

# Bringing Civil Rights Figures to the “Peace Table”

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The nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality.”  
—Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

M.S. Trikosko/Library of Congress



Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X waiting for press conference in March 1964.

If we could turn back the hands of time, and somehow invite the participants of a historic era to “stop the action” and sit down together at a negotiating table, what might they say to one another? If you were in my (M.L.’s) classroom, you would have caught a glimpse of such an event through the eyes of 10 and 11-year-old students. Six-year-old Ruby Bridges talked and listened to an equally young, white classmate. Rosa Parks held a discussion with the driver of her Montgomery city bus. Also at the table were Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, comparing the benefits and risks of peaceful versus more militant protests. The conversation was remarkable.

In my fifth grade classroom at The University of Texas Elementary School (UTES), a unit on the Constitution sets the stage for a year of integrated learning. The very next unit of study focuses on the civil rights movement. Teaching UTES students, who come from diverse backgrounds, means exposing them to many points of view so that they may form their own opinions and learn to express them effectively.<sup>2</sup>

## Social Emotional Learning

There is an expectation at UTES that each teacher demonstrates best practice instruction and explicitly teaches and integrates social emotional learning (SEL) into the general curriculum. SEL skills enable children to be socially competent citizens within their school environment and help build an overall positive climate in their school. At this school, SEL skills for the beginning of the school year include empathy with respect, listening with attention, being assertive, predicting feelings, and taking other’s perspective.<sup>3</sup>

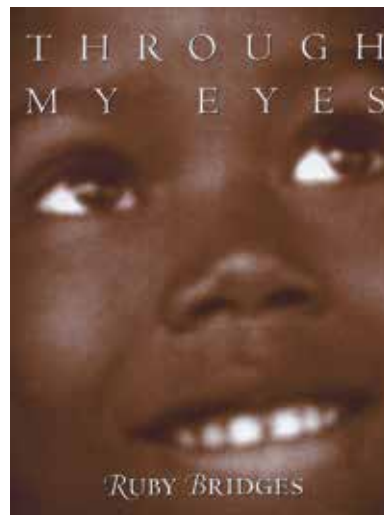
The Committee for Children, a nonprofit working globally to promote children’s social and academic success (<http://www.cfchildren.org>), publishes Second Step, the SEL curriculum used by UTES. Second Step Lessons include vocabulary, a situational video lesson, guiding questions, and interactive exercises for students. The lyrics to one of the students’ favorite Second Step music videos teaches them to “Stop, name that feeling, calm down.” By combining explicit lessons, opportunities for role-play, classroom discussions, and music videos, students learn and practice the social emotional skills that can help create a positive classroom and school environment. SEL lessons integrate well with social studies and ELA, particularly in our study of the civil rights movement. Many of the activities described here are based on methods described in Second Step.

## Body Language

I use a Second Step SEL lesson that discusses passive, aggressive, and assertive body language, actions, and words, as I help students negotiate interactions with their peers in the classroom. First, I ask students to become sculptors and sculptures, modeling these three types of communication with their bodies rather than words. Then we make an historical connection, as we analyze Rev. King’s “Integrated Bus Suggestions,” which he delivered to the black community in Montgomery in 1956, following the end of the successful 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott. King



Ruby Bridges appears on an episode of the 2013 series "The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross" hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Visit [www.thirteen.org/13pressroom](http://www.thirteen.org/13pressroom).



and Glenn Smiley prepared these behavioral guidelines to facilitate peaceful riding following the U.S. Supreme Court order to desegregate the city's buses (HANDOUT).<sup>4</sup>

Initially, I don't disclose the names of the authors. I ask the students to describe the difference between a "suggestion" and an "order or command." As

students read and discuss the introduction and each "bus integration suggestion," they pose questions and make comments such as, "Who could the author be?" "It sounds like a preacher," "How could you sit there and let someone curse you, or hit you and not hit them back?" "It sounds like our Star Steps [in the school's SEL curriculum] when it says, 'If you cannot take it, walk. ...'" Students make connections between bullying situations they've observed in their own lives and the intimidation that occurred on buses during Jim Crow. They realized that it might be difficult to practice the self-restraint (and tolerance of other people's bad behavior) that's recommended in the guidelines for bus riders.

## SIDEBAR: Examples of Poems in Two Voices

### Two Men: Martin and Malcom by Aaron and Malcolm

I am	I am
A lover	A fighter
A peaceful protester	A restless rebel
A minister	A minister
A Christian	A Muslim
My heart was stopped by a bullet	My heart was stopped by a bullet
I stood for equal rights	I stood for equal rights
I have a dream	I have a fist
I am	I am
Martin Luther King, Jr.	Malcolm X

### Ruby and Pam by Bunmi and Ariel

I was six years old when something big happened in my life	I was six years old when something big happened in my life
I am a beautiful	I am a beautiful
Ebony	White
Girl	Girl
I believe colors don't matter	I believe colors do matter
My mama taught me to pray for people Experience comes for a purpose	My daddy taught me to judge people, Until one day I met Ruby, and Daddy couldn't take people yelling at her any more
I integrated my school	I integrated my school
I am Ruby Bridges.	I am Pam Johnson.

# How to Behave: “Integrated Bus Suggestions”

December 1956, Montgomery, Alabama

On 17 December the Supreme Court rejected city and state appeals of *Browder v. Gayle* and ordered Montgomery’s buses desegregated. Three days later, when the court order arrived by mail, [we] held two mass meetings to formally call the bus boycott to an end and prepare for the next day when the protesters would return to the buses. After several weeks of well-attended nonviolent training sessions, Rev. King and Glenn Smiley prepared these guidelines for mass distribution.

This is a historic week because segregation on buses has now been declared unconstitutional. Within a few days the Supreme Court Mandate will reach Montgomery and you will be re-boarding integrated buses. This places upon us all a tremendous responsibility of maintaining, in face of what could be some unpleasantness, a calm and loving dignity befitting good citizens and members of our Race. If there is violence in word or deed it must not be our people who commit it.

For your help and convenience the following suggestions are made. Will you read, study and memorize them so that our non-violent determination may not be endangered...

1. Not all white people are opposed to integrated buses. Accept goodwill on the part of many.
2. The whole bus is now for the use of all people. Take a vacant seat.
3. Pray for guidance and commit yourself to complete non-violence in word and action as you enter the bus.
4. Demonstrate the calm dignity of our Montgomery people in your actions.
5. In all things observe ordinary rules of courtesy and good behavior.
6. Remember that this is not a victory for Negroes alone, but for all Montgomery and the South. Do not boast! Do not brag!
7. Be quiet but friendly; proud, but not arrogant; joyous, but not boisterous.
8. Be loving enough to absorb evil and understanding enough to turn an enemy into a friend.

GOD BLESS YOU ALL.  
THE MONTGOMERY IMPROVEMENT  
ASSOCIATION  
THE REV M. L. KING, JR., PRESIDENT  
THE REV. W. J. POWELL, SECRETARY



African American and white children on a school bus, riding from the suburbs to an inner city school, Charlotte, North Carolina in February 1973. (W.K. Leffler/Library of Congress)



## Peacemaking in Real Time

I want students to employ the same kinds of strategies that they learn in their SEL lessons and from King's suggestions for peaceful integration with each other. I led a discussion about our own fifth grade Peace Table. Students generally use the Peace Table when two or more individuals need to discuss an issue and work out differences or misunderstandings. They are taught to follow a "Peace Table Protocol," which requires participants to be calm, respectful, assertive (not passive or aggressive), to listen carefully, and to show empathy. Next, I invite students to role-play typical fifth grade conflicts being discussed and resolved at the table. For instance, if a student hears a rumor or has a disagreement with a classmate, he or she may invite the people involved to the table to discuss it openly and peacefully, to clear up misunderstandings.

Students bring these skills, which they have begun to practice with each other, to our historical peace table. Students brainstorm a list of people in history whom they would like to see talking "at the table." Teams of three or four students select two historical figures. They role-play people who hold different points of view about civil rights, with one team member acting as mediator. Expectations for students' interactions during this role-play are "Be assertive. Listen with attention. Have empathy. Be respectful."

## The Spoken Word

This past school year, peace table discussions occurred between Ruby Bridges and an adult, white protester of integration; Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X; Rosa Parks and the municipal bus driver; and— from another era of history—Thomas Jefferson and King George. The dialogue between Rosa Parks and her bus driver was polite and honest. Rosa listened as the bus driver said he was just enforcing the law, and he listened as she told how unfair it was for her to give up her seat to a white man. Some of the conversations were uncomfortable; all were civil, honest, and respectful. Students agreed to disagree, but they agreed to talk again. The conversation between Dr. King and Malcolm X was also illuminating and provided evidence that the students had a basic understanding of both figures. For example, when Dr. King commented that peaceful protests are the best way to influence public opinion, Malcolm X replied, "If that were so, why are so many black brothers and sisters being hurt?" Dr. King calmly agreed, saying, "It's true. Many have suffered. That is why we have to set an example for our children."

## Writing Poems in Two Voices

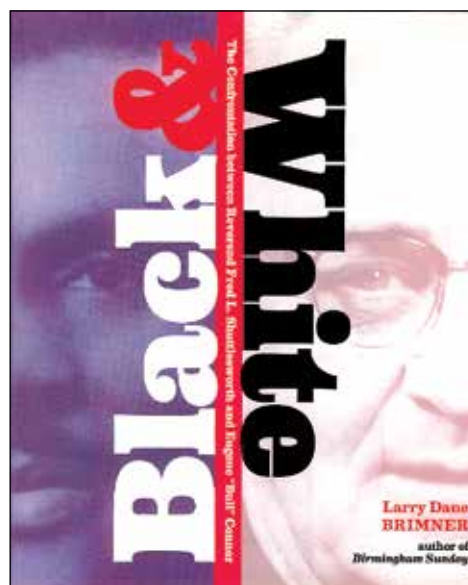
Finally, I asked students to write "poems in two voices." In this activity, two people whose perspectives would be vastly oppositional write a dialogue together. Working in pairs, students use their knowledge about different perspectives in the civil rights movement, some of which came out during the peace table discussions, to create their poems in two voices (SIDEBAR, page 10).

The combination of SEL skills and the knowledge of the

different perspectives about the civil rights movement equip students to develop empathy for the variety of people and issues they have discovered in the past and will encounter in the future. They'll soon be citizens who can choose to create a much larger "peace table" that could include neighbors, co-workers, jurors, fellow citizens, and people from other lands. They might be prepared to live one of Rev. King's Integration Suggestions, "Do not be afraid to experiment with new and creative techniques for achieving reconciliation and social change."<sup>75</sup>

### Notes

1. King Jr., Martin Luther, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958/2010), p. 215.
2. University of Texas Elementary School (UTES) is a public charter school with the University of Texas at Austin and serves as a research-based demonstration school for the College of Education at UT Austin. UTES was established in 2003 to serve at-risk, historically underserved children in the East Austin community. Of the 300 Pre-K through 5th grade students at UTES, 68% are Hispanic, 18% are African American, 13% are White, and 1% Asian. About 60% are economically disadvantaged. Our school demographics change dramatically from year to year, reflecting shifts in the local community. Visit [www.utelementary.org](http://www.utelementary.org).
3. Committee for Children, Scope and Sequence, Fifth Grade. Second Step: Skills for Social and Academic Success (2011), [www.cfchildren.org/Portals/0/SS\\_K5/K-5\\_DOC/K-5\\_Scope\\_Sequence\\_SS.pdf](http://www.cfchildren.org/Portals/0/SS_K5/K-5_DOC/K-5_Scope_Sequence_SS.pdf).
4. "Integrated Bus Suggestions" by the Reverend M.L. King, Jr., President of the Montgomery Improvement Association (1956), [mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/primary-documents/Vol3/19-Dec-1956\\_IntegratedBusSuggestions.pdf](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/primary-documents/Vol3/19-Dec-1956_IntegratedBusSuggestions.pdf).
5. This quote appears in a part of the 1956 document not reproduced in the hand-out. Students can view the entire document at the URL cited in note 4, above.



To learn about these two historical figures (Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth and Eugene "Bull" Connors), upper elementary students might listen to parts of this book, a secondary level (grades 7-12) Carter G. Woodson Book Award winner in 2012.

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