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Sarah Westad

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EFFECTIVE AND ENGAGING WAYS OF TEACHING THE CIVIL RIGHTS  
MOVEMENT TO K-2 STUDENTS

by

Sarah Westad

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Chapter Overview

When I reflect on my time as an elementary school student in the early 2000s, one thing that always comes to mind is the memory of the third week of January, every year, when we celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK Jr.) and his role in the Civil Rights Movement. I grew up in a predominantly white, middle-class suburb of Minnesota. In this community, Martin Luther King Jr. was seen, without a doubt, as *the* man who fought tirelessly for civil rights in America. Our classrooms discussed iconic moments in his life: his house getting bombed, his children growing up in a racially segregated community, his assassination, and his greatest legacy- the “I Have A Dream” speech. Year after year we watched videos of him speaking the now iconic words, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they are judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” We saw the crowds and crowds of people gathered to hear him speak at the March on Washington. Teachers helped us analyze his speech repeatedly until it became solidified in our minds as perhaps the most recognizable moment in the Civil Rights Movement.

The years of celebrating this legacy by coloring MLK Jr. pictures and writing our own dreams for the world around us gave us a way to access the most basic ideas of the

Civil Rights Movement: dreams and change. Through these activities, MLK Jr. became a heralded figure and his public perception as a hero became instilled in us as young students while his leadership in the movement was deemed undeniable and unforgettable. While MLK Jr. and his leadership are certainly worth teaching to our students, it limits the students' perspective on what made the Civil Rights Movement successful and more specifically, *who* made the Civil Rights Movement successful. Now is the time to expand childhood knowledge on what "civil rights" really means and include more people in the popular narrative.

Chapter one of this capstone serves as an introduction to my capstone project and will provide background information describing a planned curriculum unit for K-2 students related to the Civil Rights Movement. My research question asks- *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?* It will briefly cover the current state of instruction in the United States with regards to the movement and will discuss potential ideas and major research points on the topic. Chapter one will also serve as an introduction to the remainder of the chapters, providing a brief look at the issues, resources, and possible solutions to be discussed in later chapters.

### **Research Question**

The overarching view that I and countless other elementary children had of MLK Jr. is the direct result of a narrative of the Civil Rights Movement which focuses on a handful of major players in the movement who were seen as safe, nonthreatening, and polite leaders that political figures of the day could use and manipulate for sound bites

and photo ops. Teachers discussed the movement with us, describing it primarily through the eyes of MLK Jr. while sometimes including the fact that he received help from “many other people.” The sacrifices and importance of these “many other people” were never included in this narrative throughout elementary school. Their names and stories ultimately faded into the background in order to emphasize MLK Jr.’s role as leader and orator for the movement. When I got older and continued to learn about MLK Jr. during middle school and later in high school, one of the biggest questions that I began asking myself was, *Was MLK Jr. the only one who cared about Civil Rights?* I wondered how throughout all the years of the Civil Rights Movement, why was MLK Jr. the only one who invested in the movement on such a deep level?

In actuality, of course, this is not true. There were countless individuals in cities and towns in almost every state in the nation who spent day in and day out fighting for civil rights and racial equality at great personal and financial cost. It was not until my experiences and coursework as an undergraduate history major at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire that I learned about people like Claudette Colvin, Stokely Carmichael, Bayard Rustin, and more. This was also the first time I heard about organizations other than the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, (NAACP); professors taught about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Each of these organizations played pivotal roles in the local and national fight for civil rights yet they were completely left out of civil rights conversations throughout my time in the public school system.



Since my time in public elementary schools, almost twenty years ago, curriculum developers have expanded the general conversation regarding civil rights in the United States. On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, schools no longer talk only about the childhood of MLK Jr. and his personal experiences with racism. They have begun to talk about the larger culture of racism in the United States during the country's dark history. Schools have started relating the historical aspects of the movement to current situations, discussing the realities of social injustice and the cycle of poverty that exist in modern times. This pedagogy is beneficial, but there is still opportunity for improvement within the Civil Rights Movement curriculum. This would include changes to basic Civil Rights Movement instruction and how the movement has evolved since the early 20th century.

Similar to my experiences, K-2 students today are still served major events of the movement as isolated incidents, summed up as nothing more than dates and specific places while critical details, planning, and failures of the movement are left out due to time and other constraints. "The reduction of the movement into simple fables obscures the broad social, institutional and personal sacrifices of the people who engaged in the struggle" (Schuster, 2014, p.5). Typical classrooms start with *Brown v Board of Education* then jump to Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott then jump to the March on Washington, leaving out the connections and relationships between these events which provide crucial context and could inform student learning in deeper ways. These fables work not only to minimize the impact of certain voices in the movement but also convolute the legacies of well-respected American icons.

As these same K-2 students grow up and begin to take additional social studies and history courses, they have an incomplete idea of what the Civil Rights Movement entailed and are often unable to speak accurately about the social and political climate of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. They are only able to think about major contributions to the movement that took place on a national level because they are never taught about the evolving fights for civil rights and social justice in their own communities. Students grow up viewing leadership in the movement as only a handful of figures when, in actuality, leaders ranged from individual citizens, to local councilmen and women, to preachers, to local media, and to the president. Jeffries (2020) believed that,

Students accept what they have been taught about the essential leadership of preachers and presidents...And they reiterate what they have learned about the primacy of integration and federal legislation. Having never been presented with a counternarrative, they have no reason to question received wisdom. (Jeffries, 2020, p. 3)

This idea of Civil Rights education as a master narrative that is never challenged or questioned presents a potentially problematic culture for students who have no outlet to pose questions, thoughts, or alternatives to their teacher-centered instruction. These narratives place major figures onto a pedestal that idealizes and romanticizes the likes of MLK Jr. and Rosa Parks, creating a distinct distance between current K-2 students and the past. If we are to help students create meaningful connections to American history and specifically to the Civil Rights Movement, we must begin to introduce significantly

more relatable and accessible lessons to convey the larger significance of the movement and the role that it still plays today. Considering this, the research question we must answer is; *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?*

With this research question, I will use resources and studies published from across the US to discuss the ways in which the Civil Rights Movement is currently taught in schools, how it has shifted over time, how information and content from elementary school discussions on Civil Rights stay with students by the time they enter middle and high school, and the ways in which students can become civically engaged in the communities around them, creating meaningful connections and relations to the movement in order to maximize information retention.

### **Importance of Curriculum**

The Civil Rights Movement is without a doubt one of the most impactful events in American history and has shaped the current climate of our country as the fight for true racial equality continues fifty-five years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. One of the reasons that the Civil Rights Movement is so critical to a student's education is that students, even in grades K-2, are able to decipher what is fair from what is unfair (Schuster, 2014). They begin to notice things like prejudice and discrimination in their schools and society, even if they do not yet have the vocabulary to articulate what they are feeling. The Southern Poverty Law Center published a report noting,

When students learn about the movement, they learn what it means to be American citizens. They learn how to recognize injustice. They learn about the

transformative role played by thousands of ordinary individuals, as well as the importance of organization for collective change. (Shuster, 2014, p. 4)

Despite this direct relationship between teaching about the movement and civic engagement, there are no comprehensive content standards for teaching about the movement in elementary schools. Moreover, sixteen states do not require any Civil Rights Movement instruction in the classroom (Shuster, 2014, p. 6).

Students in classrooms can connect meaningfully to the figures and events in the Civil Rights Movement in a number of ways. In “Teaching Young Children about the Civil Rights Movement,” authors Foster, Root, and Lee (2015) argued that K-2 students relate and understand the movement on deeper levels than other aspects of American history because they can be exposed to the movement in interdisciplinary ways due to the nature of the movement. They can be shown iconic images from the movement, respond, and ultimately draw their own conclusions based on facial expressions and what they see happening in the photographs. There is a plethora of children’s literature books, both fiction and nonfiction, that allow students to think about the narratives from a firsthand perspective through the lens of an authentic experience. Students can learn protest songs from the movement and think about the emotions and thoughts behind the lyrics as they sing them and they can retell major events through carefully scaffolded dramatic play and poetry. Guest speakers who participated in the movement can be brought in to truly bring the movement to life in the eyes of the students and to further emphasize the ways in which the movement is still ongoing (Foster, 2015).

### **Relevance to MN Standards**

The Civil Rights curriculum developed in this capstone addresses several major social studies standards for K-2 students.

For Kindergarten students, the curriculum covers the following standards:

- 0.1.1.1.1 Democratic government depends on informed and engaged citizens who exhibit civic skills and values, practice civic discourse, vote and participate in elections, apply inquiry and analysis skills, and take action to solve problems and shape public policy
- 0.1.2.2.1 The civic identity of the US is shaped by historical figures, places and events and by key foundational documents and other symbolically significant artifacts
- 0.4.1.2.1 Historical inquiry is a process in which multiple sources and different kinds of historical evidence are analyzed to draw conclusions about how and why things happened in the past (Minnesota K-12 Social Studies Standards, 2013)

The first grade standards to be addressed are

- 1.1.1.1.1 democratic government depends on informed and engaged citizens who exhibit civic skills and values, practice civic discourse, vote and participate in elections, apply inquiry and analysis skills and take action to solve problems and shape public policy
- 1.1.2.2.1 The civic identity of the US is shaped by historical figures, places, and events and by key foundational documents and other symbolically important artifacts

- 1.4.1.2.2 Historical inquiry is a process in which multiple sources and different kinds of historical evidence are analyzed to draw conclusions about how and why things happened in the past. (Minnesota K-12 Social Studies Standards, 2013)

The second grade standards to be addressed are

- 2.1.1.1.1 Democratic government depends on informed and engaged citizens who exhibit civic skills and values, practice civic discourse, vote and participate in elections, apply inquiry and analysis skills and take action to solve problems and shape public policy
- 2.1.2.2.1 The civic identity of the US is shaped by historical figures, places and events and by key foundational documents. (Minnesota K-12 Social Studies Standards, 2013)

### **Chapter Conclusion**

By reflecting on my own experience as an elementary school student in suburban Minnesota, I was able to recall some major questions and blank spaces that I had regarding one of the most widely celebrated holidays in the United States. This reflection, alongside my experience as a history major during my undergraduate career at the University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire, led me to recognize a lack of understanding about the Civil Rights Movement in American society which ultimately starts at the elementary school level. Based on this, the upcoming chapters will continue to address my research question, *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?* Chapter 2

provides a literature review of current and relevant research on teaching the Civil Rights Movement. The literature review covers topics like incorporating art and social studies, connecting to student experiences, creating engaging activities, and making meaningful connections between students and history. Chapter 3 looks into specific instructional methods, development of the curriculum, and research-supported, age-appropriate activities. This provides information as well as support for each lesson and activity covered in the curriculum unit. Chapter 4 reflects on my major takeaways and findings of this capstone project. It also describes practical limitations of the capstone while highlighting areas for further research and ways that this research benefits the teaching profession.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter of the capstone will look into the current research and studies regarding curriculum and evidence of student learning related to American history and the Civil Rights Movement. The chapter will discuss a variety of areas, including the ways in which our society has, over time, created a master narrative surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. The master narrative represents an overarching theme in social studies education that emphasizes a simple, whitewashed version of the Civil Rights Movement, promoting heroes, nonviolent tactics, and protestors who were calm and reasonable at all times. This master narrative portrays the Civil Rights Movement as a fifteen to twenty year movement led by a handful of major leaders and politicians. These figures have been romanticized through the eyes of public education systems across the US and have reached hero status in popular culture.

Chapter two will also address the importance of maintaining the legacy of the movement through teaching about it. By teaching the movement as an ongoing, ever-evolving effort to achieve racial equality, students create meaning to the movement and construct relevance of the movement to their lives (Branch, 2006). The chapter serves as a resource for the capstone's curriculum unit on teaching the Civil Rights Movement in meaningful ways to K-2 students. This literature review will also analyze the benefits and limitations of addressing historical figures as human beings during their



time period rather than portraying them as untouchable figures who were admirable for their strength, bravery, and other character traits.

Another topic discussed is the different methods that educators can utilize to help students connect learning about the movement to their own lives and prior knowledge. The last topic will look into how early learning, particularly K-2 learning about the Civil Rights Movement, will impact student's later learning about the movement. The chapter will ultimately conclude with a summary of the major themes presented throughout the literature review and will look forward to the next chapter which will further discuss and develop ideas for a methodology behind answering, *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?*

### **Implications of the Master Narrative**

When thinking about pop culture references to the Civil Rights Movement and many individual experiences of learning about the 1960s, the American public can generally recall limited amounts of details about a movement that shaped race relations, social justice, and equity conversations well into the 21st century. Americans can easily talk about and recognize Martin Luther King Jr. and his annual holiday, Rosa Parks' bravery in instigating the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and occasionally another leader or organization like the NAACP or the Black Power Movement. The average American identifies these figures and ideas with the movement, because that is what they are familiar with; that is what they have discussed within the confines of their elementary, middle, and high school classrooms (Frost, 2012). Perhaps the largest piece missing from

this puzzle is the impact that local leaders and organizations had on the movement. These rarely discussed individuals and organizations are critical because they were what ultimately made the Civil Rights Movement successful (Frost, 2012). Together with publicity garnered from many famous figures, individuals from across the country came together for the purpose of achieving racial equality, often at great personal cost. Each of these sacrifices were vital to the success of the early Civil Rights Movement and should be taught in elementary schools because of their role and their legacy in students' lives today.

Young students, particularly K-2 students, are just beginning to explore and discover the world around them. Thinking about the United States as an entire nation can often be overwhelming to K-2 students who are still learning state names and capitals, relatively unable to identify specific cultures and histories of individual states or regions. It would be rare to find a kindergarten student from Minnesota who is able to describe the social and political culture of a Southern state like Alabama or Georgia. Considering this, it makes sense to relate all learning to the areas and places that students are already familiar with (Egan, 1982).

Teaching the stories of major figures like MLK Jr. and Rosa Parks are critical to helping students understand the total trajectory of the movement, but choosing localized leaders more accurately describes the reality of the bottom-up approach (Branch, 2006). This perspective shifts the narrative to instruct students about a movement that was driven by individual citizens who banded together with each other to reach up and impact politicians rather than a movement that began with politicians and trickled down to

individuals. It allows students to think about the movement realistically and in a way that is understandable and accessible on their level. By focusing on how local movements and lesser-known leaders and activists contributed to the Civil Rights Movement, revisionist historians broaden our view of how and why historical change occurs (Frost, 2012, p. 441). Often textbooks describe historical change as the result of a single leader's actions or a critical, emotionally-charged speech. These types of factors undoubtedly do contribute to historical change but focusing only on these factors ignores major pieces of the puzzle:

This intellectual development is not only important for historical understanding, but also for social movement strategy- whether one looks to charismatic leaders like King to inspire and build movements or to people organizing one-by-one, as Ella Baker argued, fostering commitment and changing consciousness so that people recognize their own power to achieve social change and act on it. (Frost, 2012, p. 441)

Individuality and the importance of having integrity and making decisions independently is a critical skill that is taught in early elementary school and can be easily transferred into dialogues about the individuals who fought for social justice and who continue to do so (Frost, 2012). In K-2 students this power to recognize their own skills and talents is critical to improving our current social, racial, and political climate (Branch, 2006).

### **Misrepresentations of Major Figures**

Among the most popular, major figures associated with the Civil Rights Movement are MLK Jr. and Rosa Parks. Thinking about these major figures can provide

students with inspiration and insight into the Civil Rights Movement, however popular culture and the larger master narrative about the movement have produced romanticized, sometimes inaccurate information about these beloved figures. Rosa Parks is often portrayed as a poor seamstress who, because of her fatigue, refused to give her bus seat to a white man. Moreover, the bus boycott is then presented as an unplanned, spontaneous reaction by African Americans to Parks' arrest (Bettis, 1994, p. 211). This narrative of the over-tired Parks enforces an understanding of the movement as an impromptu, unorganized group of people taking advantage of Parks' rough day. This discredits the several other black women who refused to give up their seat for a white person prior to Rosa Parks' arrest. These women committed the same act of resistance against segregation yet were intentionally left out of history books and continue to be left out of conversations about the Montgomery Bus Boycott because of the shades of their skin, their age, their marital status, their parenthood status and more (Branch, 2006).

Among these women was Claudette Colvin, a fifteen-year-old girl who was arrested nine months prior to Parks for refusing to move seats on the bus. Colvin lived in a lower-income neighborhood and got pregnant shortly after her arrest. The general public did not share the same enthusiasm towards Colvin as an unwed, pregnant teenager that they later did for Rosa Parks, a lighter-skinned seamstress with a history of activism (Branch, 2006). With no backing from local leaders or organizations, Colvin was left in the background while the movement shifted focus to Rosa Parks' arrest.

Intentionally crafting a narrative that revolves around safer, less problematic figures takes humanity out of the movement and prevents students from being able to

recognize themselves as capable of leading future change. Furthermore, eliminating important individuals and their local contributions undermines the level of authority and organization of the movement at its most basic levels (Branch, 2006).

Similar to Rosa Parks and her valuable role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, K-2 students can easily become citizens who idealize MLK Jr. and understand him to be the sole leader of the movement; someone who inspired thousands upon thousands with his ideas and speeches. While there is truth to the idea that MLK Jr. inspired and called many people to action during the movement, as Baker (as cited in Frost, 2012), a renowned member of both the NAACP and SNCC, once said, “Martin didn’t make the movement, the movement made Martin” (p. 440). This capstone project addresses this common phenomenon by introducing students to figures other than MLK Jr. and Parks. The inclusion of Roy Wilkins, Malcolm X, and more leaders in the curriculum unit opens student eyes to the diversity and differences between both major leaders of the movement as well as individual activists.

### **Culturally Responsive Classrooms**

When thinking about the ways that teachers and schools approach social studies instruction as a whole, one of the most important things to keep in perspective is the choice involved in deciding which aspects of history are discussed and whose stories are told in classrooms. These choices reflect the values and biases of teachers and administrators, often resulting in the exclusion of narratives that offer alternative, sometimes contradictory perspectives from people in marginalized groups. Teachers, especially white teachers, are tasked with consistently and intentionally reflecting on their

curricular choices and the ways that they choose to address racism in US history (Pellegrino, 2014). With an overwhelming percentage of educators and administrators being white, this control of the master narrative regarding the Civil Rights Movement and social studies as a whole raises a number of questions about which voices are ignored and silenced in classroom discussions (Pellegrino, 2014).

In recent years, when teachers have been tasked with creating Civil Rights curriculum for their classrooms, they have followed a nationwide pattern regarding which aspects are discussed. A study conducted by Pellegrino, Swalwell, and View (2014) discovered that teachers in K-12 schools held fast to two major criteria when selecting Civil Rights topics to cover in their classrooms: relevance and appropriateness (p. 107). As cited in Pellegrino, relevance consists of the events that occurred between 1950 and 1970. Relevance also includes groups or individuals who acted in ways that were ‘admirable,’ demonstrating character traits like bravery, perseverance, and non-violence (Pellegrino, 2014, p.109). The study defined appropriateness as a scale based on how graphic or violent the event or image was in relation to the age of the students; kindergarten students are less likely to learn about the beatings of Bloody Sunday while older students would be more appropriate to engage in conversations based on the images of protestors getting beaten on the Voting Rights March from Selma to Montgomery (Pellegrino, 2014).

These two major pieces of criteria for selection of what to include versus what to exclude are logical pieces of the larger puzzle. Although relevance and appropriateness should be considered when deciding what to teach, according to Pellegrino (2014),

“Noticeably absent from participants' explanations was attention to or discussion of entrenched institutional and interpersonal racism and white supremacy” (p. 111). This lack of concern over institutional and interpersonal racism reflects the privilege of white teachers who are working in multiracial classrooms with students of color. If students are only given pre-packaged boxes describing the Civil Rights Movement in ways that have been deemed, ‘appropriate’ and ‘relevant’ by white administrators, it can easily impede on the true meaning of the movement and limit student understanding of the realities and complexities of the movement (Pellegrino, 2014).

A significant piece of culturally relevant pedagogy revolves around student-centered activities and lessons. One way to incorporate this into K-2 classrooms is to involve discussions in student learning. Within this capstone, both small group and large group conversations about the movement work to help students develop meaning behind images, videos, audio clips, newspaper headlines, and more in ways that make sense to them. “Discussion is more important in history than in other subjects because ‘evidence,’ although it may be an artifact or a picture, can only be interpreted through language; it cannot, as in mathematics or science, be physically manipulated to investigate problems” (Cooper, 1994, p. 113). Social studies in K-2 classrooms must then become a student-centered environment that is filled with discussions, debates, and meaningful experiences.

Young learners can also benefit from the task of inferring and analyzing historical documents and images (Burstein, 2010). Research into the thinking of students between the ages of five and eight indicates that students can develop arguments about history if

they are appropriately scaffolded with memorable learning experiences and vocabulary instruction. “Young children enjoy making inferences about historical evidence, and in focusing attention on the quality of children’s thinking rather than simply on fact acquisition” (Cooper, 1994, pp. 103-104). In this way, the capstone project gives students multiple opportunities to interpret historical evidence including pictures, videos, and music from the Civil Rights Movement in ways that make sense to them. Connecting learning to inferences and individual students lets students know that the movement can mean different things to different people and that each student can recognize and relate to different ideas within the movement.

### **Legacy of the Movement**

In the 21st century, history textbooks can often be found describing the Civil Rights Movement between 1950 and 1970; typically beginning with the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) or the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956) and ending with either the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 (Frost, 2012, p. 437). This approach to teaching the movement serves to isolate events in a specific year, minimizing the importance of social-political contexts. The overarching legacy of the Civil Rights Movement is one that continues to this day and will continue on, likely for the foreseeable future. Looking into this legacy will help to answer the research question, *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?* Not only does the legacy of the movement give students a deeper understanding of what Civil Rights



activists were fighting for in the early Civil Rights Movement but students can also greatly benefit from connections between events and actions in the historic Civil Rights Movement to the contemporary fight for social justice throughout the US and the world.

### **Movement's Meaning Today**

One of the most meaningful connections that students can make from history to present day is through the lens of former President Barack Obama (Slate, 2011). Obama's story of overcoming bias and prejudice in the north reflects the stories of many people in a way that continues to build upon the initial legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. Discussing the ways in which Obama encountered and overcame racism allows students to recognize that racism did not exist solely in the historic South and that Northern states implemented their own forms of institutional and interpersonal racism which still penetrate society today.

Teaching Obama's history can help students understand how the traditional narrative of the Civil Rights Movement can be expanded both geographically and temporally. Perhaps even more important, viewing the past through the lens of Obama's history empowers students to examine how their own lives have been influenced by and could contribute to the many legacies of the long Civil Rights Movement. (Slate, 2011, p. 591)

Thus, as K-2 students think about the historic Civil Rights Movement, it can be incredibly beneficial for them to recognize the movement as it exists today to fight continued institutionalized and interpersonal racism (Cavallaro, 2019).

From early ages, students are indoctrinated with the racial prejudices of cultures and belief systems around them, particularly in the United States (Cavallaro, 2019). Beginning in the first years of their lives, they are taught how to navigate social structures that are fundamentally based on historical inequality (Cavallaro, 2019). Kids absorb ideas of police brutality, the cycle of poverty, homelessness and hunger in ways that they may not be able to process or put words to until much later in their lives. That said, children as young as four and five years old are still aware of racism as it exists around them. Studies completed by psychologists in the early 21st century indicated that young kids are aware of race from the time that they are very young, making it educationally and ethically critical to talk about racism with them (Boutte, 2011). It is essential to address these topics with young students in ways that are meaningful, truthful, and that allow student voices to be heard and respected. Giving students a platform for their ideas and thoughts grants them time and opportunities to develop their thinking and to become aware of the meaning of racism and prejudice in their lives (Boutte, 2011).

### **Ways that Students Can Think about the Movement**

The Civil Rights Movement, like much of American history, is dark, graphic, and gut-wrenching. Many adults can find the images and videos from events like Bloody Sunday, Woolworth Sit-ins, and Freedom Rides painful to watch. Considering this, it becomes even more important for educators to take time to evaluate the material they are teaching to assess how much of it students are able to process and to what extent it is age appropriate to teach (Egan, 1982).

Thinking in relation to the discussion of which aspects of history K-2 students can understand, researchers and psychologists have spent the better part of the last two centuries taking polarizing approaches to teaching K-2 students about the past. Piaget, a prominent educational psychologist, is one example of a researcher who argued that children between the ages of six and eight are not cognitively able to think about the development of time and what that means in regard to the past. “Piagetian educators suggest that not until adolescence do students ‘develop’ some of the concepts basic to historical understanding and that attempts to teach history to young children are doomed to failure” (Egan, 1982, p. 439). Similarly, contemporary historians and other educators note, “History is a subject whose meaning is properly appreciated only in our maturity...Human sympathy gradually percolates into the narratives of events. If this is a final achievement of the wisest people, what access can young children have to it” (Egan, 1982, p. 439)? This poses a problematic question for social studies curriculum in public elementary schools across the United States because it calls into question the effectiveness of spending valuable instruction time on history if students are not comprehending it in the ways that educators expect them to.

On the other hand, Cooper (1994) suggested that, while Piaget’s early research, both in 1928 and 1956, led him to the conclusion that young children cannot comprehend history, there are more recent psychologists who interpret his research in new ways (p. 103). Piaget, (as cited in Cooper, 1994) argued that, “The young child (7-8) rarely spontaneously uses ‘because’ or ‘although’ and if forced to finish sentences using them, uses them as a substitute for ‘and then’” (p. 106). This would indicate that elementary

students are unable to make the connection between cause and effect in relation to historic events. Despite this, 21st century researchers claim that

Elementary students *can* understand general chronological sequences...even though they may still be hazy about particular dates, and that they can understand age-appropriate representations of people and events from the past (especially narratives built around the goal-oriented activities of central characters with whom the students can identify. (Alleman, 2010, p.107)

If students are to learn from history, they must be able to understand the goals of historical figures and relate to them. Specifically thinking about effective and engaging ways to teach the Civil Rights Movement, this means that students must recognize the goals of justice and equality in the movement and they must identify with individuals who are similar to them. There must also be logical and scaffolded instruction about the chronological order of the movement so that students follow the process of historical analysis and interpretation (Alleman, 2010).

With both of these perspectives, there are still other researchers that lie somewhere in the middle, believing that, “Theories relating to historical empathy regard it as both a cognitive and an affective process, although the relationship between these processes and the pattern of their development is unclear” (Cooper, 1994, p. 109). These contrasting perspectives indicate that the views on teaching K-2 students history has shifted dramatically over the last century though special care still needs to be taken to help students build connections between the past and today. Understanding that K-2 students are just beginning to develop a sense of the past and how the world existed

before they were alive, teaching students about the Civil Rights Movement needs to be an experience that is student-centered and student-led, discussion based, and one that allows students to make inferences and draw their own conclusions.

### **Connections to Student Life and Prior Knowledge**

For a majority of students living in the Midwest, thinking about the Civil Rights Movement of the American south in the 1950s and 1960s allows them to make few independent connections to their daily lives. Students in 2020 live in a time filled with technology. Processing the differences in technologies of the mid-1900s is a difficult task for students in and of itself, but adding in the differences in social and political values can be overwhelming for students. Bringing up isolated names and dates in a classroom does little to help students utilize their own experiences and lives in learning about the Civil Rights Movement and making meaning of it (Egan, 1982). Students are, “better served by a curriculum that is closer to their personal experience” (Brophy, 1997, p. 4).

Furthermore, thinking about the ideal social studies classroom,

These concepts would be introduced through a teaching framework designed to make history meaningful (by connecting it to the students’ here and now experiences), age appropriate (by focusing on initial exploration of concepts rather than in-depth, detailed understandings), personified (by having students study their own histories), and intellectually stimulating (by featuring content that has disciplinary integrity but also connects to the children’s lives.). (Brophy, 1997, p. 9)

Students can, and should, be supported in discovering the Civil Rights Movement, not just as it existed in the 1950s and 1960s, but as it exists now and is present in their lives. This capstone incorporates each of Brophy's ideas by introducing concepts to students in a way that allows them to expand on their learning in later years. Teachers must be able to create lessons that are engaging, authentic, and that create pathways for students to discover the past and then apply it to their lives as citizens living in modern times.

### **Engaging Student Learning**

As teachers begin to develop curriculum maps and unit lesson plans for the Civil Rights Movement, it is crucial that students are exposed to the movement in engaging and student-centered ways. One example of such activities is the use of artwork as a method of teaching students about the history of the movement. On one level, artwork (paintings, sculptures, photographs) have the ability to convey profound emotions to students that they will be able to turn into their own meaning. Art is arguably much more universally understood by younger students than hefty readings or lengthy lectures that attempt to unpack larger issues (Christensen, 2006).

Taking paintings from time period artists like Bernice Sims, Jacob Lawrence, and Lorenzo Pace give students ways to access the major themes of the movement in age-appropriate ways (Christensen, 2006, p. 313). Christensen (2006) postulated that,

When using artwork, depth of content is added by focusing on the following:  
learning the geography of the place portrayed in the artwork, envisioning issues students may or may not have encountered or considered previously, viewing life or issues from another's perspective, inquiring and researching to gain new details

about the era, reflecting on changes in the way they view the artist's work. (p. 313)

Combining various aspects of art and introducing them in conjunction with teaching the raw, sometimes graphic, history of Civil Rights lets students think about topics and events in new ways that are built upon their personal experiences and emotions rather than the emotions of a textbook author or the teacher.

Beyond just looking at artistic representations of the movement, students may also use their own materials to create pieces of art to portray the movement. Selecting colors for paintings about the movement, creating sculptures relevant to social justice, making community collages, and many other ideas all work to demonstrate the movement's fight for change on local, national, and international levels (Christensen, 2006). Using art combines student interests with content by giving them a platform to express any unprocessed thoughts or feelings about certain events. "Creating works of art is of interest to young learners and can be a means of applying what they have learned and disseminating the information to inform others" (Christensen, 2006, p.315). This alone is enough to argue that art is important in teaching the Civil Rights Movement but continued writing that art, "can help resolve issues students have identified through the in-depth study of heroes and heroines" (Christensen, 2006, p. 315). This approach is critical to providing those moments of self-reflection where students have time to think about their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Through art, students must use intentionality and thought to literally draw their own conclusions about their learning, rather than relying on a teacher or a peer to provide them with conclusions about history.

### **Authenticity in Learning**

In all ages, learning must be authentic in order for students to receive maximum mastery of the content. Teaching K-2 students about civil rights is no different.

Worksheets and coloring sheets for students that give fun facts and pictures of Civil Rights leaders do little to help them expand their understanding of the movement or the current world around them. To help young students have more meaningful, genuine experiences with the Civil Rights Movement, teachers must look beyond the easy discussions and videos to create dialogues for students to share thoughts and ideas as well as opportunities for students to draw their own conclusions about the movement and what it means for them today (Bettis, 1994).

Arguably, one of the most important reasons for teaching students about the movement is to inspire them to continue fighting for change (Cavallaro, 2019). Inauthentic, tired experiences and lectures in the classroom will not drum up the next generation of foot soldiers. In order to inspire students in meaningful ways to guide them in realizing their potential, they must be able to explore ideas and themes of civil rights in age appropriate ways and on their own terms. Student-centered lessons about the movement will allow them to recognize the ways in which kids and individuals can, and do regularly, have an impact on their community and the larger world around them.

Only when all students are thus engaged will the pace of the march for equity quicken from the ‘shuffling’ that characterizes the current status of the movement for full equality to the deliberate ‘steps’ that are needed for this nation to fulfill its democratic potential. (Bettis, 1994, p. 211)



This democratic potential and full equality are the same ideals that Civil Rights foot soldiers fought for in the 1950s and into 2020. Arming new foot soldiers, in elementary school classrooms, with the weapons of intellectual understanding and motivation to enact change opens a new world of possibilities for the meaning of the movement and its long-term legacy.

### **Impact on Later Learning about the Movement**

As K-2 students grow up and take their early understandings of the Civil Rights Movement throughout middle, high school and college-level history courses, misconceptions and romanticized narratives will hinder their ability to understand the details of the movement fully (Frost, 2012). Like any major historical event, as time continues to go on, more and more sources and insight into the event come to light. As the nation's understanding of the movement evolves, our ways of teaching the movement must evolve as well. While young students cannot comprehend the severity of institutionalized racism and brutal violence often done to protestors involved in the movement, they can make sense of major themes like fairness, justice, and inequality. It is critical to engage students in historically truthful narratives about the movement that can be expanded upon in later years rather than giving students half-truths and myths about the movement that are much harder to debunk as they get older (Frost, 2012).

### **Creating Meaning for Young Students**

Young students, specifically K-2 students, bring several experiences into the classroom that allow them to form profound opinions about the Civil Rights Movement and racism among their peers. K-2 students witness disagreements in their families, their

schools, and the community around them. Social studies curriculum in early elementary classrooms revolves around the basic aspects of learning about the students' families and the communities in which they live. Students watch democracy unfold on a national level as the media discusses elections, crime, and public health each night on the daily news. K-2 students know that conflict exists in society and, in turn, recognize that conflict also existed in the past (Cavallaro, 2019).

Using this prior knowledge to connect students to the Civil Rights Movement is an authentic relationship to understanding the content. Openly providing forums to discuss conflict in society creates a classroom community that trusts each other and is able to achieve much more than a classroom that avoids conflict. "Conflict has been ignored in the school curriculum. However, avoidance of this issue is an unrealistic approach for students who live in a democracy that is in a state of constant struggle and conflict" (Bettis, 1994, p. 197). Topics that are controversial often end up being sanitized and whitewashed in an effort to keep as many people (and taxpayers) as happy as possible.

Most school history books and state-approved curricula often ignore discussion of historical conflicts that are perceived as controversial and irrelevant to the dominant culture. The Civil Rights Movement is one among many that force students to grapple with issues of oppression and democracy in society. (Bettis, 1994, p. 197)

Ignoring conflict or attempting to erase conflict from teaching about the Civil Rights Movement does students a disservice by creating a narrative that is largely false and provides inaccurate information to students.

It is certainly not easy to think about taking on major themes of the Civil Rights Movement and planning age-appropriate and engaging experiences for K-2 students to think about the level of conflict within the movement. Teaching the movement effectively requires intensive and reflective practices that are consistently centered around the experiences and interpretations of the students (Dunn, 2005). Introducing students to ideas of justice and equity is critical to creating educated social studies students and critical thinkers. Despite this, social studies curriculum, like many other content areas, has been greatly limited both in time and other resources in elementary classrooms as schools strive to raise standardized testing scores and focus on reading and mathematics (National Council for Social Studies, 2017). Elementary educators must move beyond the tried and true standard history lectures if they want to drive students to form meaningful connections to the Civil Rights Movement.

### **Current Understandings of High School and College Students**

Students who are currently enrolled in high school and college history courses often have several misconceptions and gaps in their knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement (Frost, 2012). These misconceptions come from years of thinking about the Civil Rights Movement as defined between 1950 and 1970, led by MLK Jr. and Rosa Parks, eventually working with politicians like John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson to create legislative change. These understandings are rejected by prominent historians,

scholars, professors, and teachers for “simplifying, truncating, and mischaracterizing key aspects of the movement” (Frost, 2012, pp. 437-438). High school teachers and college professors alike must take time out of their courses to address these inaccurate perspectives before moving forward with further teaching about the movement, limiting the areas that they are able to cover and preventing important conversations about race from happening (Frost, 2012).

When students are indoctrinated with ideas of the master narrative in early years they are more likely to remember things like specific dates, years, and places where events took place (Frost, 2012). This demonstrates a superficial level of understanding that does not always easily transfer to future learning about the movement. By the time they reach high school, students commonly, “think of history in units of decades rather than in overarching themes or connected narrative arcs” (Pellegrino, 2014, p. 111). This becomes an issue as students dig deeper into discussions about the movement and they become unable to recognize the political, social, and cultural context of what else was happening in the country and in the world during the time that the movement began picking up speed. Specifically looking at the Civil Rights Movement, students carry the misconception that, “the 1950s and 1960s is...distinctive from the activism that preceded and succeeded it in terms of a mass movement that captured the attention of and forced social change from white America” (Frost, 2012, p. 440). When students learn about historic topics as isolated events, they learn about the past as if it were in a vacuum, having no impact on the future, leaving students unable to draw conclusions and interpret history in meaningful ways.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

As we think about the amount of literature and scholarship about the Civil Rights Movement, current curriculums, and the impact of teaching K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement, it perhaps seems like an overwhelming task to take on yet, it is critical to the academic and social-emotional development of students that they receive quality instruction on this pivotal topic. Current curriculums and holiday celebrations to the heroes of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement are, on the whole, lacking in their ability to produce students who have an understanding of the context, issues, and impact of the movement beyond being able to recite dates and events. It is vital that educators move past this if we are to inspire K-2 students to become more analytical of the past and the present. Students are capable of making meaningful and accurate inferences and interpretations of the content if teachers and adults guide them and appropriately scaffold questioning sequences.

Considering each of the topics discussed in this literature review, the next chapter will look at specifics in planning and describing the capstone project itself. It will provide background information and reasoning behind topics and objectives chosen in the unit. The upcoming chapter describes the intended audience for the project as well as the details of the curriculum's lessons, activities, and assessments. Chapter three will justify topical and instructional decisions made when drafting the capstone project and the intended impact of those decisions on student learning.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Chapter Introduction

Thinking about implementing the wide variety of contemporary research on teaching the Civil Rights Movement to K-2 students presents educators with a number of questions regarding which content to teach, when to teach it, and how to introduce it to students. Chapter three of this capstone will address those questions by sifting through current and historical practices to answer, *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?* The chapter will combine research and practice in order to propose strategies for instruction and a project overview. Throughout the chapter, there will be discussions on audience and context, research support, frameworks and theories, and the benefits of a new curriculum. Chapter three will also address which topics are presented in the capstone curriculum and why they were chosen. The chapter will conclude with an introduction to chapter four which will reflect on the results and implications of the curriculum unit.

#### Project Overview

In order to answer the capstone question, a curriculum was designed to be implemented over the course of roughly eleven school days in twenty to thirty-minute increments. Though the curriculum is divided up into eleven separate topics and their corresponding lessons, teachers may find it beneficial to allow their classrooms extra work time for certain lessons, depending on the needs of students. Throughout the course

of the curriculum, students will be introduced to eleven topics related to the study of the Civil Rights Movement through a variety of mediums and will be assessed in a number of ways.

The unit begins with the topic of slavery. Slavery is critical to discussing the Civil Rights Movement because racial inequality can be easily traced back to the United States' roots in slavery. The lesson brings in pieces of literacy as well, utilizing Faith Ringgold's, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* as a catalyst for conversations about slavery. From there, the timeline shifts to a post-slavery America where segregation is rampant and intrusive in the lives of people of color. Students learn about six different ways in which segregation was implemented across the United States. This serves to set the stage and provide context for students as to what types of conditions future Civil Rights activists were facing during their lifetimes. Lesson three introduces students to the ways in which individuals began protesting segregation and racial discrimination. To connect to Civil Rights protestors, students think of and create their own protest signs using inspiration from early marches. These first three lessons of the curriculum primarily serve the needs of social-political context prior to introducing students to the actual events of the Civil Rights Movement itself.

Once students explore the social-political backdrop of slavery and segregation, they move on to the next section of the curriculum. Day four looks at the actions and legacy of MN Civil Rights activist Roy Wilkins and other leaders like Denzil A Carty, Nellie Stone Johnson, and W. Harry Davis. As youth living in the state of Minnesota, the students will work in groups to think about the state and communities that they live in,

brainstorming ways that they could improve Minnesota. Using these conversations, students collaborate on a community collage piece of art that compares their vision of MN with its current reality. On day five, the personal connection to history remains the focus as students conduct oral history interviews with adults in their lives that lived through the historic Civil Rights Movement. This activity provides a forum for discussion about individual and personal experiences with the fight for civil rights and humanizes the movement. From there, students spend day six of the curriculum analyzing primary sources from the Civil Rights Movement in the form of protest songs. Commonly used in marches and other movement events, songs from the time period give students the opportunity to listen to and interpret the emotions and feelings of activists in a way that cannot be done by simply reading speeches or printed out song lyrics.

After understanding the significance that individuals and local people played in the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the unit transitions into the major strategies of organizers. Day seven uses historical image analysis to focus on the role of Rosa Parks in the Montgomery Bus Boycott while day eight informs students of other tactics from the movement like Freedom Rides, sit-ins, marches, and voter registration drives. The following day allows for a brief introduction into Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement. Each of these days use a combination of group work, individual work, and large group learning to keep students engaged in the learning process.

The last section of the curriculum unit addresses more contemporary issues. Lesson ten calls for students to think about the life of President Barack Obama and his personal journey as the first Black man to be president of the United States. Continuing



contemporary themes, the eleventh and final lesson of the unit requires students to research and reflect on current events using newspapers, magazines, and other online news sources. The purpose of these last two days of the unit is to connect the students' learning about history to their understanding of the world around them today in order to form meaningful connections and lasting impressions about the Civil Rights Movement.

### **Audience and Context**

With the research question asking about the most effective practices for K-2 students, the intended audience for this project is elementary students in kindergarten through second grade. This age group was chosen primarily because of the demographic's current exposure to information about the Civil Rights Movement. The intended age group also seeks to begin introducing new, anti-racist and more truthful approaches to history instruction for young students. Certain aspects of this curriculum will be directed at students living in the Midwest. These aspects may include Minnesota-specific organizations or individuals like Roy Wilkins, the Reverend Denzil A Carty, Nellie Stone Johnson, and W. Harry Davis. These components can be easily altered for other states using that state's organization and/or local leaders.

### **Frameworks and Theories**

Social studies instruction, as it exists in elementary schools today, provides little to no meaningful and authentic experiences for students to tackle 21st century issues on their own terms (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017). The National Council for the Social Studies wrote in 2017 that, "The 'expanding communities' curriculum model of self, family, community, state, and nation is insufficient for today's young learners"

(National Council for the Social Studies, 2017, p. 1). This common method of approaching social studies is found in many elementary classrooms across the US but prevents students from engaging with real principles of social studies. Civics, economics, geography, and history are left behind in this method and are frequently given less and less time and resources despite the large impact that these aspects of social studies has on students in their day to day lives.

There are several researchers who have studied and written about the various ways of teaching history to elementary school students. Among these researchers is Chilcoat (1993) who wrote about ways to incorporate student-directed activities into social studies instruction. In Chilcoat's findings, history and social studies classrooms often revolve around activities like lectures, worksheets, and written essays (Chilcoat, 1993). While this verbal dispersing of information may be common as well as efficient in high school and college courses, it is out of touch with the interests and learning styles of many elementary students today. When answering the research question, *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?*, the traditional teacher-led lecture and corresponding worksheet are not enough to be effective or engaging to young students.

### **Curriculum Framework**

Lesson plans will be heavily shaped by the framework of McTighe and Wiggins, *Understanding by Design* (2005). Within the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework, each lesson in this capstone project has been designed by first thinking about the lesson objective and related standards. From there, the lessons have incorporated

research-driven methods and specific case studies, included and discussed in chapter two. This incorporation allowed for the planning of meaningful activities and lesson sequences for students (Wiggins, 2005). Similarly, the UbD framework emphasizes the need for the teacher to be a “coach of understanding” throughout lessons. Across the course of the lesson series, the teacher serves many different roles: introducing topics, facilitating discussions, supporting student learning, leading reflections, and more. The teacher is not seen as the only one with knowledge of the topic which allows for a more natural, authentic learning environment (Wiggins, 2005).

### **Support for Methods**

One of the methods used in the capstone project is the use of art in the social studies classroom. Art is beneficial because it allows students to express their feelings, ideas, and perspectives to demonstrate their learning and their understanding (Chilcoat, 1993). Furthermore, researchers have found that the visual representation associated with creating pieces of art aids students in their thinking, allows them to capture abstract information more concretely, and to communicate their thought processes more effectively (Chilcoat, 1993). This level of engagement grants students time and the ability to create and construct their own meanings about the movement. Additionally, art can more effectively convey cultural values, norms, and ideas when compared to traditional textbooks and written works (Burstein, 2010). Elementary students can more directly engage with social studies content through paintings, drawings, sculptures, and music, helping them connect to the past in meaningful ways. Art in many ways,

...helps better develop student understanding of disconnected concepts, vocabulary, and content in social studies. Using the arts extends student understanding by providing a context, often a tangible product, which then connects them to the content in real, explicit, relevant ways. (Burstein, 2010, p. 20)

Beyond creating pieces of artwork, students will also interpret historical pieces of art, including photographs, to start discussions about new topics. Examining photographs requires students to think deeper and more critically than if they are simply told about a photograph. The information and discussions that come out of viewing photos allow for teachers to gain valuable insight into the prior knowledge and observational skills of their students (Marangell, 2020).

Another type of activity to be used in the curriculum is oral history. Oral history is defined, loosely, as any type of oral conversation, such as interviews, with a person's own experience in history. Within an elementary classroom, oral history takes the form of many shapes: videos, audio recordings, transcripts, guest speakers, and more. Learning history from those who experienced it firsthand is critical to helping young students make meaning of difficult topics. "Through oral history projects, students can reap tremendous rewards academically, socially, and emotionally" (Walbert, 2004, p. 8). Engaging with oral history improves students writing, critical thinking, and research skills. Beyond these skills, students learn about historical content and related disciplines while making connections to the past and their community (Walbert, 2004).

Historical simulations are often used in social studies classrooms from kindergarten up until post-secondary courses. More often than not, the goal of historical simulations is to create a uniquely relatable experience where learners find themselves immersed in a specific event or time period, aimed at recreating the feelings and emotions of parties involved. As they exist in the 21st century, educators can be quick to reach into their grab bag of pedagogical choices and pull out simulations with a justification of, “Students are highly motivated, they become involved, they take on the roles assigned to them and seriously act out their parts” (Marsh, 1981, p. 188). Despite this high level of student engagement and motivation, many scholars find common issues when teachers try to use classroom simulations when covering graphic, darker aspects of world history (Gonzalez, 2019). “When it comes to certain events-those related to slavery, the Holocaust, war crimes, or any other event where people experienced violence or trauma-simulations can do more harm than good” (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 3). The harm that simulating these types of narratives creates reflects a confusing representation of the past when compared to the present.

Without taking special care, historical simulations can trivialize profound moments in history and ultimately fail to truly recreate historic traumatic experiences appropriately (Gonzalez, 2019). Considering the potential harmful effects of continuing to use historical simulation in classrooms, educators must provide simulations that provoke real, demanding questions in students. Among these questions Gonzalez (2019) asks are, “What are the consequences? What are the costs? Who’s being left behind?” (p. 2). Asking students to think about these intentional and meaningful questions pushes

them beyond a surface level reenactment and forces students to recognize the humanity in historical figures and their decisions. Considering all of the current research and studies on historical simulations, this capstone project intentionally leaves out any historical simulation, urging fellow educators to think critically about the implications of simulations and their possible ramifications before implementing them in a classroom.

### **Benefits of a Curriculum**

One of the biggest reasons to develop a curriculum based in the Civil Rights Movement is the overarching themes that students are exposed to during the curriculum. Students in a post No Child Left Behind world are often subjected to rigorous literacy and math curriculum and spend up to an hour per day immersed in each of these core subjects. Social studies, on the other hand, is typically taught within increments of no more than thirty minutes and only when confined to specific units of study. This prevents students from developing a full, complex understanding of topics like civics, geography, sociology, psychology, history, and more.

The specific curriculum created in chapter four provides teachers with a way to implement critical thinking skills within the framework of social studies. Among these activities will be research, debates, discussions, projects, artwork, and more. These activities are proven to be engaging and analytical experiences for diverse learners.

They need to engage in frequent opportunities to make daily decisions about democratic concepts and principles that are respectful of the dignity and rights of individuals and the common good. They need to participate in learning experiences that involve core values of democracy, including freedom of speech

and thought, equality of opportunity, justice, and diversity. (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017, p. 4)

The activities in this curriculum engage students with each other in each of these practices, leading them to learn from the practices in meaningful ways. “Elementary teachers should create opportunities for students to discuss values, engage in real-world problem solving, weigh costs and benefits, consider opportunity costs, and make rational and reasoned decisions” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017, p. 6). Thinking about the Civil Rights Movement in this way prevents cursory understandings of the past and forces students to think beyond their prior knowledge to recognize new ideas that can be applied to the 21st century and the day to day lives of students.

### **Chapter Summary**

Within chapter three of this capstone, several ideas have been discussed to support the methodology behind the curriculum unit. Beginning with a project overview, outlining the eleven major topics to introduce K-2 students to the Civil Rights Movement, the chapter provided insight that justifies the lessons and activities present in the capstone project. Giving a brief glimpse into the current research on interdisciplinary and integrated social studies learning, the chapter mapped out various activities to be reflected on at greater length in chapter four. Among these activities are artistic representations of the movement, oral history, small and large group discussions, and other student-centered lessons to activate student learning, answering the question, *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?* Looking ahead to chapter

four, these experiences will serve as a guidepost for the development of a curriculum that strives to create authentic learning environments for K-2 students across the state of MN and the US.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

Over the past three chapters, I have been investigating what it means to teach early elementary students in a world that is experiencing political and social unrest. As this paper was written, there was a notable surge in conversations surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis Police Department in Minnesota. The types of conversations and ideas presented in these capstone chapters became even more important for me to research and propelled the need to create a curriculum that would be meaningful for students going forward. As I investigated the question, *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?*, I discovered a plethora of answers but even more questions. Throughout this chapter, I reflect on my personal findings from this capstone and the implications that the project will have on future teaching and future learning. The chapter will also return to the literature review in chapter two, addressing some limitations of the project and areas where it could be explored more in-depth.

#### Learnings and Takeaways

When trying to answer my research question, I came across a great deal of resources that I had never discovered before and as a result, found a wealth of information that I did not anticipate. As a researcher, I went into this capstone project aware of the current need for improved Civil Rights Movement education in the United

States. I was, however, not fully aware of the fact that as of 2014, sixteen states did not require any instruction about the movement. While instruction is not required, it remains possible that schools were still teaching about the movement as a supplementary unit yet, on the whole, it seems incredibly alarming that Civil Rights is not considered a critical and essential piece of education. I found it, in some ways, unexpected that there is such little care for Civil Rights education in a country that is still struggling to realize the dream of MLK Jr. from the podium of the March on Washington.

As a writer, this capstone has allowed me to grow immensely in my ability to draft, revise, and then draft again. The process of creating a four chapter document dedicated to one research question seemed daunting from the start. The biggest personal milestone, completing the literature review in chapter two, opened my eyes to the level of urgency with which I had to continue researching as well as writing this capstone. As a learner, I often found myself relying on other professionals and colleagues for feedback, guidance, and support. The words of professors and my peer reviewer gave me new insight into my topic, refined my lesson plans, and improved this capstone immeasurably. Perhaps the greatest takeaway for myself as a learner is the importance of self-reflection. With each draft of these capstone chapters, I learned more and more, not only about the Civil Rights Movement itself, but also about K-2 students, K-2 standards, social studies instruction, the importance of fostering a sense community in classrooms, and more. Continuously returning to my prior pages demonstrated the evolution of my understanding and provided me with an outlet to improve my writing as my understandings deepened.

As a citizen in the US during a time of major racial and political unrest, this capstone has also informed me of the role that education plays, both in fostering communities and in peeling them apart. The research in this capstone reflects the ongoing and urgent need for meaningful and honest conversations about racism and its role in establishing the country we live in. We can no longer neglect to teach our students about the US' dark history of prejudice. We can no longer avoid controversial topics to appease white taxpayers and white educators who are uncomfortable discussing them with students. It is critical that we expand our students' learning in a way that informs them with authentic and relevant information while instilling critical thinking skills so that they are able to analyze the world around them and draw their own conclusions.

### **Revisiting the Literature Review**

When initially reviewing the literature written about teaching the Civil Rights Movement to elementary students, I was impressed by both the amount and variety of research that had been done on the topic. The expansiveness and exhaustiveness found in the research was a stark contrast to what I had been exposed to as a young student learning about MLK Jr. and civil rights. It led me to question, *if there is so much research out there, why are school practices still lacking in Civil Rights Movement instruction?* I continued to research, recognizing that this question could be expanded upon later. In forming the basis for my capstone project, I heavily gravitated towards a handful of sources that served as particular influences throughout my research.

One of these most important pieces was Cavallaro, Sembiente, Kervin and Baxley,'s, "Combating Racial Inequity through Local Historical Analysis" (Cavallaro,

2019). This work gave me information that reflected on ways that racial inequity can be addressed in elementary classrooms by looking at local angles. This article is the reason why I took time in my capstone to specifically look at Minnesota influences in the Civil Rights Movement and relate them back to student learning and student experiences as Minnesotans today. After completing the capstone project, I think it is furthermore important to recognize that Cavallaro's theories can also be applied to other forms of community engagement in contemporary times; creating a fundraiser for an organization in need, supporting families by donating cold weather gear during winter months, and organizing voting registration drives are all ways that students and classrooms could get involved in their community.

I was also greatly influenced by Christensen's "Using Art to Teach History to Young Learners" (Christensen, 2006). This influence can be seen by my use of multiple art-related lesson plans in the capstone project. Christensen's advocating for incorporation of art to help students develop and process their learning was critical to my work in developing this capstone. After completing the capstone, I also began to recognize the ways in which art can also be integrated into other subjects like language arts, math, and science. Language arts students can easily use art to represent a character or a setting from a story. Math students can engage with topics like radial symmetry and shapes by using art. Science learners can use art to create models and dioramas of content they are learning about. The benefits of incorporating art into lesson plans are incredibly far-reaching.

The last two major influences from the literature review go hand in hand. Foster, Root, and Lee's "Teaching Young Children about the Civil Rights Movement" (Foster, 2015) and Lee and Foster's "Exploring Multiple Views of History: Investigating the Civil Rights Movement through an Oral History Project" (Lee, 2011). These two works both gave me a better understanding of specific ways that history can be taught to young students and the ways that students interpret and make meaning of history in early elementary school. The second work also provided insight into the importance of oral history in creating meaning for students. This is why lesson five of the capstone project revolves around students interviewing an adult about their experiences with the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, both of these articles reflected on age appropriate practices and learning for students which kept me zoned in on student needs while writing this capstone.

### **Possible Implications and Limitations of the Capstone**

Though this capstone is the result of extensive research into past and current work on social studies instruction as well as Civil Rights Movement instruction, it does have its limitations. Students in different schools will have different needs and different levels of background knowledge before they begin the unit which will ultimately determine the unit's effectiveness. In addition, the project calls for many outside resources including books and technology. While these resources may be accessible through school budgets or district technology reserves, some other resources required to complete the unit are not. In two separate lessons, students take home an assignment to work on with an adult at home. It would be unrealistic to assume that every individual student has a strong

support system at home that would be able to take time to answer their student's questions and help them look through current events for something to bring to school. This creates an implication that students who have more access to adult help at home will be more successful in completing the unit.

One of the most pressing policy implications that this capstone has is the need for Civil Rights Movement education at early elementary ages. Each chapter in this capstone, particularly the literature review, emphasizes the need for students to be exposed to truthful, realistic portrayals of the movement and its impact today. When we as educators think about the importance of teaching topics like community, civic duty, integrity, and equity in our classrooms, we cannot ignore the parallels between our current world and the world of the historic Civil Rights Movement. The two worlds go hand in hand and deciding to wait until students are in middle or high school to begin conversations about race and the United States' dark history limits student understanding and denies them critical opportunities for growth and reflection.

Perhaps the largest limitation of the capstone is in its length. Classrooms in the 21st century have sometimes what seems like endless lists of standards that they are required to teach students in every subject. The capstone takes up a minimum of eleven days of instruction with the potential to take up more time, depending on the speed and needs of the students. Eleven days of instruction is a large chunk of the school year when teachers are pressed with a number of other content areas. In the same way that the capstone's length is a limitation, the capstone's length is also a hindrance in that it does not cover enough. If teachers are to effectively cover the Civil Rights Movement that has

generally been associated with Black communities, it is also necessary for them to recognize that the movement inspired a generation of social justice activists across a wide spectrum of issues in the United States and abroad. It is near impossible to capture the importance and details of each individual movement that occurred around the time of the Civil Rights Movement but they are just as necessary: the American Indian Movement, gay rights, the second wave of women's feminism, and more defined the 1960s-1970s and have marked our history forever.

### **Areas for Further Study**

The American Indian Movement, gay rights, and women's liberation are just a few of the movements that propelled the 1960s and 1970s into social justice decades. Looking at both their similarities in time and purpose, each of these movements could be used as an extension of this capstone's project. The American Indian Movement worked to fight for equal rights and restitution for centuries of injustices at the hands of federal and state governments. The fight for LGBTQ rights was kickstarted with the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and led to decades of activists working for guaranteed civil liberties. Women's Liberation, including *Roe v. Wade*, pushed out stereotypes of women as the lesser sex and as second class citizens. Given time and resources, this capstone could easily be enriched by comparing the Civil Rights Movement to these movements.

The other most logical area for further study would be to dig deeper into race relations after the 1970s. While this capstone attempts to address the transition from the 1960s to the 21st century, it certainly leaves out many events and figures that students can learn a lot from. Tracing the assassinations of MLK Jr. and Bobby Kennedy in 1968

to the protests of segregation at universities across the US in the 1970s can easily provide a background for students to talk about the Reagan administration's War on Drugs in the 1980s to the Rodney King riots in the 1990s.

### **Using Results and Benefitting the Profession**

When I first began this capstone, I knew that I had a lot to learn about teaching the Civil Rights Movement to early elementary students. After spending the course of two semesters investigating, *what are the most effective and engaging ways to teach K-2 students about the Civil Rights Movement while fostering meaningful connections to history?*, I have found that there are many, many answers to that question. Going forward, I will personally have a plethora of resources designed to improve not only social studies instruction in my classrooms but also that will give me opportunities to regularly integrate antiracist curriculum and activities into the classroom community. As I go forward, I will recognize that the best place to start, in social studies or other content areas, is with the students I am teaching and their own prior knowledge and experiences.

In a similar way, other educators can use this capstone, in its entirety or as a branching off point to expand their own pedagogy practices. As a whole, the capstone project gives educators a way to begin historically difficult and awkward conversations with students at the forefront of their own learning. It serves as a segue to foster a safe classroom environment that values the voices of its students and promotes social justice. Used in parts, the capstone can inform teachers of common misconceptions and misrepresentations of historical figures, events, and movements. The dangers of continuing to tell these myths and false truths are present in this capstone and, at the very



least, will cause educators to reflect on the narratives present in their curriculum and their impacts on students.

### **Conclusion**

As we look back on the past sixty-six years since the Supreme Court ruled on *Brown v. Board of Education*, the fight for civil rights and racial equality in America has continued on in the form of boycotts, sit-ins, Freedom Rides, marches, demonstrations, Black Power, race riots, and most recently, Black Lives Matter. Early elementary students have differing experiences and understandings of our nation's current political and racial climate but it is critical for all students to work together if we are going to truly achieve racial equality. Boiling down the past sixty-six years in the organized fight for civil rights into a two day lesson about MLK Jr. and Rosa Parks does little to address the needs of the current movement and its generation. If students are to be equipped with lessons and wisdom from the early leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, they must receive better, more in-depth, and more accurate, truthful narratives and instruction about the movement. When they are able to make meaningful connections between leaders of the past and themselves, they are more likely to continue that same fight today.

This capstone works to ensure that K-2 students are introduced to major themes of the movement at early ages. Starting with discussions about slavery, this capstone honors the work and contributions of ordinary, often nameless individuals in American history who risked life for the sake of liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Through a course of engaging, student-centered lessons and activities, students will be able to make meaningful connections through stories, art, collaboration, music, videos, news, and

more. Its purpose is to unite a classroom with a sense of community and connectivity through learning that will foster future dialogues and inspire change in communities from sea to shining sea.

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