

**COMPARING LANGUAGE OF SELF-EMPOWERMENT****TEACHER TOOL 4: CONTEXTUALIZING JAMES BROWN'S "SAY IT LOUD, I AM BLACK AND I AM PROUD"**

This Teacher Tool provides historical context for James Brown's "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" with an emphasis on the civil rights movement from 1954 to 1968.

The Civil Rights Movement in the United States refers to a set of events and reform movements aimed at abolishing public and private acts of racial discrimination and racism against African Americans from 1954 to 1968, particularly in the southern United States. Prior to the civil rights movement much of the South was segregated as a result of Jim Crow laws. The Jim Crow laws were state and local laws in the United States enacted between 1876 and 1965. "Jim Crow" is a term derived from the name of a popular minstrel show character of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Jim Crow laws mandated *de jure* racial segregation in all public facilities, with a supposedly "separate but equal" status for black Americans. Some examples of these laws were the segregation of public schools, public places and public transportation, and the segregation of restrooms and restaurants for whites and blacks. State-sponsored school segregation was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of the United States in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. This ruling marked the beginning of the dismantling of Jim Crow laws.

The strategy of public education, legislative lobbying, and litigation within the court system that typified the Civil Rights Movement in the first half of the 20th century broadened after the *Brown* decision to include a strategy of "direct action." This approach encompassed boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, marches, and similar tactics that relied on mass mobilization, nonviolent resistance, and civil disobedience. This mass action strategy typified the movement from 1960 to 1968. Churches, the centers of most black communities, and local grassroots organizations mobilized volunteers to participate in broad-based actions. This was not only a more direct approach, but a more rapid means of affecting change than the traditional approach of mounting court challenges.

From 1955–1968, acts of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience produced crisis situations between activists and government authorities. Federal, state, and local governments, businesses, educational institutions, and communities often had to respond immediately to crises, which highlighted the inequities faced by African Americans. Forms of protest and/or civil disobedience included boycotts such as the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956) in Alabama. It lasted for over a year until a federal court order required Montgomery to desegregate its buses. The success in Montgomery made its leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a nationally known figure. It also inspired other bus boycotts.

Other successful forms of protest were "sit-ins" such as the influential Greensboro, North Carolina sit-in (1960); marches, such as the Selma to Montgomery marches (1965) in Alabama; and a wide range of other nonviolent activities, such as "Freedom Rides." Freedom Rides were journeys Civil Rights activists took on interstate buses into the segregated southern United States to test the United States Supreme Court decision *Boynton v. Virginia*, (1960) that ended segregation for passengers engaged in inter-state travel. During the first and subsequent Freedom Rides, activists traveled through the Deep South to integrate seating patterns and desegregate bus terminals, including restrooms and water fountains. That proved to be a dangerous mission. In Anniston, Alabama, one bus was firebombed, forcing its passengers to

flee for their lives. In Birmingham, Alabama, an FBI informant reported that Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor gave Ku Klux Klan members fifteen minutes to attack an incoming group of freedom riders before having police "protect" them.

Martin Luther King, Jr. worked closely with the Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Present John F. Kennedy. It was at Robert Kennedy's insistence, through conversations with King and others, that President Kennedy came to recognize the fundamental nature of electoral reform and suffrage—the need for black Americans to actively engage not only in protest, but in political dialogue at the highest levels. Over time, the President gained King's respect and trust, through the efforts of Robert Kennedy who was the President's key advisor on matters of racial equality. Assassination cut short the careers of both the Kennedy brothers and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet, the essential groundwork of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had been initiated before John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The need for political and administrative reform had been driven home on Capitol Hill by the combined efforts of the Kennedy brothers, Dr. King (and other leaders), and President Lyndon Johnson. On December 10, 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 35, becoming the youngest recipient of the award.

There were several key legislative achievements during this phase of the Civil Rights Movement: the passage of Civil Rights Act of 1964, that banned discrimination based on "race, color, religion, or national origin" in employment practices and public accommodations; the Voting Rights Act of 1965, that restored and protected voting rights; the Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965, that dramatically opened entry to the U.S. to immigrants other than traditional European groups; and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, that banned discrimination in the sale or rental of housing. African Americans re-entered politics in the South, and across the country young people were inspired to action.

## REFERENCES

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