

Reading Closely and Discussing the “I Have a Dream” Speech

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In his “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered on August 28, 1963, before tens of thousands at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned a diverse America of integrated classrooms and communities—in contrast to the racial segregation of the Jim Crow era.¹ Fifty years after King’s speech (and 49 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964), de jure segregation has ended in the United States; however, not enough progress has been made in terms of de facto segregation and discrimination. Today, the overall racial and ethnic diversity of America (which has increased) splinters when we examine statistics describing where we live, who holds the top-level professional positions, or who sits beside us in the classroom. “It would be wrong to assume that our nation has now realized Dr. King’s dream and created a society where race no longer matters. [A 2009 report] concludes the opposite: the United States continues to move backward toward increasing minority segregation in highly unequal schools.”²

I taught fourth grade at an urban public elementary school in northern New Jersey, where, despite de facto residential segregation,³ students sat with peers of different racial, economic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. The school’s status as a district charter school required that it recruit students from throughout the district. As a result, the school’s enrollment reflected the district’s racial demographics: 32 percent white, 19 percent Asian, 22 percent black, 18 percent Hispanic, and 9 percent biracial. Similarly, the school was integrated socio-economically, with 34 percent of its students eligible for free or reduced lunch. As is the case in many classrooms, my students had varied resources, abilities, skills, and strengths. However, unlike many American classrooms, my students embodied many of the attributes of Dr. King’s dream. He envisioned a day when “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” My classroom held a diversity of students who worked cooperatively together and formed friendships outside their own socio-economic groupings and racial backgrounds.

In preparation for the school’s celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, I developed an integrated language arts and social studies one-week unit of study on the civil rights movement, where I reinforced reading, writing, and speaking skills. The overarching goals for the five-day lesson on Dr. King’s speech (described below) was for fourth graders to understand that, historically, and currently, discrimination has been and continues to be an obstacle to many groups and that progress against discrimination has been the result of mobilization by citizen activists. As a result of the lesson, students were expected to:

1. Define segregation and discrimination;
2. Identify historical or current evidence of discrimination or segregation;

3. Make meaning of a text, using sensory details, vocabulary, and figurative language; and
4. Make personal connections to an historical text through speaking and writing.

Choosing a Text

I chose a 14-paragraph selection of King’s landmark “I Have a Dream” speech and handed it out to the class. For ease of students’ reading and note taking, I distributed the speech printed in 18-point typeface, with double-spaced lines. The selection began, “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.”

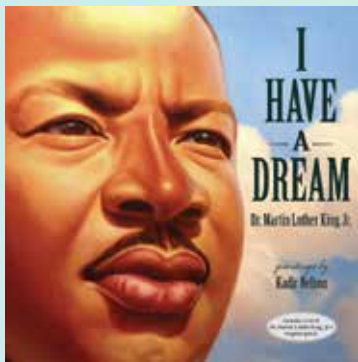
I felt that these metaphors would provide students with an historical context of de jure racial segregation and the efforts of the civil rights activists who questioned the unfair laws and demanded change. I hoped that this selection of text would inspire my students to make connections and build knowledge of the civil rights movement and its nonviolent strategies. I ended the selection with the famous line: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Similar to the first line chosen, this line describes the rationale for ending discriminatory behavior and highlights the essential elements of equality, fairness, and justice.

Over the course of five days, I engaged students in an analysis of the text where they: 1. identified and defined rich vocabulary, 2. created visual representations of figurative language and sensory details, 3. questioned the text, 4. made text-to-self connections, and 5. responded to the text in writing. Each day’s activities assisted the students’ comprehension of the messages embedded within the text. The use of these strate-

I Have a Dream

by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Paintings by Kadir Nelson
Schwartz & Wade Books, New York, 2012. 40 pages

Reviewed by Susan Goetz Zwirn



This large-format book, illustrating an excerpt from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most renowned speech, includes a CD of the original speech in its entirety. Of course, anyone can read the speech online, but Kadir Nelson's illustrations make reading and viewing this book with children an extremely worthwhile experience.

How audacious for an illustrator to try to capture the power of this speech through painting! Yet, Caldicott-winner Kadir Nelson

succeeds in capturing the strength and verve of King's speech, stimulating both emotions and a desire for action. Nelson has selected to illustrate the last section of the speech, which expresses the hopes of a people in the most positive and glowing terms. He did not illustrate the sad description of the poverty and brutality (which many in the audience were continuing to experience in 1963) from the first part of the speech, but chose instead to create images consonant with the soaring hopes of the closing. He also elected to emphasize the inclusive nature of King's message by portraying a diverse audience of black and white people, true to photographs of that event.

The opening page portrays not the famous speaker but the spectacle of the enormous crowd, which reinforces scholar and civil rights activist Cornel West's statement, "... there was a context that produced [King].... There is no King without a movement, [but] there is a movement without King. King is part of a tradition."¹ In the second illustration, the image of Lincoln-in-white-marble looms over the speaker, taking up over two thirds of the page. Again, in this choice of composition, Nelson emphasizes that King is part of a tradition and cause which Lincoln advanced.

In the pages that follow, Nelson uses two-page spreads to juxtapose broad views of the crowd that day with close-ups of white and black children, young adults, and King's face. There is power transmitted in Nelson's shifting of proportion and scale—from an enormous crowd, to a Georgia O'Keefe-like close-up of black and white hands clasped in friendship, and then to a close-up of King's energetic face. This movement from the personal to the public, and from the individual to the crowd, facilitates a sense of excitement and engagement.

We get to peer over King's shoulder to be a part of this day, to see what he saw. We are drawn into his message of hope and unity through Nelson's sure artistic hand.

Notes

¹ Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993), p. 19, quoted in M. Vail, "The Integrative Rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr.'s I Have a Dream Speech," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1, Spring (2006), 51–78.

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gies provided students with a variety of reading comprehension skills, as well as opportunities for different students to shine, based on their different strengths.

Day 1: Rich Vocabulary

I handed out the excerpts of the speech to the students. We began our analysis with a search through the text for vocabulary words; students wrote down three new, challenging, or interesting sounding words in their notebooks. They chose words, such as: momentous, segregation, desolate, sweltering, fatal, invigorating, autumn, tranquility, threshold, degenerate, inextricably, fatigue, persecution, and righteousness. When students shared their vocabulary words, we first read the sentence in which the word was located. Volunteers offered suggestions for possible meanings and explanations based upon the context clues or prior knowledge. Pairs of students then created a model sentence (and illustrative drawing) that used the term to present to the class and to place on the social studies word wall.

Student learning and engagement benefited greatly from the class's diversity of skills and knowledge. I grouped students in mixed-ability pairs. In each pair, a student who held more advanced word attack and vocabulary skills would teach his or her partner a new strategy for making meaning of a new word. Students had trouble using the word "persecution" as a noun, so I suggested that they use the verb "to persecute." The students drew a group of white men bothering an African American man at a bus stop. Although the image did not capture the full concept of the term, the students began to understand that "to persecute" means "to bother or oppress." For the term, "tranquility," students wrote: "When segregation was ended, African Americans had tranquility." Although, the words were challenging for fourth graders, they worked together to make sense of the meanings. By examining students' own sentences and illustrations, I was able to assess their true understanding of their assigned terms, and they were better able to learn the words through the use of their peers' language and age appropriate definitions.

Day 2: Sensory Details and Figurative Language

The following day, as I slowly read pre-selected excerpts of the speech, I directed students to draw pictures in their minds of the most powerful image they “saw.” When they opened their eyes, I directed them to draw the image. Walking around the room, I saw images of children holding hands, people in prisons, and some images of more abstract concepts, such as peace signs and rainbows. Interestingly, this activity inspired a different group of students to speak up than had the vocabulary activity.

We discussed the importance that sensory details and figurative language play in a text. I chose four metaphors and handed them out on large paper to four groups of students. The metaphors were

- Now is the time to rise from the desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice;
- Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the rock of brotherhood;
- This sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality;
- Let us not satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

Students then interpreted the meaning behind their assigned metaphor, using markers to circle words and explain their implications. First, students focused on the verbs. For example, one group circled “lift” and chose synonyms: elevate, rise, improve, better; another group circled “drinking” and wrote: consume and take. Next, I asked the students to explain why Dr. King chose to use the metaphors instead of a more literal description. One student responded by saying, “it gives me a picture in my mind.” I asked her to explain what she meant, and she said, “When I read a metaphor, it helps me see the story.” Another student added, “Dr. King could talk about really awful things, but using nice words.” I added that a metaphor is a tool that can also be used to express one’s point or argument in a compelling and convincing manner.

Day 3: Questioning the Text

We began the third day by re-examining the 14 paragraphs of text. I read the text, while the students followed along and put stars by passages that made them think of questions, which they narrowed down to two profound or thought-provoking questions. I modeled for the students how to make a question deeper by showing them that starting with “why” or “how” (as opposed to “when” or “what”) allows for a variety of, and often deeper, responses. Similarly, starting with “when” or “what” may only provoke a one or two word response. Questions could be directed to Dr. King or to the class. Students’ questions included, “Why is there racism?” “How can we end racism?” “How did people work to end discrimination?” “How can we help?” These questions then provoked a deep discussion about both history and current day events.

Day 4: Text-to-Self Connections

Students reviewed identified sections of the speech where they could make connections from the text to our society today. The students who participated in this exercise were not the same ones who shone during the vocabulary activity. A student who read independently on a second grade level, benefited from the previous lessons, during which I’d read the speech aloud. An African American student raised his hand and shared his connection, “My uncle experienced discrimination from the police in the [housing] projects. They followed him around, and he didn’t do nothing.”

Next, a pensive girl of Tibetan descent, who rarely spoke up, and preferred to write her thoughts in her journal, raised her hand to share, “Tibet is ruled by China. They do not allow my family and others to be free. Two months ago, my aunt was in a protest, like those during the Civil Rights Movement, and she was ...” The girl looked next to her friend of African and Caucasian descent, who used a hand gesture to encourage her to continue. The student quickly blurted out, “They killed her.” The class froze, as tears slid down their classmate’s face. This was the first time that I, or any adult at the school, had heard this. I asked the student if she needed to go for a walk, assuming that sharing this with her class emotionally drained her, but she shook her head, “No.”

I turned to the rest of the class, and saw seven more hands in the air—seven more students with connections to the text. I wondered how to proceed but decided to continue with the sharing. The next student, a boy with parents of Indian descent began, “In India, no offense Ms. Brown (my family is English), the English did horrible things to our country. Now, there is terrorism in India, and my relatives live in fear.” He continued, comparing Gandhi to Dr. King, in terms of how they both responded to injustice.

Next, a student whose father is Nigerian shared that she had recently attended a Broadway performance with her father about a Nigerian musician, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, whose music was politically motivated. Fela’s house was attacked, and his mother murdered by the military.

Last, a white student, who struggled academically, raised her hand to discuss her mother who was from South Africa. Although the student could not complete her thought, I assisted her as she shared about apartheid in South Africa. She did not know Nelson Mandela’s name, but talked about him and his efforts. Dr. King’s speech provoked a dynamic and powerful classroom discussion, as students made comparisons to their own (or their family’s) experiences with discrimination, state-sponsored violence, and nonviolent protest.

This classroom discussion introduced complex cultural, political, and geographic concepts, such as colonial regimes, militarism, government-sponsored segregation, and de facto discrimination. Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, I did not treat my students as empty vessels;⁴ rather, knowing their strengths, I developed and facilitated activities and used the activities to assist my students in making powerful connec-

tions. Due to the personal and emotional nature of the students' stories, all of the students were engaged and listening. In addition to sharing cultural stories, students were sharing "cultural capital."⁵ Typically, student's experiences are limited by their social settings and networks. However, a diverse classroom with engaging discussions can provide multiple opportunities for students to share their experiences and perspectives with one another. Additionally, students gain cultural tools (verbal and nonverbal communication) that can be used to communicate with those outside their cultural or social networks.

Day 5: Writing

On the last day, I gave students the writing prompt, "Why is discrimination wrong? Please choose an example of discrimination from your own life, or from Dr. King's speech. Then, use two quotes from the speech to support your argument." Students' intended audience was their peers. During the lesson, I reviewed the criteria for the assignment and shared the writing rubric.⁶ I modeled how to find a quotation that supports an argument or a reason.

Through their analysis of Dr. King's speech, students were able to make personal connections to inequities in society and the need for change (as crystallized in King's message). The conversation from the previous day provided students with multiple examples of discrimination, so they began writing without much hesitation. Students wrote about each other's life examples and asked for permission to speak with the original presenters to check their facts. Most of the essays also highlighted a heroic person from these examples who had made a sacrifice for a more just world.

Interestingly, it was easier for students to provide examples of discrimination than it was for them to define the term, "discrimination." Most students explained that discrimination is when people are treated unfairly, but they did not all specify that it was a result of differences in people's race, class, ethnicity, or religion. In describing that discrimination is wrong, many of the students described the importance of equality and treating all people the same. One student explained that Dr. King's dream should not be a dream, but a reality.

Comprehending and Connecting

Before reading Dr. King's speech with my class, I wondered how my students would react to hearing about America in the 1960s, how aware they were of discrimination and injustice. After discussing the speech and reading their essays, I was impressed by students' insights about current discriminatory behaviors and inequities. Within my classroom, students interacted with their peers of different races, religions, cultural identities, financial means, and values. These interactions provided students with small examples of misunderstandings, as well as tolerance, conflict resolution, and new awareness.

Not all classrooms are as diverse as mine. However, my students' discussions made me realize that even students as young as nine and ten are fully capable of comprehending and

connecting to examples of discrimination from diverse ethnic, religious, and racial groups. If I were teaching this lesson to a more racially and economically homogeneous class, I would provide students with examples, similar to the ones my students shared, which can be found in children's literature, articles, songs, primary source texts, or short videos.⁷

An examination of diverse examples of discrimination, both historical and current, can expand students' awareness of the forms discrimination can take and the effects it can have on a variety of people. This awareness can empower students to ensure that they do not contribute to discriminatory behavior but, rather, take actions to resist it.

I suspect that my students and I would not have heard each others' stories of discrimination had we not immersed ourselves deeply in the language of Dr. King's speech. In other elementary classes, students will have different stories, which can be supplemented by contemporary examples of injustice, struggle, and reform around the world and in the United States. Close reading of this primary source text that students thought they already knew enabled them to develop their vocabulary, strengthen their reading skills, gain historical insights, and make connections between historical circumstances and current conditions. Investing time on a supposedly well-known piece of writing yielded insights about discrimination and injustice—then and now, at home and abroad—that could last long beyond that one week. ●

Notes

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream" (1963), www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf
2. Gary Orfield, "Reviving the Goal of an Integrated Society: A 21st Century Challenge." (Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, January 2009), civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education, p. 1; See also Gary Orfield and C. Lee, "Racial Transformation and the Changing Nature of Segregation" (Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2006).
3. Residential segregation is seen where neighborhoods are sharply divided by (for example) race or ethnicity. This can be the result of illegal discrimination, such as "redlining" by mortgage officers, or more subtle forms of racism and exclusion.
4. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1987).
5. P. Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (London: Sage, 1977), 10; A. Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); "Cultural capital," provides students with a currency, or tools, that can be used to communicate and engage with specific social or cultural communities. Segregation and isolation limit the amount of cultural capital students possess. Accordingly, in a diverse setting, students can learn about others' cultural systems and gain cultural capital, which enhances their perspectives and access to other communities.
6. The rubric gave highest marks for (1) a clear definition of the term discrimination; (2) a strong example of discrimination supported by two or three details; and (3) two reasons explaining why discrimination is wrong, with citations from the "I Have a Dream" speech.
7. Teaching Tolerance (www.teachingtolerance.org) is an online resource where teachers can "find thought-provoking news, conversation, and support for those who care about diversity, equal opportunity and respect for differences in schools."

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