Celebrating the Life and Legacy of Rosa Parks

Lorraine Stewart

Lessons on Rosa Parks and her refusal to surrender a bus seat are taught in many, maybe most, elementary social studies classrooms across America. Too often, however, the interesting biography of this long-term activist, her role in the Civil Rights Movement, is reduced to a small snapshot of a physically tired woman who did not feel like giving up her bus seat to a white man. That's it. The story is not told in any depth. Thus we glaze over a whole chapter of history and trivialize one person's vital role. Our students grow into adults, still believing that tired feet and a sudden stubbornness were the only factors that led Parks to give up her bus seat for a white man in a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955.

In his new book for adult readers, *She Would Not Be Moved: How We Tell the Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, author and National Book Award Winner Herbert Kohl labels this belief: “Rosa was tired.” Kohl confronts the shallow narration that appears in too many trade and textbook writers by suggesting ways that teachers can present a fuller accounting of related events. This type of critical examination is sorely needed to help balance our views of the Civil Rights era, to differentiate myths from facts, and to provide a truer understanding of who Rosa Parks was and how she lived her life.

Denied Her Place
During the weeks following Rosa Parks’ recent death—in the midst of conversations with children and adults—I was constantly reminded of the need for a deeper understanding of her life. During those conversations, it became clear that there must be many Americans, including in-service and pre-service teachers, who still believe the “Rosa was [physically] tired” myth. I surveyed my social studies methods students and discovered that 25 out of 30 students had a knowledge base about Parks that seemed to be limited to that one-dimensional image.

While attending a national conference, I found that quite a few social studies educators that I conversed with held on to a different, but still shallow interpretations of Park’s contributions. No, they did not believe the “Rosa was tired” myth, but several asserted that “Rosa was a plant”—meaning that she was passively “set up” to get arrested by others, experienced activists, who choreographed her protest. During one conversation, two educators elaborated on how leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had “instructed Parks to sit toward the front of the bus in order to provoke a confrontation with the driver.” This unsubstantiated anecdote is harmful for at least two reasons: (a) it reduces Parks to a puppet rather than a leading player, and (b) it creates the impression that black citizens had to go to extraordinary efforts before they would experience oppression and discrimination.

With regard to the first point, Parks was no puppet. (Nor was she acting on impulse.) She had educated herself for just this kind of conflict, and the fact that she acted righteously at an opportune place and time is to her credit. NAACP leaders quickly recognized her nonviolent protest and arrest as an excellent opportunity to challenge Jim Crow laws in the courts.

Second, the claim that Parks had to “provoke” an arrest ignores the magnitude of discrimination that was omnipresent in the South at that time. Everyday examples of unfair treatment and prejudice were so prevalent that the NAACP had many cases to consider. The organization had been waiting for the “right case,” free from unrelated factors that could jeopardize the effort.
Both before and after her moment of national fame, Parks worked with the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP in several capacities. Her service included helping to mobilize a voter registration drive in Montgomery and serving as adviser to the Youth Council and secretary for the local chapter.

Few people know that, addition to her great involvement with the NAACP, Parks attended a two-week training workshop at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, during the summer of 1955. The Highlander Folk School was originally founded as a place where people in the Appalachian Mountains could receive training in their fight for safer working conditions and better pay. By the 1950s, Myles Horton, the founder, was working for Civil Rights. In Rosa Parks, My Story, Parks states, “I spent ten days at Highlander and went to different workshops, mostly on how to desegregate schools.” A few months after her return from Highlander, Parks made her historic protest by remaining seated.

Activist and Citizen in Training
In the January/February 2004 issue of this journal, educators Hilary Landorf and Ethan Lowenstein strove to dispel the “Rosa Parks myths” by clearly outlining Parks’ roles as an activist. They included the fact that she “had a long background of service and commitment to promoting the rights of African-Americans, and was part of an ongoing effort by the African-American community in Montgomery, Alabama, to resist Jim Crow segregation.” Landorf and Lowenstein shared the little-known fact that Parks was among the first women in Montgomery to join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

New Children’s Books about Rosa
Identifying, reading, and engaging students with children’s books that address some of the lesser-known aspects of Parks’ life will invite students to gain a broader knowledge of her and the Civil Rights Movement. I highlight in this article four children’s books that accurately portray Parks as an activist and acknowledge the broader context of her life’s story—and the years of struggle of the black community against Jim Crow laws.

The first is a new picture book, Rosa, by Nikki Giovanni, that beautifully presents Parks’ story with radiant colors and heartfelt words. Giovanni elaborates on all the things that Parks was tired of.

She signed as she realized she was tired. Not tired from work, but tired of putting white people first. Tired of stepping off sidewalks to let white people pass, tired of eating at separate lunch...
counters and learning at separate schools. She was tired of “Colored” entrances, “Colored” balconies, “Colored” drinking fountains, and “Colored” taxis. She was tired of getting somewhere first and being waited on last. Tired of “separate” and definitely tired of “not equal.”

Through this book, students can read and feel the mix of anguish and determination that Parks must have experienced. Teachers can challenge students to imagine what Parks might have been feeling as she refused to move. Students could follow up by writing about their own feelings and experiences. They can also make writing connections by creating a character analysis of Parks in the same way as students conduct a through examination of all aspects of a literary character such as their appearance, behavior, speech, and occupation. Parks is from the “pages of real history,” so students can draw upon all the appropriate children’s books discussed in this article as resources for their character analysis. These activities can help to engage students deeply in the book, rather than just encounter it.

Giovanni identifies one of Parks’s fellow riders as the father of a youth who frequently attended events sponsored by the NAACP Youth Council. This detail gives the author the opportunity to mention that Parks was an advisor for the NAACP Youth Council in Montgomery, which is another example of Parks’s involvement with community service prior to December 1, 1955.

The second book, *Don’t Know Much About Rosa Parks*, which is also newly published, is an intriguing work organized in a question-and-answer format. Author Kenneth Davis dives into some harsh realities of the South and gives specific details of Parks’s life from childhood through her fortieth birthday on February 4, 2003. This book, recommended for students in grades three through seven, goes into more detail than do most picture books. Davis thoroughly discusses the Montgomery Improvement Association, the Women’s Political Council and its major role in planning and spreading the word about the boycott, as well as the influence of Raymond Parks, Rosa’s husband. *Don’t Know Much About Rosa Parks* includes photographs of many people, insightful etchings, and sidebars that elaborate on key points. This book holds a wealth of information. It is a “must read” for older elementary students.

Older Favorites
*Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue with Today’s Youth*, first published in 1996, is a wonderful complement to *Rosa* because it specifically makes the point that “she didn’t give up her seat because she was tired.” When answering a sixth grader’s question, “How did you feel when you were on the bus?” Parks responded,

> People have said over the years that the reason I did not give up my seat was because I was tired. I did not think of being physically tired. My feet were not hurting. I was tired in a different way. I was tired of seeing so many men treated as boys and not called by their proper names or titles. I was tired of seeing children and women mistreated and disrespected because of the color of their skin. I was tired of Jim Crow laws, of legally enforced racial segregation.

*Dear Mrs. Parks* is a compilation of questions posed by children in their letters to Parks and her responses to them. Teachers might present students with a third-person account of Parks’s actions and then turn to this book to read what Parks herself recalls thinking and feeling during her now famous protest, her own rationale for why she chose not to move from her seat. Parks’s words, “I find it rewarding to leave the future generations with my thoughts,” express her humble spirit of integrity and respect. I wish that this book could somehow find its way into every elementary classroom not just in this country, but all around the world.

After reading and discussing all or some portions of *Dear Mrs. Parks*, students could interview or correspond
with a local individual who participated in the Civil Rights Movement. You can find such people if you look for them; the Civil Rights Movement was a vast and prolonged effort, and—in one way or another—it touched the life of every community in the United States.  

Life imitates Art

The final book discussed here was published in 1999, If A Bus Could Talk, by Faith Ringgold, is a historical fiction that presents Parks' story in an imaginary way while still holding true to the events of that day and the Civil Rights Movement in general. It is clear from the illustrations that black riders were the majority of the customers using the bus system. Ringgold shares an example that helps students to perceive that random acts of prejudice were a common experience for blacks in the South before the Montgomery Bus Boycott. One day, after Rosa Parks had paid her fare, the driver (bus drivers were, without exception, white) asked Parks to get off the front entryway to the crowded bus and enter at the back. She stepped off and the bus pulled away. Parks was left standing on the curb. This was a common experience for Blacks at that time.

Other details in this book help children see her qualities of persistence and determination in the face of hardship. For example, the well-educated Rosa Parks attempted to vote three times before the white election clerks at the polling place would permit her to do so.

Fittingly, some elements of Ringgold's imaginary story were actualized during the week following Parks' death: in Montgomery and Detroit, bus operators paid tribute to the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement" by either reserving the first seats of their buses, placing a black ribbon on those seats, covering the back with black fabric and placing a photograph of Parks in the middle, or by putting signs of honor above front row seats. (Was this life imitating art? Maybe so.) Students could make comparisons in discussion or writing) of what happened in Ringgold's story to the actual, informal tributes that took place on some buses after her death.

If A Bus Could Talk also lends itself to teaching map skills. Ringgold chronicles Parks' life from her birth on February 4, 1913 up until September 6, 1956, when President Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Ringgold names several Alabama cities that were relevant to Parks' life such as Tuskegee, where she was born, Pine Level, where she attended school through the sixth grade, and Montgomery, where the bus boycott took place. The Parks' moved to Detroit, Michigan, in 1957 because it had become difficult for the couple to find employment in the Montgomery area, and their lives were repeatedly threatened due to the high profile court case and subsequent boycott. Students could explore their reading and map skills by finding these cities, comparing the demographics of each, and simply calculating the distance between each, especially the distance between Montgomery, Alabama, and Detroit, Michigan. The illusion of a "brief conflict" on the bus is quickly dispelled when one considers the disruption that Parks' protest wrought on her own family and living situation.

A Fuller Understanding

In my view, the four children's books discussed above share Rosa Parks' story in ways that honor her steady contribution to the struggle of Civil Rights in the United States. Teachers need to be mindful that all books on the topic are not as thorough as these. When using trade books—whether in the context of a language arts or social studies lesson—the teacher should be prepared to fill in the gaps when a particular book for children relates a historical event in brief. In such cases, it is essential for the teacher to read background materials, check out criticisms and book reviews, investigate curious historical details, and recognize inaccuracies or possibly misleading statements in a book that provides a richer understanding of a person, a moment, or a movement in history.

Notes

7. Writing a Character Analysis. http://www.fsu.edu/docs/charter.doc

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