

## **Civil Rights**

The book "*The Watson's Go To Birmingham -1963*" by Christopher Paul Curtis, is a novel that is read by middle school students as part of the curriculum in the Newark Public Schools. The story is an historical fiction that allows students an opportunity to learn about Birmingham, Alabama during the civil rights movement in 1963. It takes them from the relative calm of Flint, Michigan to the epicenter of the fight for civil rights in a time when four young black girls are killed by a bomber at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church just after choir practice on a Sunday morning.

The Watsons are a fictitious family that travels from Flint, Michigan to Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 and by using songs that were written specifically about the bombing, the civil rights movement, and video of events as they unfolded, I hope to allow students and opportunity to have a better understanding of the historical significance of this period in American history.

### **The Basics**

#### **SUBJECT**

American History, Civil Rights,

#### **TARGETED GRADE LEVELS**

7 – 8 Social Studies to support Language Arts

#### **STANDARDS**

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (Adopted 2009):

6.1 U.S. History: America in the World All students will acquire the knowledge and skills to think analytically about how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage. Such knowledge and skills enable students to make informed decisions that reflect fundamental rights and core democratic values as productive citizens in local, national, and global communities.

6.1.8.A.3.a. Examine the ideals found in the Declaration of Independence, and assess the extent to which they were fulfilled for women, African Americans, and Native Americans during this time period.

6.1.8.A.3.b. Evaluate the effectiveness of the fundamental principles of the Constitution (i.e., consent of the governed, rule of law, federalism, limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, and individual rights) in establishing a federal government that allows for growth and change over time.

6.1.8.A.3.g. Evaluate the impact of the Constitution and Bill of Rights on current day issues.

6.3 Active Citizenship in the 21st Century All students will acquire the skills needed to be active, informed citizens who value diversity and promote cultural understanding by working collaboratively to address the challenges that are inherent in living in an interconnected world.

6.3.8.D.1. Engage in simulated democratic processes (e.g., legislative hearings, judicial proceedings, elections) to understand how conflicting points of view are addressed in a democratic society.

**Author:**

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**Introduction:**

The intention of this Unit Plan is to give students a foundation and understanding of the political climate and racism that was present during the time that “The Watsons Go To Birmingham -1963- takes place. Under legislation sponsored by Assemblymen William D. Payne and Craig A. Stanley, schools in the Garden State are moving to recognize the integral part African-Americans have played at every turn in this nation’s history. The Amistad Bill (A1301), which became law in 2002, calls on New Jersey schools to incorporate African-American history into their social studies curriculum. This legislation also created the Amistad Commission, a 23-member body charged with ensuring that African-American history, contributions and experiences are adequately taught in the state’s classrooms. "New Jersey Amistad Commission." *New Jersey Amistad Commission*. State of New Jersey, <http://www.state.nj.us/education/amistad/>

By using the Amistad Law as a guide, it is my hope to allow students an opportunity to have a much clearer understanding of the struggle that African Americans undertook in an effort to gain civil rights as they are guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States of America. I also hope to arouse a spirit within my students that shows them that they are the seeds of change as well as the great responsibility that they have in the ongoing battle for social justice.

My student population comes from the South Ward of Newark, New Jersey and is predominantly African American, African Immigrants from Nigeria, Puerto Rican, and a small emerging population of Caucasians. The overwhelming majority of students are receiving fully subsidized breakfast and lunch as it is a low income population.

The school building has had infrastructure improvements in the area of technology with smartBoards in every middle level grade classroom. The technology allows for students and teachers to aggressively use the music, audio-video, and ancillary material that have

been incorporated in the Voices Across Time Institute as a means to further the understanding of historical events in American History.

### **Objectives:**

The Students Will Demonstrate:

- An understanding of the history of the Civil Rights movement in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963
- An understanding of primary and secondary source material
- An understanding of the power of song, audio-video, and primary sources
- An understanding of empathy and sympathy and the ability to distinguish the difference between the two emotions
- An understanding of personal responsibility to play a role in social justice

### **Resources/Materials:**

“Birmingham Sunday” (Joan Baez)

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shgSLKb-onA&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shgSLKb-onA&feature=player_embedded)

Documentary Film: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGoP6TGa7ig>

“(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue” (Thomas "Fats" Waller / Harry Brooks / Andy Razaf)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ELb0dQiV5w>

“Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” (Author Unknown)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5Z1trynEHs>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJ6mhRZ8LjM>

“Emmett Till” (Bob Dylan)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywc3YFeMiYE>

“Man in the Mirror” (Michael Jackson)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEQAie8ABLE>

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What are civil rights?
2. What is racism?
3. What makes a person an activist?
4. Under what circumstances is a person compelled to take a stand to create change?

5. Are protestors/activists criminals?
6. Can teenagers be activists?
7. Is historical fiction a good way to teach history or does it soften the truth of what occurred at a point in history?

Vocabulary:

- Birmingham, Alabama
- Flint, Michigan
- Protest
- Civil rights
- Anarchy
- Defiant behavior
- Marshal law
- Racism
- Activisms
- Prejudice

### **PROCEDURES:**

Day 1: Foundation of the climate of unrest in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963.

The students will be given a copy of (What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue. Based upon a review of the lyrics the students will attempt to determine:

1. When was the song written?
2. Who would be singing the song? Male or female?
3. What race is the singer?
4. What words indicate if this is a celebratory song or a sad song?
5. What feelings come to mind from reading the lyrics?

The students will then pair up and discuss their responses with a partner and complete a Venn diagram that indicates different as well as common responses.

The class will then share as a class at the Venn Diagram is completed on the smartBoard in the front of the classroom. The song will then be played on the smartBoard as the students follow along. Based upon the music, the students will be given an opportunity to discuss whether they would change their responses.

The class will then watch and listen to the video, Birmingham Sunday, by Joan Baez.

Homework: Respond to, "How is Birmingham, Alabama, 1963, the same or different then Newark, New Jersey, in 2013?"

Day 2: How does civil disobedience play a role in changing the mind-set of the American cultural landscape?

The students will listen to, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” and respond to:

1. What are some issues that may still require an organized civil response?
2. What issue would you as a student be willing to risk arrest and jail for?
3. How would you go about determining what issue is worth taking action on?
4. What steps would you take to bring about change?

The class will then share their personal responses as a class and discuss the process of how social change comes about from activism.

The class will then break into groups of three and brainstorm an issue that they would like to develop a plan of action for.

To drive home that change begins with individuals coming together to find common ground, the class will listen to, while reading the lyrics to, Man in the Mirror, by Michael Jackson, and put a plan of action into practice.

### **Closure:**

The students will present a poster that calls attention to a specific situation that requires action to change.

### **Evaluation:**

The students will present a poster of the issue that they have identified as being important to come together for change. During the presentation they will identify:

1. The issue.
2. Why it is important?
3. How they came to a consensus?
4. How will they draw attention to the issue?

### **Reflection:**

By using music that is historical and from “pop-culture” students will be given an opportunity to see that people rising up for change are the catalyst that creates change. People make sacrifices for other people for without that commitment, there would be no change.

As a social studies teacher it is important to step outside the box to offer students an opportunity to gain an appreciation of what a specific period in history looked like so that they may be able to make a personal connection on a meta-cognitive level. Using music and

song is one way for a student to gain that empathy and sympathy necessary to obtain that knowledge.