

# Our conversation with you about “He had a Dream”...



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On August 28, 1963, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Fifty years later, it’s worth thinking about what children should know, beyond the memorable lines from the iconic speech, about struggles for equality and justice in America.

The speech is memorable for good reason. It brought King and his message of non-violence to a nationwide (and worldwide) audience. It was part of the March on Washington, where over 250,000 people gathered in the nation’s capital, bringing greater attention to the Civil Rights Movement. It’s no accident that the speech was delivered at the Lincoln Memorial, as King reminded Americans that, on the one hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, there was much work yet to be done on racial equality in America, work that would require the force of the federal government. Indeed, the speech made Congress and the President move faster on the Civil Rights Act, which passed the following year in 1964.

But it is also possible to focus too much on the one speech and miss the importance of the courageous work of thousands that led up to and followed the speech. Presidents don’t tend to take stands in opposition to entrenched powers without extensive pressure from the populace. We are reminded of the story about black labor leader A. Philip Randolph meeting with President Franklin Roosevelt. Randolph described to FDR the condition of black people, of working people in America. Reportedly, FDR listened, then replied, “I agree with everything you have said. Now, make me do it.”

In addition, it is worthwhile to examine the linkages between the problems of prejudice and discrimination that King spoke of in the 1963 speech, and the triple evils of Racism, Poverty and Militarism that he began to speak of two years later. How often do our national celebrations of, and classroom discussions on, King’s birthday focus on the latter two issues? For example, how relevant in 2013 are the words from his speech at Riverside Church in New York, on April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination in Memphis, “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”?

The articles in this issue all eschew a facile “What’s your dream?” approach. Authors present lessons and materials that

examine lesser-known parts of the speech, other defenders of justice (well known and lesser known), as well as a variety of perspectives on the nature of justice.

In her article “Reading Closely and Discussing the ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech,” Elizabeth S. Brown highlights the importance of an in-depth examination of the language of lesser-known parts of King’s famous speech as a vehicle for connecting historical circumstances and current conditions of discrimination. In a sidebar, Susan Goetz Zwern briefly reviews the picture book *I Have a Dream*, illustrated the Kadir Nelson.

In “Bringing Civil Rights Figures to the ‘Peace Table,’” Mary Ledbetter, Sherry L. Field, and Michelle Bauml demonstrate that ten and eleven year olds can come to the classroom Peace Table as civil rights characters, representing different perspectives, and engage in thoughtful discussions.

Shari Dorfman and Ruth Rosenberg’s piece, “Empowering Our Students to Make a More Just World,” shows how a unit of study on picture book biographies about “Defenders of Justice” can help fifth graders understand that those who fought for equal rights over our country’s history included women and men of varied backgrounds, ethnicities, and creeds.

“Somebody Had to Do It: School Desegregation Stories, 1954-63” is a brief description by Millicent E. Brown of her work to gather the memories of those who participated in the struggle to integrate public schools following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. The Pullout, “Millicent’s Story: School Desegregation in South Carolina, 1963,” is Dr. Brown’s recollection of her own experience, at age fifteen, of being one of the eleven African American students in South Carolina to integrate formerly all-white public schools. Students can read for themselves this narrative, which is presented in a large typeface.

Ryan Hughes’ article, “Why Historical Fiction Writing? Helping Students Think Rigorously and Creatively,” shows how a thorough study of historical fiction picture books on the civil rights movement can help third graders compose their own original, content-rich stories.

Mary Battenfeld’s book review, “Round and Round Together: The Civil Rights Movement Comes to an Amusement Park,”

chronicles the years-long struggle to desegregate Gwynn Oak Amusement Park, near Baltimore, Maryland. The book's author, Amy Nathan, relates a lesser-known, though nonetheless extraordinary, example of the fight for racial equality during the 1950–60s.

Black leader and intellectual W. E. B. DuBois memorably said, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” Unfortunately, the problem is still with us in the twenty-first century and begs some questions about how the next generation is being educated about it. Perhaps these questions can frame grade level or faculty meetings:

- How do you help your students to understand the distinctions between prejudice and discrimination? Between civil disobedience and criminal law-breaking? Between being willing to die for a cause and being willing to kill for a cause?
- To what extent do you focus on the role of the federal government in effecting change with respect to civil rights? On the role of individual citizens?
- Have you ever used excerpts from other eloquent King speeches; e.g., Riverside Church speech in 1967:

“Drum Major for Justice,” given just before his death in 1968? How do students’ reactions to those speeches differ from their reactions to his 1963 “I have a Dream” speech?

- To what extent have you examined struggles for civil rights in the North?
- Are there fights for injustice that you would not address at the elementary level? Why?
- To what extent do you examine stories of “extraordinary, ordinary people” who fought, and continue to fight, against injustice?
- To what extent do you employ oral histories when studying civil rights?
- To what extent do you use newspaper articles of the time when studying civil rights?
- What perspectives do you think need to be added to your classroom to provide a more complete picture of struggles for civil rights in America?
- To what extent do you have your students write historical fiction? How much time do you devote to the process?

We look forward to the thoughtful conversation around struggles for rights at NCSS Connected. Please join us!

—Andrea and Jeannette

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