



**Promoting Democratic Ideals and Social Action:  
Children's Literature on the  
Civil Rights Movement and School Integration**

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*Abstract*

*This article highlights the role of social studies educators in promoting democratic ideals and social action. The benefits of incorporating children's and young adult literature into the social studies curriculum in the elementary and middle school grades are discussed. Biography, historical fiction, poetry, and information books are presented to teach students about the civil rights movement and school integration. Literature extension activities are designed to encourage students to examine issues of equality, social justice, and human dignity, while also considering their own prejudices and perspectives on social action.*

**Introduction**

Segregation in our nation's public schools is at the highest level since the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Photographs from inner-city schools in states such as New York, Michigan, Illinois, and California are indistinguishable from poor, Southern black schools in the 1930s. In Washington, DC during the 2000-2001 school year, 94 % of students were black or Hispanic, and some schools in the Bronx had almost no white students (Kozol, 2006). According to Jonathan Kozol, our most segregated schools are those we have named for civil rights heroes, such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. The Jackie Robinson School in New York City, named for the man who broke the color barrier in major league sports, is 99% black and Hispanic, and 99% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (New York City Public Schools, 2003/2004).

How did we get to this place in our public schools more than fifty years after the Brown versus Board of Education decision? Why have we passed numerous civil rights laws, only to be inflicted with rampant racism and prejudice directed toward minority groups? What is the role of the social studies educator in a democracy where equality and social justice are touted as ideals? This article will explore the purpose of social studies education and the role of social studies educators in preparing students for life in a pluralistic society. The importance of promoting democratic ideals and social action will be emphasized and the value of incorporating children's literature into the social studies curriculum will be discussed. Stories of the civil rights movement and school integration will be highlighted, using biographies, poetry, historical fiction, and information books. Literature extension activities designed to help elementary and middle school students become informed citizens and analyze the past, present, and future of civil rights will be presented so that they might meet social studies goals as well as change attitudes and behaviors that can lead to prejudice.

## **The Purpose of Social Studies Education**

The primary purpose of social studies is to help students become involved in civic affairs and make informed and civically responsible decisions (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). Students experience citizenship within a democratic society that is becoming increasingly more diverse. While equality, social justice, and human dignity are the ideal, the realities of racism and prejudice are apparent in everyday occurrences such as racial violence and school segregation. Christensen (2005) discusses the gap that exists between our democratic ideals and the realities of life for minority groups such as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and women. It is the responsibility of the social studies curriculum, as outlined in *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence* (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), to cultivate student attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are consistent with a democratic philosophy. Social studies educators, then, must help students think critically about stereotypes and social problems, analyze racism and its consequences, and prepare for social action.

## **Promoting Democratic Ideals and Social Action**

To promote democratic ideals and social action, students need to become informed about the civil rights movement and school desegregation. Knowledge of these events allows students to understand the critical role of individuals in social change. As they learn about Daisy Bates, Ida B. Wells, Marian Anderson, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and children such as Linda Brown and Ruby Bridges, they begin to comprehend how the actions of one person can make a difference in the lives of many others. As they study the civil rights era, educators suggest that students become involved in disciplined inquiry, so they begin to learn about this period in history by asking their own questions. As they contemplate and question the events of that time, students examine evidence and reach their own conclusions. They develop the ability to reason chronologically, empathize with minority groups throughout history, determine the multiple causes of historical events, and assess the significance of events and people from the past (Fertig, 2005). Students must see the relevance of the study of history in order to maintain interest. If they feel it does not apply to their lives or is boring and unchallenging, they will not see its importance (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). With regard to civil rights, relevance is important to all students, not just minority students. Elementary and middle school students can begin to ask themselves questions such as: Am I a proponent of democracy? As a citizen, what can I do to promote justice? What civil rights issues continue to exist and how can I help?

## **Incorporating Children's Literature into the Social Studies Curriculum**

The first step toward social action is to understand the past. Incorporating quality biographies, poetry, historical fiction, and information books into elementary and middle school social studies classrooms gives students a glimpse into the lives of civil rights heroes and significant events in the struggle for social justice. The advantages of using trade books over textbooks are many. Trade books are better written than textbooks (Richgels, Tomlinson, & Tunnell, 1993) and more easily comprehended (McGowan & Guzzetti, 1991). Because of space constraints within textbooks, standard texts often present students with a very narrow view of historical concepts. Trade books expand students' knowledge and understanding of historical

events and concepts. They add depth to a specific topic by providing detailed information that is often missing from standard textbooks. Children's books present students with alternative views and perspectives on specific historical events that are often lacking in standard textbooks. In this way, they have the capability of more fully informing students of various viewpoints on any given historical event.

Trade books reveal history through the eyes of characters, either actual or fictional, which have lived through historical events, instead of through the eyes of biased and remote textbook authors. Students often find that the information presented in texts is presented in a detached and factual manner. History, when revealed through the eyes of people who lived through events and time periods, becomes more real and personal for the reader. When children learn about social studies and history through books, they are presented with the human side of history that is lacking in standard texts. Because much of history is grim, it must be presented to students in a developmentally appropriate manner. Trade books lend themselves to presenting sometimes difficult or sensitive concepts to children in an age-appropriate and tasteful manner. Consequently, students can learn about an event, such as the death of a young African American boy in rural Mississippi, within the context of quality children's literature that has been specifically written for them.

The incorporation of children's literature also allows teachers to integrate the teaching of social studies with reading and language arts instruction. Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), forty-six states report that teachers are spending less time on social studies. If reading and language arts skills can be taught through the use of social studies trade books, teachers can prepare students for NCLB reading assessments while emphasizing content in history, citizenship, and democratic principles (Checkley, 2006).

The following books give elementary and middle school students a glimpse into the lives of civil rights heroes, both known and unknown, and some of the significant events in the movement toward social justice and school integration. While some of the books are only suitable for the middle school grades, many, including the picture books, are appropriate for any grade level. Picture books are easy to read in a short period of time, full of illustrations to facilitate comprehension, and attractive to reluctant readers. Literature extension activities were created to help students become informed, analyze the past, present, and future of civil rights, think critically about their own prejudices and behaviors, and determine their own attitudes toward social action.

### **The Civil Rights Movement and School Integration Through Children's Literature**

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was one of our nation's earliest civil rights heroes. The biography *Ida B. Wells: Mother of the Civil Rights Movement* (Fradin & Fradin, 2000) tells the story of the woman born as a slave, who worked throughout her lifetime to gain rights for African Americans and women. Ida's quest for social justice began in 1884 when she sat in an all-white train car in Tennessee. Three men dragged her from the train and she filed a lawsuit against the railroad. She later helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She worked to gain voting rights for women and to end the practice of lynching, frequently risking her own safety. Archival photographs, including those of lynching, are incorporated into this text. Therefore, this biography is not appropriate for those younger than middle school, and students should be prepared in advance for what they will view.

Prior to reading the book, access [The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow website](#) (Educational Broadcasting Service, 2002) and have students take the online [Jim Crow quiz](#). Discuss Jim Crow and its significance to African Americans in the South. Have students read the online story [Ida B. Wells](#) and view the video clip of her experience on the train. Introduce the book *Ida B. Wells: Mother of the Civil Rights Movement* (Fradin & Fradin, 2000) and read portions of the book aloud, or if multiple copies are available, ask students to read independently. To spark discussion and help students to contemplate, ask questions, and reach their own conclusions about Ida's actions and early civil rights violations, consider the following questions: In what ways did Ida B. Wells-Barnett promote democracy? Why do you think she would risk her life to help others? Do you feel as strongly about the rights of others as she did?

In her lifetime, Ida made decisions that affected her life and the lives of many others, even into our present day. In order to consider the outcomes and effects of those decisions, students complete a What If? Data Chart (Appendix A) (Zarnowski, 2003). Students first identify the important decisions or turning points in Ida's life. They then consider what might have happened if she had made different decisions. For example, students might reflect on what might have happened in our nation's history if she had not fought against the lynching of African Americans or helped to found the NAACP. They can then be invited to ponder how life in the United States is different today as a result of Ida's efforts.

*A Wreath for Emmett Till* (Nelson, 2005), a young adult poetry book, is an honor book for the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature. The author uses a crown of sonnets to tell the story of Emmett Till, a young African American boy who was lynched in 1955. A crown of sonnets consists of fifteen interrelated sonnets; the last one is composed from the first lines of the original fourteen. With abundant symbolism, this poem allows students to consider the life and death of this young boy, while also protecting them from the multitude of horrors related to his lynching.

After reading, discussing, and analyzing the symbolism throughout the poem, students brainstorm ways that Emmett Till's life would be different if he was fourteen years old in present-day America. They are encouraged to remember both the positive changes that have occurred as well as the civil rights issues that continue to bring controversy to our nation. Students' ideas are written on the chalkboard and used to create a class sonnet. Students should be encouraged to read the story of Glori Chaiku's 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and the online publication of their sonnets at [online publication of their sonnets](#). Also available on line are [techniques](#) and [instructions](#) for writing sonnets. Students can use their sonnet in the design of a bulletin board in memory of Emmett Till.

*Let Them Play* (Raven, 2005) is the story of the Cannon Street All-Stars, an all-black Little League team from Charleston, South Carolina. In the segregated South of 1955, no white teams would play an all-black team and all the white teams pulled out of the Little League franchise. The Cannon Street All-Stars won all their games by default and advanced to the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Little League officials allowed the team to attend the World Series warm up, but they were not allowed to play. Spectators in the stands began to stomp and chant, "Let them play!" The Cannon Street All-Stars were only allowed to watch. However, in 2002, 47 years later, 14 of the original team members were honored at the Little League World Series, and finally, they were able to play ball on the field.

Students examine the cover and title of the book and make predictions about what the book might be about. Before reading the story, students complete the True/False Prediction Chart (Appendix B). They read each statement and predict whether the statement is true or false. Then,

as the story is read, students check their predictions and mark whether each statement is really true or false. Students can discuss Jim Crow laws which can be found at an online site created by the [Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site Interpretive Staff](#), and the [PBS](#) site. Photographs of segregated signs in restaurants, train stations, and other public places can be found online at the [Afro-American History](#) site. As students share thoughts and feelings about the segregated South, they look to the present and consider ways that segregation continues to affect our nation. Segregated practices in housing, schools, and careers can be shared and discussed, and strategies for desegregation may be brainstormed.

In the book *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (Morrison, 2004), author Toni Morrison shares photographs taken before, during, and after school integration. Well-known images of Ruby Bridges, Linda Brown, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks are included, as well as those of school children across the United States who were caught up in the idea of “separate but equal.” Suitable for all ages, the photographs are accompanied by the imagined thoughts of those who are visually captured. The introduction provides the history of school integration, and the book is dedicated to four African American girls who lost their lives during the 1963 bombing of a black Birmingham church.

After examining the photographs, students brainstorm a list of questions they have about school integration and the impact of the civil rights movement as well as contemplate methods of finding answers to those questions. Books such as *The Dream and the Struggle: Separate But Not Equal* (Haskins, 1998), *The Power of One: Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine* (Fradin & Fradin, 2004), and *Fight On! Mary Church Terrell’s Battle for Integration* (Fradin & Fradin, 2003) are excellent resources. Teachers can add questions such as follows: What does the United States Constitution say about equality? Who were some of the people who made a difference in school integration? What civil rights issues are still present today? What can people do to have a positive impact on social justice? Students may retrieve pictures from magazines and the Internet to represent civil rights in present-day America. In searching for pictures, ask students to focus on themes such as rights, equality, power, and human dignity. Students use the images to create a collage. Each picture should be accompanied by the thoughts or feelings of those in the photograph. Sharing and discussion can focus on positive changes since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, social justice issues that have not yet been resolved, and steps that ordinary citizens can take to promote justice.

Both children and adults were civil rights heroes. One child who had a significant impact on the civil rights movement was Ruby Bridges. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 1995) tells of her experiences as the first African American child to attend an all-white elementary school. Ruby had to be escorted to school each day by armed federal marshals as crowds of angry people shouted racist comments and obscenities at her. White parents kept their children home, and Miss Hurley, Ruby’s teacher, often commented that Ruby seemed very relaxed even amidst all the hatred. Miss Hurley later learned that Ruby stopped among the crowds of people each morning and afternoon to pray for the citizens who were tormenting her.

It is important for students to realize the impact that a young child like Ruby had on nonviolent social change. Students can compare the actions and beliefs of Ruby Bridges with other civil rights heroes such as Marian Anderson and Rosa Parks. Using *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 1995), *A Picture Book of Rosa Parks* (Adler, 1993), and *When Marian Sang* (Ryan, 2002), students can analyze the characters using the Character Analysis handout (Appendix C) (Ellermeyer & Chick, 2003). A modification of a semantic feature analysis (Johnson and Pearson, 1984), the character analysis activity allows students to analyze the

character traits of real or fictional characters by comparing them with the traits of others. After students have completed their analysis independently, they may share ways that Ruby, only a child, was like and different from Marian Anderson and Rosa Parks. Discussion of how they, as children, can make a positive difference in the lives of others in their school, home, and community can help students to realize their own potential.

*A Sweet Smell of Roses* (Johnson, 2005), an historical fiction picture book, was inspired by all the children who made a difference in the civil rights movement. Two young girls sneak out of their house early one morning to participate in a march for freedom with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They experience the sweet smell of roses even as they are frowned upon by policemen and screamed at by angry people. The sweet smell follows them all the way back home as they tell their worried mama about the march. Students should be encouraged to question and discuss the thoughts, feelings, and actions of these two young people. For example, students may wonder what motivated the girls to participate in the march, why they chose not to tell their mother where they were going, and how they might have felt after the march was over.

Students can act as book detectives by locating people in their school, home, and community who have thoughts, feelings, and actions that are similar to the girls in the story (Quinlan, 2002). Using the Book Detective handout (Appendix D), students must find someone who fits each of the descriptors and obtain their signature. Students may also use the names of people who are not accessible, such as relatives in another state, people who have passed away, or individuals about whom they have read in stories. In addition to getting signatures, students should be encouraged to talk with each person about his or her experiences. Class discussion may focus on ways that people bring about change and civil rights issues that remain unresolved. Students can use the book detective descriptors to determine if they have any of the qualities necessary to bring about positive change.

## Conclusions

Social studies education is imperative in a pluralistic society in which citizenship and democratic ideals are an integral part of the nation's history. Students need opportunities to examine issues of equality, social justice, and human dignity while also considering their own prejudices and perspectives on social action. As students begin to understand the critical role of individuals in social change, they may reflect on ways they could possibly make a difference in the lives of others. Literature for children and young adults allows students to see the human side of history and permits teachers to teach complex and controversial topics in developmentally appropriate ways. Teaching civil rights issues through trade books also encourages teachers to integrate social studies education with the language arts. This is especially important in an increasingly diverse society in which teacher accountability reigns, racism frequently prevails, and children are the greatest hope for social change.

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Appendix A  
**What If? Data Chart**  
Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Directions: Ida B. Wells-Barnett made a number of decisions that affected her life and the lives of many others throughout history. In column one, identify the important decisions that Ida made. In column two, list other possible decisions that she could have made instead. In column three, discuss the effects of these hypothetical decisions.

<b>Important Decisions</b>	<b>Other Possible Decisions</b>	<b>Effects of These Decisions</b>
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		



## Appendix B

**True/False Prediction Chart***Let Them Play*

Directions: Read each statement and make a check mark under either true or false in the “before reading” column. Then, read the story and check your predictions. Make a check mark in the “after reading” column to show whether each statement is really true or false.

<u>Before Reading</u>			<u>After Reading</u>	
<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false	1. Baseball teams were divided by race in the South in the 1950s.	<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false
<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false	2. The Cannon Street All-Stars had both white and African-American players.	<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false
<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false	3. There were separate rest rooms and drinking fountains in the South in the 1950s.	<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false
<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false	4. All of the white teams in 11 Southern states dropped their Little League franchise so they wouldn't have to play the Cannon Street All-Stars.	<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false
<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false	5. One white team agree to play the Cannon Street All-Stars.	<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false
<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false	6. The Cannon Street All-Stars played in the Little League World Series.	<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false
<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false	7. In 2002, members of the original Cannon Street All-Stars team were honored at the Little League World Series in Williamsport, PA.	<input type="checkbox"/> true	<input type="checkbox"/> false

Appendix C

**Character Analysis**  
**Ruby Bridges, Marian Anderson, and Rosa Parks**

Directions: Make a plus (+) for yes, a minus (-) for no, or a (+/-) for sometimes in the blocks for Ruby Bridges, Marian Anderson, and Rosa Parks.

	Brave	Experienced prejudice	Was arrested	Used peaceful means to make change	Performed for kings, queens, and presidents	Affected the civil rights of people today	Changed the education of school children across America
Ruby Bridges							
Marian Anderson							
Rosa Parks							

## Appendix D

**Be a Book Detective***A Sweet Smell of Roses* by Angela Johnson

Directions: Find someone who does the following:

1. Takes risks \_\_\_\_\_
2. Is brave \_\_\_\_\_
3. Is an independent thinker \_\_\_\_\_
4. Follows what is happening in the news \_\_\_\_\_
5. Likes to help people \_\_\_\_\_
6. Participated in an important event in our nation's history \_\_\_\_\_
7. Believes that America can be a better place \_\_\_\_\_
8. Believes there is still inequality in America \_\_\_\_\_
9. Met a famous person \_\_\_\_\_
10. Has experienced prejudice \_\_\_\_\_
11. Has been treated unfairly \_\_\_\_\_
12. Has settled a disagreement peacefully \_\_\_\_\_
13. Feels good after doing something they know is right \_\_\_\_\_

Civil Rights Movement - African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Women, Native Americans. Which action in U.S. history is an example of civil disobedience? A. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sued the state of Kansas for violating the constitutional rights of public school students. B. The congress of racial equality supported legal segregation of buses and trains in the south. An analysis of the civil rights leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., Stokely Carmichael, and Malcom X would show that each. A. Received the greatest support from African Americans in the rural south.