Grassroots Activists and the Three Branches of Government: *Key Players in the Civil Rights Movement*

Elizabeth Brown and Linda Silvestri

Only one-third of Americans could name all three branches of government; one-third couldn't name any. —Guardian of Democracy Report, 2011¹

In order to understand the complex workings of the three branches of American government, young citizens need early exposure in the elementary years to hands-on lessons that include real life examples and opportunities for students to apply what they have learned. To that end, we designed a fiveday, inquiry-based unit for fourth grade students, with examples of each branch of government in action during the civil rights movement. The lessons were guided by two compelling questions: How did grassroots activists influence members of the three branches of government to end segregation? How did members of the three branches of government react to activists' actions?

Over the course of the unit, students visited different learning stations; two of the stations provided students with opportunities to conduct research using children's literature and the Internet. Students' research was used in a culminating project in which students created a diagram in the form of a tree (supporting the three branches of government and members of each branch), as well as a lawn (where grassroots activists and their civic organizations worked to propel their government into action). This research-based approach to learning is aligned with the Common Core ELA research standards² and the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards, which states,³

By the end of grade 5, individually and with others, students [will be able to] gather relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, structure, and context to guide the selection.

One of the goals of our unit was for students to understand that reforms are made through the hard work of many people—from grassroots activists to the members of each branch of government. In order to emphasize the diversity of individuals involved in the Civil Rights Movement, each student was assigned to study an influential, sometimes lesser known, person from the civil rights movement (TABLE 1). After researching this individual, students presented their findings to the class and created either a leaf (representing a member of a branch of government) or a blade of grass (representing a grassroots activist). The tree and surrounding scene that students created illustrated the powerful effect that activists had on moving each branch of government to end segregation through executive orders, judicial decisions, and the creation of new laws.

Over the course of the unit, students began to realize how the movement depended upon the collective actions of the many people, not merely upon the actions of one branch of government, or of one individual. According to the C3 Framework, "rich social studies teaching ... offers students opportunities to investigate [questions] more thoroughly through disciplinary [civics, economic, geographical, or historical] or multidisciplinary means."⁴ Our unit integrated civics, history, and language arts. The integration provided students with the opportunity to make deep connections between the disciplines.

Learning Goals

We were concerned that students sometimes copy facts about the three branches on a picture of a tree without understanding how the three branches of government interact or why the three branches have separate powers and responsibilities. Instead, we wanted students to learn about the workings of the branches in a real-world historical context. Thus, our goal was for students to analyze how members of the three branches of government and grassroots activists worked together to end racial segregation in the United States.

The learning stations that we designed required students to gather relevant information from multiple sources and explain, using evidence, how their assigned individual worked with

Table 1 Three Milestones in the Civil Rights Movement (Teacher's Key)

	Brown v. Board 1954	Little Rock Nine 1957	Civil Rights Act 1964
Activists, Their Organizations, and Their Actions	NAACP* lawyer Thurgood Marshall argues the case of five families who have experienced discrimination in five different states. Also, Oliver Brown, Barbara Rose Johns, and John A. Stokes	President of the Arkansas NAACP Daisy Bates recruits students M. P. Beals, M. Brown, E. Eckford, E. Green, G. R. Karl- mark, C. W. LaNier, T. Mother- shed, T. Roberts, and J. Thomas	Joseph McNeil, a leader of lunch-counter sit-ins. Ella Baker was a key activist over five decades, largely working behind the scenes. Diane Nash and Bob Moses were young leaders in SNCC**
Branches of Government, Officials, and Their Actions	Judicial: Chief Justice Earl Warren leads the U.S. Supreme Court, which decides that "separate but equal" (Jim Crow) laws are unconstitu- tional. This overturns the <i>Plessy v.</i> <i>Ferguson</i> decision of 1896.	Executive: President Dwight Eisenhower orders the U.S. Army to protect black students for an entire year. Earlier, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus had ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the black students from entering.	Legislative: U.S. Senator Everett Dirksen (Republican from Illinois) and others lead the debate in con- gress to guarantee basic rights for all Americans. (Also, Senator Michael Mans- field)
Books	A Picture Book of Thurgood Marshall by D. Adler The Girl from the Tar Paper School: Barbara Rose Johns and the Advent of the Civil Rights Movement by T. Kanefield	Cracking the Wall: The Struggles of the Little Rock Nine by E. Lucas The Power of One: Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine by D. B. Fradin	The Civil Rights Act of 1964 by Robert Mayer Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down by A. Pinkney Child of the Civil Rights Movement by Paula Young Shelton
Websites (Vary by reading levels)	Americanhistory.si.edu/brown www.streetlaw.org/en/landmark/ cases/brown_v_board_of_ education #Tab=Background	www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/ social_issues-july-deco7- littlerock_09-25 www.history.com/speeches/ eisenhower-intervenes-in-little- rock-crisis	www.history.com/topics/black- history/freedom-summer www.google.com/cultural institute (Search on "The Civil Rights Act of 1964")

*NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

** SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

government to end segregation. All activities were aimed at enabling students to grapple with the unit's compelling questions.

Day 1: Introducing the Three Branches of Government

We administered a pretest at the beginning of our unit; it revealed that students had very little knowledge of the three branches of government. Most students could not name more than one branch of government, nor were they able to describe the job of each branch of government. In answer to the prompt, Name the three branches of government, students' responses included: "Barack Obama, Ben Franklin, and Michelle Obama;" "Democrat, politician, and Supreme Court;" "CNN, FBI, and CIA." Clearly, there was some confusion on the matter.

Given how little students knew about the three branches, we opted to show a brief video clip on Brain Pop to introduce the roles of each of the branches and provide students with a foundation for the unit. After watching the video, we had students brainstorm a list of government officials, and we shared the terms, senator, representative, and justice. Next, we assigned pairs of students a government official and asked them to categorize which branch the official would represent. This activity required a great deal of teacher support. Students were provided with an opportunity to re-evaluate their responses on their pre-assessment and write down the names of the three branches of government and an example for each.

Day 2: Reading Aloud and Building a "Tree with Branches"

Young children, like many adults, can find the concepts of democracy and government daunting, because they seem abstract and disconnected from real life application. Narrative picture books can be a good resource to build students' knowledge about American government.⁵ Evelyn Coleman's *White Socks Only* provides a sense of Jim Crow segregation. It's an appropriate narrative for fourth grade students, as the story is told from a child's perspective. Prior to reading the book, we defined and discussed some key vocabulary terms. Other picture books

recommended in the Carter G. Woodson Award list or the Notable Social Studies Trade Book lists could be used to provide a similar overview for students.6***

When asked to define "segregation," one student said, "Segregation is when people couldn't do things because of the color of their skin." We explained that, to try to end segregation, activists challenged the laws that allowed it to exist.

When we asked students to define the word "activist," they said, "active," "help," and "hippie." Liz defined the term activist as "one who reacts to a problem and works diligently for a solution; often, an activist may need to work for years or even an entire lifetime to fight to change an injustice." Liz explained that *White Socks Only* would help to illustrate how an activist challenged an unfair rule or law; the book provided a great opportunity to introduce the unit's compelling questions. During the reading, one student asked why segregation existed. Liz explained, "Before segregation, there was slavery and, although the law changed and made slavery illegal, unfortunately, some people's attitudes and thinking did not change with it. Many people still felt that African Americans, and other groups, were not as important as whites, and this mindset was used to justify state segregation."

After reading the book, we asked students to identify an activist in the story. One student identified the little girl who stood up to a white man, while another student added, "really [all the Black people in the story] were activists because they all took off their shoes and drank from the whites-only water fountain." We asked students if they knew of other examples of grassroots activists who worked during the Civil Rights Movement; students shared the names, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Rosa Parks, and Jackie Robinson. We asked students what George Washington had in common with the others, and one student said, "He was brave" and another student said, "He made our country." We then distinguished between activists pushing for change in government and members of government reacting to the change.

To illustrate the complexity of the three branches of government metaphor, we introduced a five-foot tall tree made of brown paper. When Linda asked students to identify the problem in the story, they agreed that the problem was how to end segregation. Linda wrote the words "Ending Segregation" on the trunk of the tree and explained that this was just one of many goals of the civil rights movement and that each of the three branches of government worked to end segregation in different ways. Together we labeled each of the three branches (executive, legislative, and judicial) on the tree and discussed each branch's "super" power. Finally, we showed students the blades of grass and discussed how grassroots activists can access members of all three branches to persuade them to make changes.

Days 3 and 4: Visiting Learning Centers

We assigned students either a grassroots activist or a member of government, and explained that they should view the civil rights movement from that person's perspective. Each of the assigned individuals was involved in one of three events: *Brown v. Board of Education*, The Greensboro Sit-in, or the desegregation activities of the Little Rock Nine.



Students were to visit five learning stations: Name that branch puzzle, Illustrated Timeline, Vocabulary & Writing, Internet Research, and Story Book Research. (Some of the worksheets for those stations comprise the **PULLOUT** that follows this article.) Students were to pretend they were detectives, collecting clues to discover how the three branches of government and grassroots activists worked to end segregation.

Book Research: Because students did not have strong background knowledge in either the civil rights movement or the government, we used a series of picture books at different reading levels to build their knowledge. (See the books listed in TABLE 1, p.14). Students were encouraged to read their books independently and answer questions about their individuals, using information gleaned from the story. How did your assigned person help to end segregation? Is your person a member of government or an activist? What branch does he sit in or work with? What do members of this branch do?

Higher-level readers were given much more independence with this activity, while struggling readers required more teacher support. Students wrote a short description of what their individual did in the civil rights movement and identified the branch associated with the individual and event. For example, one student wrote: "Thurgood Marshall is in the Judicial Branch and helped end segregation by fighting all his cases so he could make a point that segregation is a bad thing he did cases like *Brown v. Board of Education.* Thurgood was forceful, winning 24 of 33 cases, including *Brown v. Board of Education.*"

Internet Research: Students researched the assigned events and individuals. Search engines appropriate for upper elementary students include Middle Search Plus, Primary Search, Searchasaurus, and World Book Online. (See also the recommended free websites listed in **TABLE 1**, p.14). Students were encouraged to find at least five new facts about their individual's role in bringing about an end to segregation. This station was the most difficult for students to complete. Many wanted to research their individual's birthday, as they had recently written biographies, but we had to remind them that their research should focus on the questions asked in their guide: Describe the event. How did the event help to end segregation? What steps were taken by a grassroots activist or member of government to end segregation? What branch of government did he or she influence?

Preparation: For homework prior to this activity, students were assigned a close reading of a short informational text that discussed each branch of government in greater depth. In class, students reread the article, using a highlighter to identify the roles of each branch, key members, and main physical locations (Capitol, Supreme Court, or White House). Next, they used this information to help piece together a puzzle, which included a three-column chart about the workings of the three branches of government.

When they finished, students could flip the puzzle over to reveal a second image of a tree with three branches, each labeled as one of the branches of government and the leaves, displaying key members of each branch (e.g., president, senator, justice). After completing the puzzle correctly, students used the information gathered from the activity to fill out their own tree organizer.

We encouraged students to discuss the puzzle and work together. They shared information and asked compelling questions, such as, "If the President signs a bill into a law, isn't he also in the legislative branch?" Using the image, Liz pointed to the diagram on the puzzle and asked, "How do the branches interact with each other?" One student replied, "They balance one another," and Liz asked, "What does balance mean?" Another student replied, "They have equal power." When a student said, "I thought the Legislative branch was located in the Senate, not the Congress," Liz clarified, "Congress is a term that includes both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Both the Senate and the House are housed in the Capitol building.

Vocabulary: At the vocabulary station, students had to use at least 3 of the following words—*legislative, executive, judicial, change, Constitution, segregation, equality, fairness*—to write a reader's response to the book, *White Socks Only.* The prompt asked, "If you were a young African American child living in America during the time of *White Socks Only,* how would segregation have made you feel? Write a journal entry about your life." Students found this station very engaging, and their responses varied. Some students focused on their feelings of sadness and anger; interestingly, many students wrote about what they would have done to challenge the status quo. One student wrote:

Since I am Already African American I have a good view. Life would be a.... NIGHTMARE! Segregation would mean that I wouldn't know anybody in the grade (except _____).... I wouldn't care about the laws that our country without equality has. In fact, I'd sit in all stuff that's for whites. In fact, I would also be one of the people who end it.

While we appreciate that students were able to empathize and connect to the story, in hindsight, we might add, "What might you have done to stand up for the cause of ending segregation?" This question encourages students to be reflective and think deeply about the importance of people's actions and how they, although still children, might make a difference.



Illustrated Timeline: At this station, students read an informational text paragraph on each of the three events, and then summarized and drew a picture of each to demonstrate their understanding. The timeline also provided an opportunity for students to visualize how long it took each branch, driven by activists, to achieve a solution. We talked about the relative time that each of the branches took to make change, but it became apparent that an in-depth discussion of this topic would require some pretty complex understandings (e.g., filibuster, overturning Supreme Court decisions) that we determined were beyond the scope of our objectives.

Day 5: Putting "Foliage" on the "Tree"

Students' information was presented in a culminating project where they illustrated the actions that individual activists and members of government took to end segregation, through the legislative branch's creation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the judicial branch's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and *continued on page 17*

GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS from page 16

the executive branch's intervention in Little Rock. The class met on the rug to discuss the assignment. Students added their summaries about their assigned historical figures to either a blade of grass or a leaf, depending on whether their figures were activists or members of a branch of government. The leaves and blades were used to dress the bare tree we had hung on the wall at the start of our unit. Liz asked students, based on their research, whether their individual was an activist or a member of government, and most students accurately identified their individual's involvement in the movement.

To aid students in writing their summaries about their historical figures, we gave them graphic organizers that asked questions about how the person helped to end segregation, the connection to a branch of government, and an adjective that described the person. Linda also shared two models of completed informational texts with the students, an executive branch member on a leaf and a grass roots organizer on a blade of grass. We both worked to clarify any confusion as to whether individuals were members of government or activists working outside of government. For example, one student labeled the NAACP as part of the judicial branch. NAACP attorneys worked through the county, state, and federal court systems. Liz explained that the NAACP was an organization of grassroots activists that worked with the judicial branch, but as an external entity.

We both walked around the room and assisted students as they used the graphic organizers and wrote drafts of their informational texts. When the entire class finished, we reconvened on the rug; students were excited to present their individuals and place their leaf or blade on the tree. (SIDEBAR: BIOGRAPHIES)

MLK, A Leader Among Many

After students presented their historical figures, they put their respective leaves on the tree. Throughout the presentations, students asked questions, made connections between the branches, and clapped for their peers. After the tree was complete, one student asked, "Why isn't Martin Luther King on the tree?" Liz explained that the omission of Martin Luther King, Jr. from the tree was intentional: "King was a remarkable part of the movement; we have spent a lot of time discussing Martin Luther King throughout the year, and we wanted to introduce you to additional important civil rights figures. Also, King needed to work with other activists and those from each branch in order to be successful. For example, at the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, King was next to President Lyndon Johnson. We want you to understand that a movement involves many people. And that change is the result of those people's collective efforts."

Children's conceptions of the civil rights movement can be simplistic: they may believe that Martin Luther King acted alone or that Rosa Parks' actions were unintentional. We sought to present less-familiar members of the civil rights movement and a more collective and intentional depiction of the process of struggle and gradual reform. Once completed, the tree illustrated a dynamic picture of the different members of each branch of government and the grassroots activists who lobbied and put their lives on the line for change.



Assessments

Seventeen students took an identical quiz before and after this unit of study. After this unit of study, all students were able to identify the three branches of government (as opposed to none before this unit); thirteen students correctly identified the roles of all of the three branches of government (as opposed to none before this unit); and sixteen were able to correctly define the term "segregation" (as opposed to four before this unit).

To understand civics, students need experience with civics—both historic and current. Students left this unit with a better understanding of how individuals working with grassroots organizations, and individuals within each branch of government, worked to end segregation. Additionally, students were able to make meaningful connections between each individual's contribution to the civil rights movement and the roles of each branch of government. Through the use of inquiry, students were able to form their own connections and associations. Students' learning resulted from the questions posed, both by the teachers and their peers, and the developmentally appropriate resources.

Making Associations

Making associations between the roles of the three branches of government and the actual events of the Civil Rights Movement, and between the years of work of courageous activists and the ensuing federal Civil Rights legislation, its enforcement, and its interpretation may yield lasting dividends. Perhaps when students are confronted with present-day civil rights issues (same-sex marriage, voting rights, equal pay, to name a few), their deeper understanding of the interplay between people and the three branches of government will allow them to, as Gandhi put it, "become the change they wish to see." By lobbying the legislative branch, demanding enforcement from the executive branch, and taking an interest in the federal justices' interpretations of the Constitution, activists and the three branches may just repeat their successful relationship.

Notes

- 1. Jonathan Gould, Ed., *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, Washington, DC, 2011), www. CivicMissionOfSchools.org.
- 2. Common Core State Standards, ELA-Literacy.RI.4.9
- D.3.1.3-5 (page 54) in NCSS, NCSS, Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards(Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).

* Free PDF of the C3 Framework at www.socialstudies.org/c3

* Buy the paperback book (with introductory essays) at www.socialstudies.org/ store. See also "Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance," in NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).

- 4. C3 Framework, 17.
- Christine Leland, Jerome Harste, Anne Ociepka, Mitzi Lewison, and Vivian Vasquez, "Talking about Books: Exploring Critical Literacy: You Can Hear a Pin Drop," *Language Arts* 77, no. 1 (1999).
- 6. Carter G. Woodson Award and Honor Books are listed at www.socialstudies.org/ awards/woodson; Free PDFs of previous years' lists of "Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People" are available to all at www.socialstudies.org/ resources/notable. The most current list is an NCSS member benefit, published in the May/June issue of *Social Education*, which is sent to all members in the spring, including subscribers to *Social Studies and the Young Learner*. The current list is also available online to NCSS members only at www.socialstudies.org/ archives.

ELIZABETH BROWN is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education, William Paterson University, in Wayne, New Jersey

LINDA SILVESTRI is a Fourth Grade Teacher at Ocean Avenue School in Middletown, New Jersey

SIDEBAR: Examples of student-created informational text:

Oliver Brown was a grassroots activist. Brown helped to end segregation by going to the Supreme Court and fighting in the court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and said school segregation should be illegal and succeeded in making it illegal. Due to Oliver Brown's actions, the judicial branch helped end segregation by integrating all schools. Brown was brave, because he fought a court case in the Supreme Court with the nine justices. He also said school segregation was wrong and also succeeded while facing the Board of Education in the court case.

Ella Baker was a grassroots activist. Mrs. Baker helped to end segregation by teaching people civil rights and how to be activists and for people to also be integrated. Due to Ella Baker's actions, the legislative branch helped to end segregation by creating a law. Ella Baker was kind because she was a teacher and helped people.

Senator Dirksen was in the Legislative branch of government. Mr. Dirksen helped end segregation by the way he helped make a law that shows it isn't fair that some places are "whites only." It was the Civil Rights Law of 1964. Everett Dirksen was strong because he worked a long time so the law would be passed. He never gave up. Later the law was finally passed.

Recommended Nonfiction

Adler, David. *A Picture Book of Thurgood Marshall*. New York: Holiday House, 1999.

Fradin, Dennis B. *The Power of One: Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine*. New York: Clarion, 2004.

Kanefield, Teri. *The Girl from the Tar Paper School: Barbara Rose Johns and the Advent of the Civil Rights Movement.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2014.

Lucas Eileen. *Cracking the Wall: The Struggles of the Little Rock Nine*. New York: Carolrhoda, 1997.

Mayer, Robert. *The Civil Rights Act of 1964*. New York: Greenhaven, 2004.

Pinkney, Andrea. *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down*. New York: Little Brown, 2010.

Shelton, Paula Young. *Child of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Schwartz & Wade, 2009.