‘Some people even died’: Martin Luther King, Jr, the civil rights movement and the politics of remembrance in elementary classrooms

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This article examines the interpretive practices and cultural texts that shape what teachers and students remember and forget during the annual observance of the King holiday in two second-grade classrooms. Drawing on data from an ethnographic case study of the curriculum in use and theory and research on collective memory, the author analyzes the contest between two commemorative narratives, one focused on King’s boyhood experiences of discrimination and his advocacy of non-violent protest to end segregation, the other on remembering discriminatory practices in the South and the violence perpetrated by Whites against civil rights protestors. After discussing the nature of mnemonic socialization in these classrooms and the consequences of this struggle over collective memory for students, the paper concludes with a call to reconceptualize classrooms as ‘critical mnemonic workspaces’ where teachers and students are able to draw on a diversity of cultural resources for remembering multiple, even contradictory, pasts.

The politics of public memory and history

What does the confederate flag commemorate? How should we interpret Columbus’s ‘discovery’ of the ‘new’ world? Are efforts to include more women and people of color in the US history curriculum simply ‘good history’, or another example of ‘political correctness’? Struggles over what pasts we should remember and the ‘correct’ way to remember them have become more evident during the culture wars or history wars of recent years. Efforts to reform the K–12 social studies curriculum to reflect social and cultural diversity and to create national standards in history education have provoked heated debates among the general public and academics over what we ought to remember and what counts as legitimate history (Gitlin, 1995; Nash et al., 1997).

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Similar battles have engaged academics in higher education amidst efforts to diversify the literary canon and the interpretations and narratives of US and world history (cf. Bloom, 1987; Levine, 1996). At the same time, museums and other public sites of commemoration have generated similar controversies over the appropriate portrayal of the past and the correct interpretation of history (cf. Linenthal & Engelhardt, 1996).

In 1983 the birthday of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr was declared an annual federal holiday by the US Congress. The establishment of the King holiday was not without controversy, a prime example of the kinds of ‘mnemonic battles’ (Zerubavel, 1996, pp. 295–297) that are often fought between and within communities over what historical figures and events are worth collectively remembering. Although a number of years passed before the King holiday was officially recognized in all states, it has become an important annual public event in which millions of Americans can jointly remember our shared past, be it in school lessons and activities, community events, or in reading the newspaper or viewing the local or national television news on the third Monday in January. But what, exactly, is the King holiday an occasion for remembering? What historical figures and events do we remember, celebrate and commemorate during the annual observance of Dr King’s birthday and what pasts are silenced, neglected and forgotten? What knowledge of the past does the observance of this holiday provide people for thinking about the past and present of race and ethnic relations in US society?

In schools and classrooms throughout the nation, many teachers, especially in the primary grades, develop lessons and activities in recognition of King’s birthday. The King holiday, like Black History Month, can be criticized as a token attempt to include African-Americans in the nation’s past, a mere ‘add-on’ that does little to revise or challenge exclusionary narratives of US history. Nevertheless, it is important to study and understand the consequences of this annual ritual in structuring the ways students think and talk about our shared past. What do teachers and students remember and forget during their observance of the King holiday? What curricular and popular materials inform the commemorative activities that occur in schools and classrooms each year on the third Monday in January? In this paper I analyze the curriculum in use in two second-grade classrooms to understand the interpretive practices and representational politics that shape what teachers and students remember and forget during the annual observance of the King holiday, and to comment more generally on schools as important institutional sites for remembering and forgetting the past.

Schooling and collective memory

Interest in the politics of memory and history has produced a large and diverse body of work. While some work continues to be concerned with issues of historical accuracy (cf. Lowenthal, 1995), many scholars have instead sought to understand the necessarily interpretive, and therefore political, aspects of the representation and narration of history (Lowenthal, 1985; Kammen, 1991; Cronon, 1992; Cohen, 1994; Seixas,
Some people even died (1994; Trouillot, 1995; Levstik & Barton, 1997; Wishart, 1997). Within this larger body of work are scholars specifically interested in social or collective memory (cf. Halbwachs, 1980; Middleton & Edwards, 1990); how societies, nations and other communities jointly remember the past, engaging scholars in history, sociology, psychology, political science and education. This work is quite diverse, studying everything from how we remember specific historical figures such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln (Schwartz, 1990, 1991) to important historical events such as Watergate (Schudson, 1992) and the Civil War (Blight, 1989, 2001). This work also includes studies interested in particular in the role of commemoration in providing social spaces in which communities, nations and societies can jointly remember their shared pasts (Schwartz, 1982; Connerton, 1989; Bodnar, 1992; Gillis, 1994; Zerubavel, 1995; Spillman, 1997). The creation of public memorials, the establishment of holidays to commemorate specific figures and events in history, and other commemorative activities often incite heated battles over who or what we ought to remember and the correct ways to remember and interpret the past. Such struggles over the representation and interpretation of the past reveal the politics of memory and history.

The significance of commemoration in constituting and maintaining collective memories of the past suggests the importance of schools and classrooms as public spaces for producing collective representations and interpretations of history. The observance of holidays in schools, like community festivals, memorial services and other commemorative activities, assists in the ‘mnemonic socialization’ (Zerubavel, 1996, pp. 286–289) of children into the shared traditions of remembering of local, state and national communities. Zerubavel argues that most people’s knowledge of the past comes primarily from these commemorative activities and occasions and not from formal study of history:

Moreover, children’s early socialization in collective memory precedes their introduction to the formal study of history and can exceed its influence. Schools play a prominent role in the socialization of national traditions. Early-childhood education in particular reinforces those shared images and stories that express and reinforce the group’s memory. Children in nursery schools, kindergartens, and the first grades thus learn about major historical figures or events from stories, poems, schools plays, and songs. These genres often blend facts with fiction, history with legend, for this colorful blend is believed to render the literature more appealing for the very young. These commemorations contribute to the early formation of sentiments and ideas about the past that might persist even in the face of a later exposure to history. (Zerubavel, 1995, p. 6)

This observation seems particularly appropriate for the King holiday. In many parts of the USA it is not until middle school or high school that students encounter King, legal segregation and the civil rights movement in the formal US history curriculum. For many students, then, it is the annual observance of the King holiday in schools and classrooms that provides the stories, images and interpretive frames that give meaning to King and efforts to end segregation in US society.

Schooling, or more often the school curriculum, especially textbooks, is often mentioned as an important social and institutional space for the cultural construction
of the past in studies of collective memory. But little ethnographic work has been
done from this perspective to understand the constitutive work of teachers and
students in classrooms as they interpret and narrate the past. If remembering the past
is not primarily an individual psychological or cognitive phenomenon, but instead a
social and cultural practice, then it is important to capture how teaches and students
‘do the past’ in schools and classrooms. As I illustrate in my analysis of lessons and
activities in observance of the King holiday, teachers and students draw on a variety
of ‘social sites of memory’ (Zerubavel, 1996, pp. 291–293; see also Nora, 1989) for
remembering the past, material cultural forms (in this specific case study an illustra-
ted children’s book about Martin Luther King, Jr and a Disney film about deseg-
regation efforts in Selma, Alabama) that free us from the necessity of storing social
memories in the minds of individuals. At the same time the use of these cultural texts
in narrating the past is constrained by ‘social rules of remembrance’, normative rules
in established social traditions of remembering that ‘tell us quite specifically what we
should remember and what we can or must forget’ (Zerubavel, 1996, p. 286). It is the
specific social rules of remembrance surrounding the King holiday, enforced by the
teachers in these two classrooms in lessons and discussions with their students, that
structure the memory work accomplished in these classrooms.

After providing details of the study and methodology in the following section I
present and analyze excerpts of classroom discourse and the curriculum used to
understand the politics of remembrance that occurs in these classrooms in observance
of the King holiday. At the heart of this memory work is a contest between two
contrasting commemorative narratives. One narrative is focused on King’s boyhood
experiences of discrimination and advocacy of non-violent protest to end segregation
as an adult, the other on remembering specific discriminatory practices in the South
and the violence perpetrated by Whites against civil rights protestors. Following this
analysis, I draw on sociological theories of culture to understand the nature of
mnemonic socialization in these classrooms and the consequences of this struggle
over the memory of the past for students. I conclude by arguing for the need to recon-
cceptualize schools and classrooms as ‘critical mnemonic workspaces’ in which teach-
ers and students are able to draw on a diversity of cultural resources for remembering
multiple, even contradictory, pasts.

The study

Data for this paper come from an ethnographic case study of the lessons and activities
surrounding the celebration of the King holiday in three elementary school class-
rooms, conducted between January and April 1999. The study included two second-
grade classrooms at one suburban elementary school and one fourth-grade classroom
at a second suburban elementary school, both in the Rochester, New York area. Data
collection involved regular non-participant observation and videotaping of lessons
and activities, formal interviews with teachers and students, a whole-class discussion
with students in the two second-grade classrooms, and the collection of copies of
student work and all curricular materials used. This paper is focused only on the two
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second-grade classrooms, taught by Janice Peterson and Susan Thompson (all names are pseudonyms). Students in these classrooms were mostly White, with only a few African-American students, and, due to the nearby university, a few students whose parents were from other nations (e.g. Pakistan, Italy) but who had grown up in the USA.

If history is a not a found reality but a socially and culturally constructed reality, then it is important to understand the constitutive work of teachers and students as they jointly interpret, represent and narrate the past. How do teachers and students mobilize culturally available tools—metaphors, modes of discourse, popular understandings of historical figures and events—and texts—textbooks, literature and popular film—to create narrative accounts of the past, accounts that represent historical figures and events in particular ways and not others? The audio portion of videotaped lessons and activities was transcribed for analysis of classroom discourse, with particular attention to mapping the varied representations of King, segregation in Southern society and the civil rights movement. This same focus was applied to the analysis of student work and classroom texts, including a popular film cited by students in discussions of segregation and the civil rights movement, to identify the particular ‘cultural vehicles’ (Schudson, 1992, p. 5) that carried the meanings evident in classroom lessons and activities.

Through this analysis of the curriculum in use, I was able to document how teachers and students drew on a variety of material cultural forms to negotiate what counted as ‘appropriate’ recollections of King, segregation and the civil rights movement in these classrooms. By appropriate I mean accounts of King and the civil rights movement that properly fit with the curricular frame and the teaching philosophies and concerns of these two teachers. Comments made by students concerning specific discriminatory practices in the South and the violence perpetrated by Whites against civil rights protestors were not incorrect or untruthful, but rather ill-suited, or inappropriate, for the commemoration of King privileged by these teachers, which focused on King’s advocacy of non-violent protest to end discrimination against African-Americans. Through this analysis I was also able to understand how the use of various cultural texts to produce specific representations of the past was mediated by a larger commemorative narrative privileged in mainstream US society, the curricular frame of conflict resolution, the particular concerns and teaching philosophies of these two teachers, and the mundane realities of classroom life.

**Contested memories**

In this section I analyze classroom discourse to reveal the mnemonic work of teachers and students as they mobilize various material cultural forms to remember Dr King, segregation, and the civil rights movement. In these two second-grade classrooms the King holiday was an occasion for recalling a young Martin Luther King, Jr’s boyhood experiences with discrimination in the segregated South, and how these experiences led to his advocacy of non-violent protest to end segregation. The focus of the curriculum in use was primarily on King but also included other African-Americans, such
as Rosa Parks, and emphasized the use of non-violent protest to challenge segregation and end discrimination against African-Americans.

In recognition of the King holiday Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson spent two weeks teaching a unit on the Underground Railroad and a small unit on Martin Luther King, Jr. The curriculum included reading and discussing three illustrated books: *The Drinking Gourd* (1993), *Follow the Drinking Gourd* (1988) and *Young Martin’s Promise* (1993). In addition, students completed two packets of worksheets, one on the drinking gourd, the other on King, and created a ‘Peace Puzzle’ that was hung on a bulletin board in the hallway outside their classrooms. The Peace Puzzle consisted of construction paper puzzle pieces, one for each student, on which they wrote what they would do, as individuals, to promote peace. Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson combined their classes each morning for story time, when they would read a story and discuss it with their students. Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson chose *Young Martin’s Promise* as the primary curricular vehicle for remembering King in celebration of his birthday.

*Young Martin’s Promise* is the story of a young Martin Luther King, Jr and his slow awakening to the existence of segregation as he experiences discrimination as a child, experiences that would motivate his efforts to end segregation as an adult. Two events stand out in the story. In the first event, Martin’s White friends tell him that their parents have told them that they can no longer play with Martin any more because he is Black. This upsets Martin and results in his mother telling him about segregation as she tries to comfort him. The second event is a trip to the shoe store with his father to buy Martin some shoes. After taking seats in the front of the store Martin and his father are told they must take seats in the rear of the store because, as the White clerk tells them, ‘that is the only place we serve black people’ (Myers, 1993, p. 19). Martin and his father refuse to move and end up leaving the store without buying shoes. Martin is upset and confused by this incident, and this time it is Martin’s father who talks to him about segregation, telling him that it is ‘stupid and cruel’ and that he will always fight against it (1993, p. 23). Martin promises his father that he will do all he can to help him fight against segregation. They story concludes with an adult King ‘and others like him’ (1993, p. 30) convincing lawmakers to change the segregation laws, thus ending segregation in US society.

The meaning of this story and the knowledge students will gain from it about King and segregation in US history is not determined by the content of the text, but is constituted in the interaction between teachers and students as they read and discuss this book (Radway, 1984; Griswold, 1987; Apple, 1993). Given the authority of the teacher over the ‘official’ meaning-making activities that occur in classrooms, it is appropriate to ask how Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson are using this text to represent the past. What are they emphasizing and what are they ignoring? What are they remembering, and what are they purposely not remembering? Their focus, evident in class discussions and discussed in interviews with me, is on using *Young Martin’s Promise* to help their students understand the thoughts and feelings of young Martin, and other African-Americans like his father, as he experienced discrimination. Ultimately, they want students to remember Martin Luther King, Jr as a man who
advocated peace and brotherhood and who refused to respond to discrimination and segregation with violence, but instead succeeded in ending segregation through non-violent protest.

Wertsch, citing Burke, reminds us that any narrative must be a selection of reality, and therefore a deflection of reality (1998, p. 91), an insight reminiscent of Burke's well-known oxymoron that 'every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing' (1965, p. 49). One way to understand the mnemonic work Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson are doing with their students in remembering King is to note the ‘teacher deflections’ of alternative ways of remembering and interpreting the past that are offered by their students. Analysis of class discussions reveals a contest between two alternative ideas concerning what the King holiday is an occasion to remember. For Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson, the King holiday is an occasion to remember King’s experiences of discrimination and his advocacy of non-violent protest to end segregation. Students, on the other hand, are interested in cataloguing specific discriminatory practices in the South, and remembering the violence perpetrated against African-Americans who participated in non-violent efforts to end segregation. It is through repeated teacher deflections of student comments that give voice to this alternative remembering that the teacher narrative of King is remembered, and the student narrative of discrimination and violence is forgotten.

Remembering King’s experiences of discrimination and advocacy of non-violence

The teachers’ focus on remembering King’s boyhood experiences of discrimination and advocacy of non-violent protest to end discrimination, and the use of this focus to deflect student comments about specific discriminatory practices and the violence perpetrated against African-Americans, is evident in the reading and discussion of Young Martin’s Promise and a class discussion of King the day after the national holiday. These discussions occurred during morning story time, part of the regular routine in these classrooms. Every morning the school day began with students from both classes gathering in Mrs Peterson’s classroom and sitting on a rug in a semicircle around a chair on which Mrs Peterson or Mrs Thompson would be seated. After establishing the day’s date and the weather, which included reading a thermometer outside the window, they discussed the day’s vocabulary word, contained in a passage written on easel paper. On the day Mrs Peterson began her reading of Young Martin’s Promise the vocabulary word was ‘tolerant’—‘Today is tolerant Tuesday’—and the passage stated ‘it is important to treat others kindly’ and that they would be reading about a person named Dr Martin Luther King Jr who ‘tried to convince people to treat others fairly.’ After discussing the day’s vocabulary word Mrs Peterson or Mrs Thompson would lead the students in morning stretches, and then the students would be seated once again on the rug so they could listen to the day’s story.

Mrs Peterson’s reading and discussion of Young Martin’s Promise with her and Mrs Thompson’s students was focused on helping students identify and empathize with King’s experiences of discrimination as a young boy in Atlanta, Georgia. For example, after reading that all the children on young Martin’s school bus and at his school
were African-American, even though Martin’s neighborhood friends were White, Mrs Peterson asked the students to think about how Martin might have felt getting on the bus for his first day of school, and to also think about their first day of school. After reading the passage in Young Martin’s Promise where Martin’s friends tell him that they can no longer play together because they are White and he is Black and Martin is comforted by his mother and told about segregation, Mrs Peterson again tried to get the students to empathize with what Martin might be feeling. This included recalling a class activity about discrimination in which boys were excluded from a class vote, and she noted that, ‘some of the same feelings were coming up from our discussion then as we are hearing now’. Discussing the incident at the shoe store, where young Martin and his father are refused service because they are unwilling to move from the front of the store to the seats in the rear of the store reserved for African-American customers, Mrs Peterson again led the students in identifying the feelings of Martin and his father.

[1] Mrs Peterson: Martin ran over to the shoe store where he saw a pair he liked. [Mrs Peterson stops reading]. I’ll bet you can think about that happening to you too. [Mrs Peterson resumes reading]. They went inside and sat in the first empty seats they saw. The seats were near the front window, and Martin could see the shoes he wanted. A young clerk came up to them. ‘I’ll be happy to wait on you, if you’ll just move to those seats in the rear’, the clerk said in a low voice. ‘There’s nothing wrong with these seats’, Martin’s father said. ‘We’re quite comfortable here.’ ‘Sorry’, said the clerk, ‘but you’re gonna have to move to the back of the store’. ‘We’ll buy shoes sitting here’, Martin’s father said, ‘or we won’t buy shoes at all’. ‘Oh now stop being so high and mighty’, the clerk said angrily. ‘That is the only place that we will serve Black people.’ [Mrs Peterson stops reading]. How do you think Martin and his father felt? Alpa?

[2] Alpa: They were really sad ‘cause, that’s wrong.


[4] Mrs Peterson: Bill?


[7] Carrie: They feel sad because they didn’t have to sit back there because, it’s just it’s so cruel.

[8] Mrs Peterson: That’s right Carrie.

[9] Carrie: Oh and they felt annoyed because it’s just like, unfair.

As is evident in this excerpt, students were active participants in remembering young Martin’s experiences of discrimination and the feelings these experiences evoked. They were often enthusiastic participants, their arms raised in the air, hands waving, hoping to get Mrs Peterson’s attention so she would call on them. They were able to competently provide descriptions of the possible emotional states of Martin and his father, and these comments were at times heartfelt, as was Carrie’s comment concerning the cruelty of making African-Americans, like Martin and his father, take seats in the back of the shoe store. Students continued to contribute to Mrs Peterson’s
efforts to develop an understanding of the emotional toll of discrimination on Martin and his father, but their comments indicated a slightly different focus from Mrs Peterson’s in what ought to be remembered in observance of the King holiday. While Mrs Peterson did bring up issues of discrimination and unfairness, her purpose in doing this was to focus on the thoughts and feelings of Martin and his father in response to these acts of discrimination, to help the students understand their experience of segregation. However, students seemed as interested in exploring the morality and injustice of White people’s discrimination towards African-Americans as in understanding the emotional states of Martin and his father.

As Carrie noted, the clerk’s demand that Martin and his father take seats in the rear of the store does make them feel sad and annoyed, but equally significant is that it is also cruel and unfair, and a moment later she concluded that they probably had ‘crappy shoes for the Black people’ in the rear of the store. In discussing how Martin might have felt about all the students on the bus being African-American the students suggested he might have felt sad and lonely. But one girl, Emily, also noted that the reason White people and Black people went to different schools was because White people thought Black people were inferior: ‘The White people thought that Black people were worse, and they couldn’t do everything.’ And after comparing the feelings of young Martin after his White friends told him they could no longer play with him because he was Black with the feelings of the male students when they were excluded from the class vote, Steve noted that ‘White people like wouldn’t let Black people do anything. They couldn’t drink, they couldn’t drink er, at the same drinking fountain.’ Mrs Peterson shook her head in agreement, acknowledging Steve’s comment, but instead of pursuing this point she suggested they ‘go on and see what happened, and what Martin was thinking about, all these things in his life’.

Why didn’t Mrs Peterson pursue Steve’s comment about drinking fountains, or the other students’ comments about the treatment of Blacks by Whites and Whites view of Blacks as being inferior? One reason was that this was not the commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr she, and Mrs Thompson, had in mind. They wanted to focus on Dr King’s experiences of discrimination and his advocacy of non-violent protest to end segregation, and they did not, as they later indicated in interviews with me (and discussed below), want to discuss what they viewed as controversial and difficult issues raised by their students’ comments. However, there are also more mundane reasons behind Mrs Peterson’s unwillingness to pursue Steve’s and the other students’ comments. Quite simply, she was a bit pressed for time, because many of the busses arrived late that morning due to a snowstorm. In fact, earlier in this discussion another boy, Scott, wanted to share something with Mrs Peterson, but it did not address the specific question before the class: ‘How do you think Martin felt getting on the bus and his friends weren’t there?’ Mrs Peterson assured Scott that she knew his thoughts were important and she wanted to hear them, but they were pressed for time and so she would not hear them now: ‘I want to go on with our story for a minute, because we’re a little bit late this morning.’

Classrooms are important but nevertheless constrained spaces for commemorating the past. Mundane, practical realities such as late busses, interruptions caused by
aides entering the room, students leaving to go to resource specialists, or school-wide announcements on the PA system can influence, in concert with the other factors such as the curricular context and teacher philosophy, what is remembered and what is forgotten in commemorating the past. The press for time was a factor in Mrs Peterson’s decision to acknowledge, but not pursue, the information about segregation and the civil rights movement provided by the students who did not contribute directly to the specific commemoration of King she was attempting to build.

This discussion did, however, indicate the alternative mnemonic work that was possible in this classroom, work that remained unrealized as the discussion was continually redirected towards identifying and empathizing with the feelings of young Martin instead of exploring the discriminatory practices of Whites. While it was not clear that the students had an alternative story to tell about King, segregation and the civil rights movement, they were providing opportunities for exploring and examining aspects of the past not pursued by Mrs Peterson. A discussion between Mrs Thompson and the students on the day after the King holiday showed a similar pattern, and illustrated the other focus of these teachers’ commemoration of King—his advocacy of non-violent protest to end segregation—as well as the students’ remembering of the violence perpetrated against African-Americans engaged in non-violent protest to end segregation.

On the day after the King holiday, Mrs Thompson planned to use the morning story time to continue reading from *The Drinking Gourd*, a story about the Underground Railroad. Many of the busses were late again that day, due to another winter snowstorm, and so they began story time a bit later than usual. After completing their morning stretches the students were quite loud and needed to be quieted down by Mrs Thompson. Before reading the day’s story, Mrs Thompson held up a copy of the previous day’s newspaper for all the students to see, noting that it contained a ‘very interesting article’ entitled ‘In His Own Words’. She asked if anyone could guess whose words were quoted in this newspaper article, and Jim correctly responds ‘Martin Luther King’ and gives the reason why: ‘Cause it was Martin Luther King’s, um, Martin Luther King’s birthday yesterday.’ Mrs Thompson confirmed this, stating they had no school yesterday in honor of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, and noted that if he had not been shot Dr King would now be 70 years old. Without missing a beat, Alpa added that King was on a balcony when he was shot, something she says she saw in a movie, and Mrs Thompson responded that they were going to see a video about King later that day. Mrs Thompson then told the students that the article contained famous quotes and speeches King gave, and included a timeline of his life. Mrs Thompson was then ready to begin the day’s reading, the next chapter in *The Drinking Gourd*, but Emily had something she wanted to share:

[1] Emily: Mrs Thompson in a movie, um, they had these, they had like a group of people, and there they had a fire hose. And um they sprayed it. And they got all wet and a lot of people got hurt.

[2] Mrs Thompson: Why did they do that?

Some people even died

[4] Carrie: What movie was it? [Talk among students here, many of them have apparently seen this movie].

[5] Mrs Thompson: Boys and girls. It’s been a while since we were reading this book, *The Drinking Gourd*. And this tells about what it was like a long time even before Dr Martin Luther King was born. But, unfortunately, when Martin Luther King was working hard to make things equal for people and more fair, things still weren’t as fair as we want them, even then. Even back in the nineteen-sixties when he was trying to help to change things. Alpa?

[6] Alpa: Martin, when he was trying to change things, um, some people even died.

[7] Mrs Thompson: You’re right. Do you know//

[8] Apla: ‘Cause there’s because of [unintelligible], some people got arrested even if they just said something, even if they just wanted to do something. And some, and some people were just not treated well. Some people, people’s very best friends and stuff died.

[9] Mrs Thompson: Alpa, do you know why Martin Luther King didn’t suggest fighting back, to those people that were being mean? Do you know why?


[11] Mrs Thompson: There was a very famous man, from India, that Martin Luther King studied. He studied about his special ways and his special beliefs. And [his name …

[12] Tom: Who was that?

[13] Mrs Thompson: was Mahatma Gandhi. [A few students say ‘oh ya’ and ‘uh huh’, apparently they have heard of Gandhi]. Martin Luther King believed, just like Mahatma Gandhi believed, that things could be solved peacefully, and that fighting was wrong. And we read the first chapter of this book called *Fishing in Church*.

[14] Alpa: That’s what I thought. That’s what I thought um that you were gonna say. I thought you were gonna say his name.

Mrs Thompson wanted to continue reading *The Drinking Gourd* to the students, a story about the Underground Railroad, but this effort was continually derailed by student comments, troubling comments about fire hoses, people being arrested, mistreated and hurt, and people dying, even people’s ‘very best friends’. Students’ participation in this discussion was enthusiastic, as one would expect from second graders who knew they had something relevant to share with their teacher about the topic at hand, and the tone of the students’ comments was quite varied. Sometimes, as in Emily’s statement that people got sprayed by a fire hose, these points were stated matter-of-factly, a piece of the past that Emily knew that she wished to share with her teacher. At other times, student comments were more intense, as was Alpa’s comment about some people getting arrested or even dying, just for something they said or did. Outrage would be much too strong a word to characterize the tone of Alpa’s comment, but it did carry the confidence of a child who knows the difference between right and wrong and has discovered something that is clearly wrong.

Mrs Thompson was responsive to these comments, asking Emily why people sprayed other people with a fire hose, and enthusiastically picking up on Alpa’s comment about people getting arrested or even dying to talk about Dr King’s
advocacy of responding to violence with non-violence. Mrs Thompson was not ignoring the students’ comments, nor was she dismissive of what they had to say, but she was directing the conversation, steering the discussion towards one remembering of the past and not another. Instead of asking, for example, ‘why would people have to die to end segregation?’, which would provide an opportunity for remembering a different past, this line of remembering was deflected by Mrs Thompson, favoring a focus on the non-violence of Dr King over the violence of Whites. For Mrs Thompson, what is important to remember in honoring the memory of Dr King on his birthday is his advocacy of non-violent change. An additional concern of Mrs Thompson, discussed below, is that she provide students with a positive view of the world, emphasizing that injustices can be overcome when people work together for change rather than focusing on prejudice and the injustices that still plague the world.

Mrs Thompson attempted to begin the day’s reading at this point, but her effort was derailed again, as Scott recounted a story about a woman on a bus who wouldn’t give up her seat to a White man. Scott’s account was at times very animated, as when he used an angry voice to report what the Black woman told the White man who asked her to leave her seat: ‘I paid for this bus I paid for it, why can’t I sit down because I paid for this bus seat?’ Again, Mrs Thompson is not dismissive of Scott’s comment but in fact willingly pursues it, engaging the students in a discussion of the Montgomery bus boycott followed by a failed attempt to get someone to name the woman Scott is talking about (one boy finally guesses Susan B. Anthony, leading Mrs Thompson to name Rosa Parks herself). For Mrs Thompson, talk about the bus boycott and Rosa Parks was worth pursuing because it contributed to and was consistent with the commemoration of King she was interested in establishing: a non-violent boycott that changed an unfair law, with a focus not on the violence of Whites but on the non-violent actions of Blacks, led by a heroic individual. Change through peaceful methods, in fact, is consistent with one of the main curricular themes for the year, conflict resolution.

At the conclusion of this discussion Mrs Thompson finally began the day’s reading, but not before calling on Catherine for one final comment: ‘In the movie, the Black people had a White person, a White person friend. His name was Jonathan and he got shot. It was so bad.’ Alpa immediately added, ‘Oh ya, Jonathan in the movie’, and Mrs Thompson smiled to acknowledge Catherine’s comment but she did not pursue it and began reading chapter three in *The Drinking Gourd*. As I discussed earlier, the politics of remembrance in classrooms is shaped by many factors, including the mundane realities of classroom life. As on the day of Mrs Peterson’s discussion of *Young Martin’s Promise*, story time was running late that day due to a winter snowstorm and the late arrival of many busses. But Mrs Thompson’s decision to cut off the conversation at this point was not due to time constraints but to her feeling that students were a bit wild today—not uncommon on the day after a school holiday—and therefore she needed to exert more control over the students. Mrs Thompson, talking to me during the transition after story time, when her students returned to her classroom, commented on the restlessness,
inattention and disruptive behaviors of many of the students during story time. Although the students did not seem any different to me than on previous days, Mrs Thompson’s decision to contain the conversation and move on to the day’s reading after Catherine’s comment is understandable, and underscores how many different factors, including classroom climate, can shape the remembering of the past in classrooms.

Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson’s commemoration of King is echoed in the packet of worksheets on King. These worksheets are typical language arts exercises that use information about King’s life. For example, one worksheet asks students to choose words from a ‘word box’ to fill in a short story about King’s boyhood. Another worksheet presents a brief narrative about young Martin’s love of sports and successes as a student, and asks students to answer questions generated from this narrative. The ‘I Have a Dream’ worksheet presents students with a crossword puzzle constructed of facts about King’s life, and another worksheet presents a paragraph about King receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, followed by a list of true or false questions for students to answer. These worksheets continue and support the focus on young Martin’s life and his experiences of discrimination begun with the reading and discussion of Young Martin’s Promise, and the adult King’s advocacy of non-violent protest to end segregation. For Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson, the King holiday is an occasion to remember King as a man of peace and brotherhood, who experienced discrimination and responded not with violence but with peaceful protest.

Students are not passive recipients of this commemoration of King, but jointly remember this past with their teachers as they fill out their worksheets, create their pieces of the Peace Puzzle and provide appropriate responses to questions about the feelings of young Martin in class discussions of Young Martin’s Promise. But at the same time they continue to mobilize alternative representations of the past—fire hoses spraying African-American protestors, segregated drinking fountains, the death of individual protestors—that are effectively deflected and silenced in these classrooms. The discussions in these classrooms indicate how a particular remembering of the past often requires the forgetting of alternative pasts, and how teacher deflections create and perpetuate cultural silences that are an integral part of any narrative of the past (Trouillot, 1995, p. 27). The commemoration and celebration of King’s legacy of non-violent protest against segregation came at the expense of examining or exploring the often violent actions of Whites in opposing those who sought to end segregation in the United States. Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson’s silence on these matters mirrored the silence that occurs in the annual commemoration of King’s birthday in US society, where the popular media focuses on King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech and often the Montgomery bus boycott, but rarely delves into the thoughts and actions of those who opposed King and the civil rights movement. Within these classrooms the curriculum in use in observance of the King holiday provides students with a constrained memory of the past, one that effectively deflects and silences what the students seem intent on remembering. But, once relieved of these constraints, students are eager to remember a very different past.
Remembering white racism and violence

Two months after finishing their unit on King I returned to these classrooms to have a discussion with Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson’s students about what they had learned. I spent the first part of the discussion revisiting the curriculum by holding up copies of the books they had read and asking students to tell me about them, as well as questioning them about the worksheets they completed and the ‘Peace Puzzle’ they had made. Students were able competently to recall specific details about Dr King’s life, including the shoe store incident they had read about in Young Martin’s Promise, and that King was a very good student and skipped grades in school, something noted in their packet of worksheets. At this point I decided to ask them if there was anything else they remembered that they would like to share with me, things they might not have learned in class but that they knew about anyway, which produced this exchange:

(1) Catherine: I saw a show that’s called Selma Lord Selma about Martin Luther King.

(2) Researcher: Uh huh, is that a TV show?

(3) Alpa: I saw, I saw the same show.

(4) Catherine: It was on the Wonderful World of Disney.

(5) Researcher: Wonderful World of Disney. Alpa you saw the same show? (Alpa shakes her head yes, as do half a dozen other students)

(6) Emily: Me too.

(7) Researcher: And you saw the same show?

(8) Emily: I love that, I love that show.

(9) Researcher: What did you love about it?

(10) Emily: Um that there was freedom.

(11) Researcher: Uh huh, freedom for?

(12) Emily: And, but the sad part was that they, they gave um crying gas.

(13) Researcher: Oh tear gas.

(14) Emily: Ya tear gas.

(15) Researcher: When did they, do you remember what happened when they gave tear gas?

(16) Emily: Ya they were marching, and, and they sprayed tear gas and they, and they hurt people.

(17) Researcher: Uh huh.

(18) Emily: And some of them died and then they tried to run home.¹

(19) Researcher: Okay.

(20) Emily: And they were crying.
Some people even died

[21] Researcher: And they were crying.

[22] Melissa: Um. Well, um. If, if um, in the Drinking Gourd, and Martin Luther King, um, they—Martin Luther King, um, was trying to make all the slaves, um, try and go to um, the Underground Railroad, and they would be safe there.5

[23] Researcher: Martin Luther King was?


[26] Catherine: And Selma’s [actually Sheyann’s] friend in the movie, Jonathan, was killed by another White guy ‘cause Jonathan was White too.

[27] Researcher: Okay why, do you remember why that?

[28] Catherine: Because he wanted the Black people to have freedom.

[29] Researcher: Okay and his friend didn’t?


[31] Researcher: Why wouldn’t his friend want Black people to have freedom?

[32] Catherine: Um because he thought that Whites were better than Blacks.

[33] Researcher: He thought that Whites were better than Blacks? Alpa?

[34] Alpa: Um in the in the the show um, the police were shooting people.

[35] Researcher: The police were shooting people? Who were they shooting?


[37] Researcher: Why were they doing that?

[38] Alpa: ‘Cause they were marching and the police didn’t want them to march.

[39] Researcher: The police didn’t want them to march?

[40] Alpa: Ya because, the police [unintelligible] they wouldn’t get their freedom.

[41] Researcher: Uh huh, they wouldn’t get their freedom, okay.

[42] Melissa: There was um, a girl, um, who helped Martin Luther King but she got arrested.

[43] Researcher: She got arrested. Uh a girl that helped Martin Luther King I know some of you remembered who this was, with the bus?6


[46] Aaron: She died.

[47] Researcher: She died? No she’s still alive. She’s a very old lady but she’s still alive.

[48] Aaron: How old is she?

[49] Bailey: She’s still alive?
What should we remember during the annual commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr’s birthday? Freed from the constraints of the curriculum and the narrative context of Young Martin’s Promise, these students appropriate a different cultural text for commemorating King, one that portrays the violence of Whites and local authorities against African-Americans seeking social change through non-violent protest. Selma, Lord, Selma (1999), a Disney film, tells the story of Sheyann Webb, a third-grader living in Selma, Alabama, who is inspired by King to become involved in marching against segregation and whose actions eventually convince her father and mother to join the movement. This film contains many scenes of violence perpetrated against African-Americans, as well as the killing of Jonathan Daniels, a White seminary student, who is shot by the White owner of a local gas station who had warned Jonathan about ‘spreading his civil rights trash down here’. This is the ‘very best friend’ who died that Alpa referred to in the class discussion led by Mrs Thompson excerpted above. As a cultural resource, Selma, Lord, Selma provides students with material for pursuing what apparently perplexes them, such as the view of many Whites that African-Americans were inferior, and the violence Whites perpetrated against African-Americans seeking to end segregation. And it was this film that was the source of many of the students’ comments, deflected by these teachers, in class discussions.

How should we understand the exclusion of these images and this remembering of the past from classroom lessons and activities? First, as we have seen, classroom climate and the practical realities of schooling can shape the production of historical knowledge in classrooms. Time is always a constraining factor in schools and classrooms, and the lack of time can dictate how open or closed a class discussion can be, what there is time to remember and what, due to lack of time, must be forgotten. Similarly, a teacher’s perception regarding the need for more or less control over students during a lesson can lead a teacher to contain a discussion, again resulting in the shared remembering of some historical information while excluding other information.

Second, this commemoration of King occurs within a larger curricular frame, that of conflict resolution. Conflict resolution was one of the main themes in Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson’s classrooms for the year, and this provided an interpretive framework with which to represent King as a man who understood that social change could be achieved when people worked together to resolve conflict peacefully. Students practiced conflict resolution on the playground, and according to Mrs Peterson working together to solve problems was a theme that was repeated daily in her classroom, ‘that’s just a daily part of our lives’. The students’ Peace Puzzle, the
culmination of the King unit, embodied this message, demonstrating what can be accomplished when people agree to work together to solve problems. Third, the deflection of this material in class discussions represents the individual concerns and orientations of Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson. I brought transcripts of these discussions to my interviews with both teachers and asked them to help me understand what had occurred when students had referred to fire hoses, segregated drinking fountains, and people being arrested and even dying. For Mrs Peterson, her desire to acknowledge and discuss the issues the students raised is tempered by her concern with taking things too far, to ‘too intense a spot’ that could make her students fearful:

I think you have to be careful not to take it too far, too serious, because they have a fear that is hard to address with them, because they don’t have years of experience. So you want to be careful, not to take it to too intense a spot, and yet address some of the feelings that they can relate to. Well, you know, how do you think this person is feeling when this is happening? And then draw upon that, and see if they can make some kind of a connection, that’s not at that intense level but somewhere else, connected to something that they can relate to.

It is not that Mrs Peterson does not see the importance of talking about these ‘heavy types of issues’, as she referred to them in her interview, but that this is overshadowed by her concern with upsetting her students. Her continual deflection of students’ comments back to the issue of how Martin and his father felt when they were discriminated against is both sensible and understandable, given this concern with her students’ well-being.

Like Mrs Peterson, Mrs Thompson recognizes the value and importance of the comments students contributed to the discussion, but she gets uncomfortable when these things come up and finds them hard to deal with, because she is trying to instill a positive view of the world in her students. She noted that it is a lot harder to deal with these issues when it involves things happening today, but it is easier when things come up in the past because she can put a positive spin on it, and we can say things are better now:

So I try to be as upbeat as I can and say, ‘you know, maybe people in our world today, there are a lot of wonderful people like Martin Luther King who will try to make things better. And it’s sad that there are places in the world where things aren’t fair, and even here in the United States things are not fair.’ I’ve tried to also impart a little bit of — that even today there are Black people who are not treated the same as White people, and there’s prejudice and there’s bad things happening and that, um, it’s all of our jobs to try to make the world a better place and do what we can to lessen that.

Mrs Thompson’s effort to be upbeat, to focus on how things are getting better, and how people can make the world a better place, provides some understanding of her deflection, or redirection, of the discussion presented above. Rather than focusing on the conflicts mentioned by students it is better to recognize the non-violent efforts of Dr King and Rosa Parks to make the world a better place, a strategy that will help students realize that the injustices of the world can be overcome when people work together for change.
The realities of schooling and the climate of the classroom, the curricular context, and the concerns and orientations of teachers all shape, and help explain, the local production of the commemorative narrative of King. However, Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson are also drawing on the larger commemorative narrative of King in US society that has emerged during the 20 years that have passed since the establishment of the King holiday. This privileged memory of King is embodied in the curriculum: Young Martin’s Promise, the packet of worksheets completed by students and the newspaper article Mrs Thompson shares with the students. It is also evident in the privileged images and public discourse we see and hear every year as we commemorate King’s life: King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat on the bus, and the celebration of King’s method of achieving social change through non-violent protest. This collective memory is by no means monolithic, but in the hierarchy of culturally available representations of the past this is the favored commemorative narrative in mainstream US society. The King holiday is primarily a time to remember King and his life, a great man who was responsible for ending segregation through non-violent protest, and this characterizes the mnemonic work accomplished in these classrooms. In this way, Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson’s production of this commemorative narrative is both culturally understandable and socially sensible. These traditions of remembering and commemorating King do not determine the remembering of the past in these classrooms. But they are an important cultural resource consistent with the curricular context of conflict resolution and the desire of these teachers to avoid discussion of material that might upset their students or undermine their optimism about the world.

**The social power of the remembered past**

If schools and classrooms are important public sites for the mnemonic socialization of children, how should we understand the remembering and forgetting of the past evident in these classrooms, and the consequences this holds for students? As is evident in this case study, US culture provides many different cultural resources for remembering the past, in this case two competing commemorative narratives of King and the civil rights movement. Swidler (1986), a sociologist of culture, defines culture as a ‘tool kit’ or repertoire of publicly available symbolic forms, such as language, stories, beliefs, practices and ceremonies that people use to construct strategies of action in social life. People actively and skillfully use culture, selecting different cultural tools for different circumstances and contexts, in the meaning-making activities evident in social and cultural life. If culture is a tool kit or repertoire of publicly available symbolic forms, such as representations and narratives of historical figures and events, how should we understand the social consequences of the remembering and forgetting evident in these classrooms?

One answer is that mnemonic socialization in classrooms involves the internalization of specific memories of the past by children coupled with the forgetting of
Some people even died

alternative pasts. But the ease with which students were able to remember and recount the images and incidents from *Selma, Lord, Selma* outside the constraints of the curriculum in use suggests that mnemonic socialization is not about depositing particular memories of the past inside the individual minds of children and excising (or failing to deposit) alternative memories. Nor does the production of collective memory necessitate the erasure of forgotten pasts from societies or cultures. Wineburg, while noting that collective memory always involves remembering and forgetting, suggests collective *occlusion* as a more accurate characterization of forgetting than collective amnesia. While amnesia suggests the erasure of memories individually and collectively, occlusion suggests blockage, an issue of the salience and accessibility of collective memories that may still be available in various social sites of memory (2001, pp. 242–243).

That culture works through internalization has been challenged over the past 25 years by theories of culture that represent it as primarily an external rather than an internal phenomenon (cf. Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Wertsch, 1998). The relocation of culture from inside people’s heads to outside in publicly available symbols (Geertz, 1973) or as socially recognized practices (Bourdieu, 1977), especially institutional practices (Foucault, 1978), provides for a different understanding of how culture works in social life. As Swidler argues:

> Most culture theory assumes that culture has more powerful effects when it is deeper—deeply internalized in individual psyches, deeply integrated into bodies and habits of action, or deeply embedded in taken-for-granted ‘mentalities.’ But at least some of the time, culture may have more powerful effects when it is on the ‘outside,’ not deeply internalized or even deeply meaningful. Variations in the ways social contexts bring culture to bear on action may do more to determine culture’s power than variations in how deeply culture is held. (1995, p. 31)

The social power of the teachers’ commemorative narrative of King, relative to the one provided by *Selma, Lord, Selma* and appropriated (Wertsch, 1998, p. 53—58) by the students in their conversation with me, has less to do with how deeply students come to believe this narrative and more to do with how specific social and institutional contexts make this memory, and not others, useful and usable. If students’ cultural repertoires contain multiple, even contradictory, images, representations, narratives and interpretive frames for making meaning of the past, then the power of specific remembered pasts over others is to be found in the context of their use: where, when, with whom and for what purposes can one mobilize this representation, that narrative, or this interpretation of the past. The enactment of social rules of remembrance in institutional settings like schools and classrooms structures students’ cultural repertoires in publicly sanctioned ways, teaching them about the usefulness and usability of particular recollections of historical figures and events. To the extent that the politics of remembrance in classrooms mirrors the collective memory of mainstream society, students will likely find themselves retelling the story of King and his advocacy of non-violent change year after year while *not remembering* the discriminatory practices and violence of Whites in our shared past.
Reconceptualizing classrooms as critical mnemonic workspaces

As I have argued elsewhere, the commemorative narrative constructed in these classrooms obscures White agency in the system of segregation in the South and effectively silenced student talk about racism and the acts of violence perpetrated against non-violent African-American protestors during the civil rights movement (Wills, 2001). One consequence of this collective memory of King and the civil rights movement was that it provided students with a poor resource for thinking historically about contemporary race relations. When I asked students why Mrs Peterson and Mrs Thompson read them stories about King and the Underground Railroad one student responded, ‘Because they were both about Black people’. This, put simply, is one constraint of the memory work done in these classrooms: it is only about Black people.

It is important to remember that these are not just classroom silences but widely shared cultural silences, but it is also true that US culture is not monolithic. The narrative of King and the civil rights movement recounted in these classrooms echoes the collective remembering privileged in mainstream US culture and society each third Monday in January. But our collective memory of segregation and the civil rights movement is not settled, and US culture provides various symbolic and material cultural forms for remembering many different pasts. The fact that a Disney film outfitted second graders to remind their teachers, albeit unsuccessfully, about the racist views Whites held of African-Americans and the violence Whites engaged in to prevent desegregation underscores the fact that alternative representations of the past are still available in popular memory, still present in a variety of cultural texts. The question is how to make institutional sites like schools and classrooms contexts for remembering both the non-violence of King and the violence of those who opposed desegregation.

Rather than resolving questions of who and what to remember, and how these pasts should be remembered, schools and classrooms should be ‘mnemonic workspaces’ for critically examining and complicating collective memory and privileged traditions of remembering. Classrooms should be places for preserving many pasts, for fighting the cultural silencing and collective occlusion that removes people and events from popular memory. We need to develop curriculum and promote instructional practices that build and enrich students’ historical repertoires with multiple and contradictory cultural tools. For too long the past remembered in schools and classrooms has been too exclusive, perpetuating versions of history that have silenced the voices and experiences of women and people of color. While efforts to diversify the curriculum and create historical narratives that embody diversity have been somewhat successful, such educational reforms often pale in comparison with what students can experience in museums, read in the popular press, view on television or see at the movies. Popular culture is often more willing to engage controversial issues than most school curricula, and often more representative of the diverse stories and experiences that make up our collective past.

In my interview with Mrs Thompson I noted all the information students were able to contribute to class discussions, and how much seemed to come from their viewing
of *Selma, Lord, Selma*. Mrs Thompson responded, ‘It’s very upsetting to me that things they see on the television [she begins chuckling] have much more influence, and impact, than anything we did recently’. If we are not going to give up the past to Disney, Hollywood and the many forms of popular entertainment used by children, we need to make schools and classrooms into contexts for doing the past in new and creative ways. This may require worrying less about calls for standardization, high stakes testing and the perennial concern with ‘covering the content’, and more about the ability of schools to tell the many stories that make up the past and present of the USA.

**Notes on Contributor**

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**Notes**

1. The term ‘mnemonic’ comes from Zerubavel, who advances a sociology of memory that ‘deals specifically with the social aspects of the mental act of remembering’ (1996, p. 284). In drawing on the ideas contained in that work I use the term mnemonic, rather than memory, to emphasize that remembering is a social process, accomplished in concert with others, regulated by socially recognized rules governing remembering, and typically involving the use of various material cultural forms that facilitate the production, retention and transmission of socially shared memories. In classrooms, which I later characterize as ‘mnemonic workspaces’, teachers and students are not simply talking about the past, but are actively using material cultural forms such as textbooks, maps, films, illustrations and literature to enable their remembering and forgetting of historical figures and events.

2. Teacher deflections of student comments are structured according to social rules of remembrance that reflect the culturally privileged commemorative narrative of King in mainstream US society. As a consequence, these deflections enable the remembering of a collectively legitimate past while also enforcing cultural silences that ensure the forgetting of alternative pasts, in this case silences about White investment in segregation and White violence directed at efforts to end segregation. While there are ‘local’ reasons for these deflections, such as the climate of the classroom, curricular context and teacher philosophy, which I will discuss later in this paper, the commemorative narrative that accompanies the King holiday in mainstream US society is a key cultural resource that these teachers draw on in remembering the past with their students. As such, these teacher deflections are reflective of larger societal traditions of remembering and commemorative narratives privileged in mainstream US culture and not simply the personal choices of individual teachers.

3. It is important to note the significance of language choice in representing the past, in particular the terms used to refer to specific racial, ethnic or cultural groups. The clerk more likely would have called Martin and his father ‘negroes’ or something more derogatory, and using the language of the times is important in assisting students to understand the perspectives and interactions of diverse groups in the past, and in the present.

4. Actually, no one died in this scene, and in fact the portrayal of violence was not graphic, although evidently it had a powerful impact on these students. For example, in the scene Emily
is referring to people are running and yelling through clouds of tear gas, some like Sheyann fall down and have to be helped up, and police can be seen raising their billy clubs to strike protestors, but the camera cuts away before any blows are landed.

5. See Sandage (1993, p. 166), for a similar recollection of an African-American schoolgirl who visited the Lincoln Memorial and replied to the question ‘Do you know who freed the slaves?’ with ‘Martin Luther King’. See also Barton & Levstik, 1996, and Levstik & Barton, 1996, about elementary students’ understanding of historical time.

6. In retrospect this was a mistake on my part. Melissa was not referring to Rosa Parks, but to Sheyann Webb, the main character in Selma, Lord, Selma, who was arrested while marching with King.

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