as a test case. Nixon was an organizer of and became the treasurer of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the organization formed to run the Bus Boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr. [then minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery] was elected its president.

Quoted from “Biography for E. D. Nixon,” www.newsouthbooks.com/resources/mia/nixon.htm.

and put together the most accurate story that you can.”

At this point, Morrow led the class in a five-minute discussion to uncover what students already knew (or thought they knew) about Rosa Parks. (In this school district, it is likely that third graders will have heard a description of Parks’ famous protest in an earlier grade.) She gave each student a History Frame graphic organizer on which to summarize the class discussion and jot down tentative answers to the key questions—who, what, when, where, and why.⁴

Critical Reading

For the next portion of the lesson, Morrow followed a modified jigsaw model. First, students gathered into groups of five, creating five home teams. Morrow visited the home teams one by one, giving each team member a different colored instruction sheet—blue, green, yellow, orange, or red. Each sheet had printed on it identical directions for the whole activity.

Students then regrouped into expert teams, which met for 20 minutes. To find their expert teams, students went to different areas of the classroom, matching the colors of their instruction sheets with the colors of the frames holding pictures of Rosa Parks mounted on the walls. To ensure participation from every member of each group, Morrow described specific roles on each instruction sheet (see the examples on page 6). Each student was

required to take notes about the basic events and people surrounding Rosa Parks’ protest as described in the book at hand.

During the next ten minutes, each group sat in a circle and read aloud its assigned book. Students took turns reading one page at a time, passing the book around the circle. At the end of the reading, the expert group discussed this question, “Why did Rosa Parks decide to resist an unfair rule that day on the bus?”

Then students returned to their home teams to share what they had learned with their teammates for ten minutes. Morrow asked each home team to answer the same question, “Why did Rosa Parks decide to resist an unfair rule that day on the bus?” based on what the various team members learned in their expert groups. Students individually completed a second History Frame graphic organizer, but this time they had information from five different books to draw upon.

Finally, Morrow asked the class whether their initial understanding of the Rosa Parks story changed throughout the activity. She led the class in a discussion about the boycott, the evidence presented in the various books, and the process of seeking an accurate account of Rosa Parks’ role in that event.

Indications of Learning

In this population of third graders, many students knew at the outset of the lesson that Rosa Parks was an African-American

Selected Books for Young Readers about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

We suggest using these books on Rosa Parks for the lesson plan described here. We have annotated each title with regard to authenticity, sequence and scope, reading level, and child-friendliness. Other texts, stories, and historical narratives could be used to accomplish the goals of this lesson.

Celsi, Teresa. *Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott*. New York: Millbrook Press, 1991.

This book provides an overview of oppression and racism in the South and a description of Rosa Parks's experiences as a child through adulthood in such a society. The book is useful in that the reader learns about experiences that prepared Parks for her role in the bus boycott, such as her involvement in the NAACP, the Freedom Train, the Highlander Folk School, and the struggle to end school segregation.. Terms such as "KKK," "segregation," and "boycott" are carefully defined, and historical photographs are provided. The scope of the book is excellent because it begins with a history and concludes with hopeful speculations about the future. In addition, other great black leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson are incorporated into the story, demonstrating how these leaders worked together in the struggle for civil rights. This is a sincere and mature history of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Greenfield, Eloise. *Rosa Parks*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1975.

This is one of the oldest children's biographies on Rosa Parks still in print, with an afterword written in 1995 that puts Parks' life in the context of the struggle of African Americans, from the time of slavery to the present. The narrative is simple, both in language and thought. It starts by relating that on December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks decided to ride the bus after work because "she was tired." Greenfield continues, on the first page, by saying that when the bus driver told her to move, Mrs. Parks knew "all of a sudden" that she was not going to give up her seat. This wording implies that her resistance was a spontaneous personal inspiration, rather than an action premeditated by Parks and other social activists.

Nobleman, Marc Tyler. *Rosa Parks*. New York: World Almanac, 2002.

This is an accurate and full account of the life of Rosa Parks, from her birth in 1913 to her present day involvement with the foundation

that she and Elaine Eason Steele founded: the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development (www.rosaparksinstitute.org). Events in Rosa's life are contextualized in terms of concurrent events in the world and in the life of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. The writing and the photos are both very engaging. The pages are filled with sidebars of primary source documents, such as a truncated version of the flyer announcing the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the address by Martin Luther King, Jr., given on the night of December 5, 1955, after the first day of the Boycott. Nobleman includes a useful glossary of terms related to Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and a timeline of key events in Rosa Parks' life up to the dedication, in 2000, of the Rosa Parks Library and Museum at Troy State University in Montgomery, Alabama.

Parks, Rosa and Jim Haskins, *I Am Rosa Parks*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1997.

This is Rosa Parks's autobiography for grades 1-3. The history and depiction of racism are somewhat narrow, focusing mainly on rules and treatment of blacks on buses. The sequence is confusing, going back and forth through Parks' life. The writing and the illustrations are very elementary, but the conclusion does describe Parks's continued involvement in the civil rights cause. The book is on tape so that struggling readers can listen and follow the text.

Ringgold, Faith. *If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1999.

This picture book tells the story of Rosa Parks in a light-hearted fashion. The images are bold, colorful, and generally very child-friendly, and the biography is the story of a proud, defiant, and dignified woman who is loyal to her family, respected by her peers, active in the NAACP and the local black community, and determined to make a difference in the lives of her fellow black citizens. There is a fictional story-within-the-story about "Rosa Parks' talking bus." The teacher may want to

provide some guidance through this section of the book so that children can differentiate between the real story and the fiction.

Weidt, Maryann. *Rosa Parks*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group, 2003.

This recent book on Rosa Parks tells an accurate, unadorned version of Rosa Parks' life generally and her involvement in the civil rights movement. Her grandparents taught her early on to stand up for herself. For example, as a ten-year old, she picked up a brick when a boy threatened to hit her because she was black. Unique among these biographies on Parks, this one has a list of websites on Rosa Parks and a select bibliography of works for children and adults. Weidt also provides a timeline of major events in Rosa Parks' life. The illustrations, a combination of framed black-and-white photos and comic book-like pictures, seem an odd mixture of styles. This is the only awkward aspect of an otherwise thoughtful rendition of Rosa Parks.

Background for the Adult Reader

Brinkley, Douglas. *Rosa Parks*. New York: Viking Press, 2000. (Also as an audiocasette.)

Brinkley's rendition of Rosa Parks' life is a helpful source for teachers interested in gaining a solid knowledge of her background. The author intentionally balances the events of her life, relaying the message that Parks was involved in much more than the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He gives a thorough background of her life and detailed explanations of circumstances that led to her being involved, to this day, in religious communities, human rights efforts, and political life. While there are no pictures to tie to the accounts of her life, the writing is quite creative and enjoyable. Overall, the book impresses upon the reader the idea that ordinary citizens can be effective social activists. The life of Rosa Parks certainly demonstrates that point.

woman “who got arrested for not giving up her seat on a bus to a white person.” By and large, students thought that she refused to get up that day because she was tired. Students were unclear as to how long ago this incident occurred, but knew that at the time it happened, some of the laws in the United States were not fair to African-Americans. Most students also knew, before reading and discussing the various books, that the laws changed sometime after this incident, and that along with Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. had a hand in making the laws more equitable for African-Americans in the South.

All of the home teams detected differences in the accounts of the protest as presented in the five books. Differences included an inconsistency in the number of days between Rosa Parks’ arrest and her trial; the question of when she first met the bus driver (James Blake); and the reason given for why she refused to give up her seat on Blake’s bus. In this class, one of the books stated that she resisted because she was “tired,” while the other two books stated that “she was tired of Blacks being treated differently.” To explain discrepancies like these, students generally thought that the author had forgotten what had happened because it was so long ago. One child wondered why several of the authors didn’t ask Rosa Parks herself for the “real story,” since she is living. The consensus in the class was that people kept changing the story as it was retold through time, akin to the telephone game. The class was thus primed for a discussion in the next day’s class of how history gets written.

Conclusion

By comparing multiple perspectives of the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, students experience first-hand how different published accounts of the same event may contain different

Boycott: Careful Strategic Planning

The connection between Rosa Parks’ arrest and the boycott is a mystery in most accounts of what happened in Montgomery. Community support for the boycott is portrayed as being instantaneous and miraculously effective the very day after Mrs. Parks was arrested. Things don’t happen that way, and it is an insult to the intelligence and courage of the African American community in Montgomery to turn their planned resistance to segregation into a spontaneous emotional response. The actual situation was more interesting and complex ... The boycott had been planned and organized before Rosa Parks was arrested.

Quoted from Herbert Kohl, “The Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott Revisited,” in *Should We Burn BABAR? Essays on Children’s Literature and the Power of Stories* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 43-44.

information. By the end of the class, students come to see Parks’ story as emblematic of a community’s fight for equal rights, rather than as the isolated protest of a heroine who acted alone out of a spontaneous sense of frustration. The concluding section of the History Frame graphic organizer—“Theme/Lesson/So What?”—asks students to state what the take-home message or theme of the story might be. After the lesson on Rosa Parks, the vast majority of students wrote concluding statements about equality. One student said she learned from the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott that “people should have equal rights no matter what color they are,” and another understood that “the lesson in this story is to treat people equally.” These are powerful statements about the fight for social equality.

Research needs to be conducted to determine whether third-graders who participate in different lessons using multiple perspectives can internalize the broader understanding that Herbert Kohl posited in his essay. We do not yet know whether third grade students take away an image of themselves as social activists from this lesson. But many students in Ms. Morrow’s class, in their summary statements and

spoken remarks about the lesson, showed some evidence of a gain in individual social awareness. As one student said, “The lesson was that Rosa Parks never gave up, so you should never give up either.”

Notes

1. Herbert Kohl, *Should We Burn BABAR? Essays on Children’s Literature and the Power of Stories* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 30-57.
2. *Ibid.*, 37.
3. This lesson plan was developed as a model for social studies methods courses for pre-service undergraduate and graduate teachers at Eastern Michigan University and Florida International University (FIU). We would like to thank Jennifer Morrow, elementary teacher and a graduate student at FIU, who implemented the lesson in her third grade classroom at Coral Ridge Elementary School in Miami, Florida.
4. A free, reproducible PDF of the History Frame Graphic Organizer is available at www.readingquest.org. Click on Strategies, scroll to History Frames/Story Maps, and click on “print history frame.” Raymond C. Jones, the developer of this ReadingQuest site, is an assistant professor of social studies education at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC.

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