

From Freedom Riders to The Children's March: Civil Rights Documentaries as Catalysts for Historical Empathy

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Historical documentary film usually offers content in a format that students find more engaging than traditional historical texts.¹ In the classroom, documentary film can be positioned within a historical thinking framework to study a broad concept like civil rights while facilitating students' source work and skill development. While social studies scholars have previously explored the value of using documentary film to study controversial issues or explore multiple perspectives,² this article emphasizes how to join documentary film and historical thinking to elicit and develop historical empathy.³ The article identifies four progressive civil rights documentaries, and outlines how to use the films together with multiple discussion and writing exercises to examine the U.S. civil rights movement and cultivate empathy in the classroom.

Historical thinking, an approach used in elementary, middle, and secondary grades to investigate the past, includes a series of source work activities like analyzing and corroborating historical narratives, historical perspective recognition, and empathy.⁴ Ultimately, students engaged in historical thinking use this approach to develop their own interpretation of the past and develop implications for their lives today. In the classroom, students can engage in historical thinking as individuals or with others. It is important to recognize that teaching and practicing historical thinking, particularly empathy, is an ongoing process that cannot be packaged or reduced to a few lessons about one topic or theme. Instead, the series of lessons described here should be part of a larger, ongoing

attempt to foster historical thinking among students in elementary, middle level, and secondary grades.

Documentaries as Catalysts for Historical Thinking

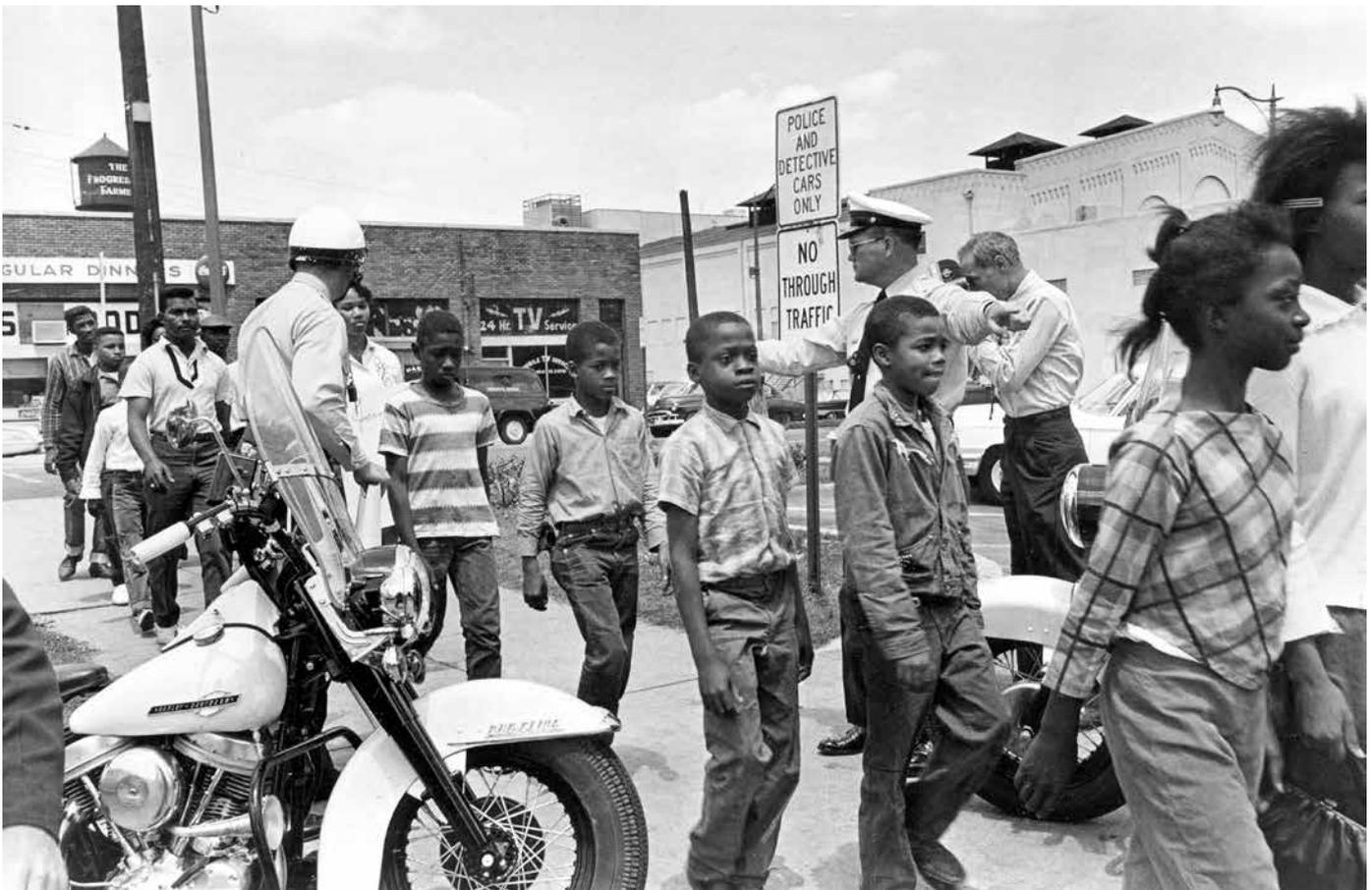
The four featured films present compelling narratives of the U.S. civil rights movement.⁵ The emotional pull of documentary film has the capacity to encourage empathy among viewers. Empathy is often considered the most difficult historical thinking skill to practice,⁶ and documentaries can promote it by engaging students' reasoning about and emotional involvement with historical individuals or groups and their experiences. When studying the civil rights movement, students can work to understand the freedom riders' decision to integrate buses

and lunch counters and the outside factors that affected the activists.

While empathy is a desired outcome of historical thinking and a common reaction to documentary film, it is important that teachers discuss with students the limitations of empathy.⁷ Challenges to fostering historical empathy include moving past perspective taking to affective engagement, analyzing available sources rather than engaging with those who experienced an event or era, and seeking to understand external factors and their impact on a historical individual's or group's actions. As students actively engage in empathy with individuals or groups presented in the documentaries, they are better positioned to identify connections between historical events and people and their own lives, and to understand why civil rights continues to be a persistent issue both nationally and globally.

Interviews as Counter-Narratives: Facilitating Empathy

The documentaries I selected present well-crafted historical accounts of four key events during the civil rights movement. They use primary source interviews to illustrate the counter-narratives of the movement that are often missing



Policemen are leading a group of black school children into jail, following their arrest for protesting against racial discrimination near the city hall of Birmingham, Ala., on May 4, 1963. The historical event is chronicled in the documentary *Mighty Times: The Children's March*. (AP Photo/Bill Hudson)

Figure 1. Documentaries that Examine the U.S. Civil Rights Movement

Film	Summary
<i>Mighty Times: The Legacy of Rosa Parks</i>	Narrates the counter-narrative of the group effort surrounding the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycotts from 1955-1956. Strengths include reenactments, primary source use, and interviews with participating community members.
<i>Freedom Riders</i>	Narrates the Freedom Rides of 1961. Strengths are extensive use of primary sources including numerous interviews and a chronological overview of the larger movement.
<i>Four Little Girls</i>	Narrates the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Strengths include primary source interviews with victims' families and citizens, original video footage, and a focus on counter-narratives of the movement.
<i>Mighty Times: The Children's March</i>	Narrates the contribution of children and adolescents during the movement. Strengths are interviews with citizens who took part in the march as children, re-enactments, and an overview of life in the Jim Crow South.

from textbooks, popular film, and trade books.⁸ Each of the documentaries presents interview footage, still images, and original historical footage or reenactments. The storytelling format offers multiple opportunities for learners to engage in historical empathy. Together, the films present a continual theme of everyday citizens collectively engaged

in civic action. The films are practical for teaching social studies in grades 4-12, and can be used to explore four NCSS Standards: ❶ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE; ❷ INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY; ❸ INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS; AND ❹ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.

While they present valuable counter-narratives of the movement, each film

comes from a certain perspective and teachers should encourage students to critically analyze the documentaries and respond to them as historical sources. The following prompts may help foster critical analysis. Teachers may also find it useful to consider these themes when corroborating the films with other related sources:

Figure 2. Responding to the Films

Sample Anticipation Guide Items	Sample Discussion Prompts	Corroborating Sources	Sample Written Response Items
Activating Prior Knowledge			
	<p>What do you know about the U.S. civil rights movement?</p> <p>What has informed what you know? What questions do you have?</p>	<p>Overview of Historical Thinking http://historicalthinkingmatters.org</p> <p>http://teachinghistory.org/historical-thinking-intro</p> <p>Introduction to Civil Rights: Classroom Resources from the Library of Congress www.loc.gov/teachers/classroom-materials/themes/civil-rights/</p> <p><i>Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories</i>, Ellen S. Levine</p>	<p>What does it mean to think historically?</p> <p>What questions do you have about the civil rights movement?</p>
Mighty Times: The Legacy of Rosa Parks			
<p>What do you already know about Rosa Parks?</p> <p>What is the popular narrative of Rosa Parks?</p> <p>What is the counter-narrative of Rosa Parks and the bus boycotts?</p>	<p>What does Rosa's story tell us about how history is told?</p> <p>Why do you think the boycott was successful?</p> <p>How does this film disrupt the popular narrative?</p> <p>What questions would you ask the filmmaker?</p>	<p>Rosa Parks www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/rosaparks/story.asp</p> <p>Rosa's Arrest Records www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/rosaparks/rosaparks.html</p> <p>Overview of the Boycott www.montgomeryboycott.com</p> <p><i>Rosa</i>, Nikki Giovanni <i>She Would Not Be Moved: How We Tell The Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott</i>, Herbert Kohl <i>Rosa Parks: A Life</i>, Douglas Brinkley</p>	<p>How did you engage historical thinking today? What was difficult about the process?</p> <p>Given their historical context, why do you think a group of citizens boycotted the buses?</p> <p>What historical narrative can you develop after corroborating this film with other historical sources?</p>
The Freedom Riders			
<p>Could you get on the bus?</p> <p>What film elements (photos, footage, interviews, etc) were the most influential and why?</p>	<p>How has your knowledge of the civil rights movement developed? How has your thinking changed? Why?</p> <p>Who or what did you relate to in the film?</p>	<p>Library of Congress Online Exhibits, www.loc.gov/exhibits/civilrights/exhibit.html</p> <p>Sit Ins, www.sitinmovement.org/history/greensboro-chronology.asp</p> <p><i>Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement</i>, Ann Bausum</p>	<p>What was the role of organized groups in the civil rights movement?</p> <p>What outside factors influenced the freedom riders' decisions?</p> <p>Why are interviews powerful tools for understanding the civil rights movement?</p> <p>What questions would you ask the freedom riders?</p>

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1. What was the filmmaker's intent and perspective?
2. What historical viewpoints are presented or missing in the film?
3. What historical narratives does the film illuminate, as compared to other historical sources?

Figure 2 identifies archived sources and literature that can be corroborated with the four films (for document analysis templates, including film analysis, see the National Archives resources at [www.](http://www.archives.gov/education/special-topics.html)

www.archives.gov/education/special-topics.html).

Viewing and Responding to the Films

Before and During the Films

First, teachers should consider whether they will screen each full film or segments of each film. For example, a teacher might choose to use the entire short film *Mighty Times: The Legacy of Rosa Parks* but use

only the first 50 minutes of *The Freedom Riders*, which illustrates the initial rides and the Jim Crow South with interview footage. Based on the teacher's decision, anticipation guides for each film can be created. Again, teachers have the option to modify anticipation guides to meet their teaching and learning goals. For example, teachers might choose to teach and practice a different historical thinking skill with each film or focus on one skill (e.g., empathy) exclusively across the

Figure 2. Responding to the Films (continued)

Sample Anticipation Guide Items	Sample Discussion Prompts	Corroborating Sources	Sample Written Response Items
Four Little Girls			
What surprised you? What questions do you have? What do you think the filmmaker's intent was in producing this film? Why?	How can we attempt historical empathy with people we do not know, cannot meet? What questions would you ask the girls' family members?	Civil Rights Movement Sources www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesonthepriize/sources/ Movement Timeline and Audio Files www.usm.edu/crdp/index.html Newspaper Article on the Church Bombing www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0915.html#article <i>Birmingham Sunday</i> , Larry Dane Brimmer	What elements of the documentaries have fostered your work with empathy? Why do you think so? How has your thinking about the civil rights movement changed?
Mighty Times: The Children's March			
What role did organized groups play in the civil rights movement? What quotes were powerful?	What surprised you about the four films you've viewed? Why did citizens take part in each of these events?	Dr. King's Speech, 16th Street Baptist, May 3, 1963 Dr. King's Speech, Birmingham Jail <i>We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March</i> , Cynthia Levinson <i>Child of the Civil Rights Movement</i> , Paula Young Shelton, Raul Colon School Desegregation: Individuals and Groups <i>Through My Eyes</i> , Ruby Bridges Little Rock Nine http://aam.govst.edu/projects/mwysocki/primary_sources.htm	How have the films influenced your thinking about the civil rights movement? Why do you think the children's march was so effective? How are documentaries different than more traditional historical sources?
Civil Rights and Historical Empathy			
	What civil rights issues exist today? Why do you think historical empathy is such challenging work? Are there limitations to empathy using these four films?		Which event, group, or person in the films did you engage empathy towards? Why? Compare and contrast the four films. What were the strengths and limitations of each? Of the four together?

four films. In general, students should use the anticipation guides to identify their prior knowledge, as a tool for recording their reactions and connections during the viewing, and as an informational source to return to during the resulting discussions. Guides should include a variety of questions, prompts, or graphics that help facilitate students' thinking during and following the films. Teachers can choose to create anticipation guides in either digital or print format.

While anticipation guides are useful for writing before and during the films, individual reflections can be used to assess student learning as the series of films progress. For example, questions

related to empathy in the anticipation guides can be explored further and assessed in students' written responses. Figure 2 provides suggested anticipation guide, discussion, and written response prompts to use in conjunction with the films.

After the Films

Because of the storytelling design and content of the films, rich discussions tend to follow a group viewing of these films.⁹ Using the anticipation guides from the films and the discussion prompts in Figure 2, teachers can foster a dialogue that carries over into students' written responses. For example, using the

anticipation guide prompts for films 3-4 (*Four Little Girls* and *Mighty Times: The Children's March*), teachers can work with students to evaluate the film texts as reliable historical sources (e.g., identifying the filmmaker's intent). Then, by choosing from the sample discussion and written response prompts, teachers can continue working with films as historical texts while guiding the students in identifying their attempts at historical empathy and its limitations in regards to all four films.

Teachers may choose to organize class discussions followed by online postings, or else to allow students to respond initially online and then continue discus-

sions in small groups or as a class. By offering multiple modalities for responding, teachers can build students' knowledge of the civil rights movement while developing their discussion skills.

Whole class or small group discussions in a face-to-face or online format are beneficial and foster students' historical thinking across the process. Time constraints may limit the opportunities for in-class discussion and writing exercises, resulting in responses being completed out of class or requiring teachers to use the films across more days for shorter periods. Two Web 2.0 tools are particularly useful for creating and archiving online responses. Padlet (www.padlet.com) displays students' responses as a virtual bulletin board. Each Padlet can be created with a unique web address and posts appear in real-time, making it an ideal format for students to respond individually to the films before engaging with peers in class. Edmodo (www.edmodo.com) is also effective for beginning or continuing conversations about the films. Students can respond to a question posted by the teacher, post a new thread, or reply to peers. Both Padlet and Edmodo are free, secure sites with flexible features for classroom teaching.

In conclusion, by joining documentary film and historical teaching, social studies teachers can offer a more dynamic approach to developing historical empathy while studying civil rights. By couching the films in an approach to civil rights that promotes historical thinking, teachers can more effectively engage students with the film content during and beyond film viewing, expand students' capacity for empathy, and hone students' discussion and writing skills. 🌍

Notes

1. Alan S. Marcus and Jeremy D. Stoddard, "The Inconvenient Truth about Teaching History with Documentary Film: Strategies for Presenting Multiple Perspectives and Teaching Controversial Issues," *The Social Studies* 100 (2009): 279–84.
2. Ibid.; Diana E. Hess, "From *Banished* to *Brother Outsider*; *Miss Navajo* to *An Inconvenient Truth*: Documentary Films as Perspective-Laden Narratives," *Social Education* 71, no. 4 (May/June 2007): 194–99.

3. Jeremy D. Stoddard and Alan S. Marcus, "The Burden of Historical Representation: Race, Freedom, and Educational Hollywood Film," *Film and History* 36 (2006): 26–35.
4. For an in-depth description of teaching for and with historical thinking and additional information about how to frame the approach in your teaching, see Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unmatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple Press, 2001) and Bruce VanSledright, "What Does It Mean to Think Historically and How Do You Teach It," *Social Education* 68, no. 3 (March/April 2004): 230–233.
5. *Mighty Times: The Legacy of Rosa Parks*, directed by Robert Houston (2002; HBO and Southern Poverty Law Center), VHS; *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson (2010; Firelight Films for American Experience), www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/; *Four Little Girls*, directed by Spike Lee (1997; HBO), DVD; *Mighty Times: The Children's March*, directed by Robert Houston (2004; HBO and Southern Poverty Law Center), DVD.
6. Alan S. Marcus, "From the Civil War to 9/11: Democracy and the Right to a Fair Trial," *Social Education* 75, no. 4 (September 2011): 196–98; Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2004).
7. For more information on fostering historical empathy with students, see Jason Endacott and Sarah Brooks, "An Updated Theoretical and Practical Model for Promoting Historical Empathy," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 41–58; Sarah Brooks, "Historical Empathy as Perspective Recognition and Care in one Secondary Social Studies Classroom," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 39, no. 2 (2011): 166–202. For insight on promoting historical empathy using film, see Jeremy Stoddard, "Attempting to Understand the Lives of Others: Film as a Tool for Developing Historical Empathy," in *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History with Film*, ed. Alan Marcus (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age, 2007): 187–216.
8. Counter-narratives are the chronicled stories of either contemporary or historical events, groups of people, or individuals that offer a perspective or account that challenges the popular or dominant narratives that are most often documented; comprehensive lesson plans and films are available as part of a free film kit for educators for *Mighty Times: The Legacy of Rosa Parks* and *Mighty Times: The Children's March*. Visit www.tolerance.org for more information. The full film *Freedom Riders* is available for streaming at www.pbs.org and also for purchase. Visit the PBS website for additional teaching resources for the freedom rides as well as the larger movement.
9. Marcus and Stoddard, "The Inconvenient Truth about Teaching History with Documentary Film: Strategies for Presenting Multiple Perspectives and Teaching Controversial Issues."

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