As I sat down to prepare my lessons for introducing Melba Beals’s *Warriors Don’t Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock’s Central High*, I kept returning to Douglass’s quote from his 1857 speech on West India emancipation and the idea that progress only comes with struggle. How could I teach this to my students? How could I get them ready to read Beals’s memoir when what they knew about the Civil Rights Movement was limited to Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and the words “I have a dream”? My eleventh-grade American Literature class was mostly white, suburban teenagers who had relatively few struggles in their own lives. How could I get them to understand the story of the nine teenagers who risked their lives when they decided to challenge the segregated and unequal educational system that existed in 1957?

As a teacher, I believe that I have a moral responsibility to prepare my students to think for themselves, to make judgments based on evidence, and to develop their minds. To be a democratic teacher who prepares her students for life in a democratic society, I must make a commitment to “helping [my] students discover and nurture their self-expression, develop consciousness, claim a new and ever-evolving awareness, as well as act on it” (Placha 124). William Ayers, in “Teaching in and for Democracy,” argues, “We want them to learn to ask essential questions that are . . . always in motion, dynamic, and never twice the same: Who in the world am I? How did I get here and where am I going? What in the world are my choices and chances? . . . What is my responsibility to others?” (5). In answering these questions, students begin to realize that they have views and that their views matter. At the same time, as educators, we need to prepare students to discuss controversial issues in civil and productive ways. Students need to learn they do not have to fear, disregard, or avoid these issues. Instead, our classrooms need to become places where students can have “experiences respectfully discussing authentic questions about public problems and the kinds of policies that can address those problems” (Hess 69) so that students can learn how to be tolerant of views different from their own.

What I choose to teach in my classroom serves as a signal to my beliefs about our society. I want my students to learn that change happens in a democratic society because of people who are willing to challenge the injustices and fight for

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle.

—Frederick Douglass, 1857 speech
change. Using Linda Christensen’s *Teaching for Joy and Justice: Re-imagining the Language Arts Classroom* as my guide, I wanted a unit that “intentionally scrutinizes literature and history to help students see through the way race and class have worked to privilege some and marginalize others” and to focus on literature “that highlights the resistance of the oppressed, rather than their defeat” (165). Based on these ideas, I developed four essential questions that I wanted the class to focus on as we went through the *Warriors Don’t Cry* unit:

1. How do we use resistance as a method of change in a democratic society?
2. What can we do alone and with others to confront injustices?
3. How can we, as individuals and citizens, make a positive difference in our school, community, and country?
4. Why do some people choose to resist injustices? Why do others choose to be perpetrators? What does it mean to be a resistor? A perpetrator? Or a bystander? What are the consequences of each?

Using these questions as my foundation, I looked for texts that would connect students to historical and fictional characters who used resistance to bring about change when confronting injustices in American society. I also wanted texts that have teenagers in the role of resistor so my students would see that they could be agents of change at school and in our community. Thus, literature becomes a lens through which we see democracy in action.

To begin the unit, I started with a set of anticipatory questions that asked the students about resistance: “Who and/or what do you resist?” “How do you resist?” and “Why do you resist?” My students listed parents, teachers, and school administrators as those they most often resisted by breaking curfews, not doing homework, texting in class, being late for class because they did not like the rules enforced on them. I shared an overview of some research on how and why students resist school on a daily basis when they enter the school building. Students resist learning in many ways because of the hidden curriculum, low self-efficacy, poor motivation, and lack of caring teachers. Students who are not in college-bound courses resist schools far more overtly than the students society considers to be on the winning path. Various types of knowledge gained in primary and secondary school settings are part of the hidden curriculum (the implicit message students learn based on their experiences) because of the inequalities suffered because of its presence (Bandura et al. 188; Contenta 11).

Schools, through their structures and pedagogies, attempt to shape and control the behavior of students with the desire to develop people who willingly accept the status quo. This is accomplished by establishing school rituals that implicitly teach passivity and submission. Students are trained from kindergarten to shuffle in and out of classes at the ringing of bells. The curriculum is sorted and slotted into sequential bits that turn knowledge into an “assembly line” with a hierarchical structure that discourages questioning. A student’s ability to demonstrate self-control and discipline is valued over questioning and free thinking. Schools reflect the hierarchical nature of workspaces so that students will go from sitting in straight rows in absolute silence to working in jobs that want them to be passive employees. By high school, students have learned the rituals so well there is no other way to act (Contenta 16, 28).

Students need to see that resistance is a daily occurrence in schools. Students are subordinated in school and they seek to gain greater autonomy as teachers struggle to manage their classrooms and accomplish academic goals (Abowitz 878; McFarland 613). Schools provide a place for social encounters—a place where children and adults interact in groups that have dominant and subordinate hierarchies. Resistance is the opposition to these hierarchies. Resistance is an attempt to explain how the working-class and other marginalized youth struggle against the norms and authority of schools that often are in conflict with the youths’ interests. Teachers represent a culture of legitimate knowledge and authority while the students represent a culture of opposition and unofficial marginalized knowledge (Abowitz 882).
Using Nonfiction Texts to Teach Resistance in a Democratic Society

Students need to know that it is in school that they have the “perfect context for accepting novice membership in society” (Meier 19) that allows them to express their views and that these views matter in a democracy, “not because there is something special” about their views, but because “all views matter in a democracy” (Hess 70).

For the first lesson, I displayed on the interactive whiteboard Johnny Jenkins’s photograph of Elizabeth Eckford being harassed by a crowd of white people on what was to be her first day at Central High School. At each of their six table groups, students had a copy of the photograph that they could look at more closely. Without telling them anything about the photograph, I asked the class to study the photograph. They were not allowed to talk but to just look at the photo. What did they see happening? What stood out for them? What questions did they have? Using a Think-Pair-Share strategy, the students first wrote down their individual responses in their writer’s notebooks. Then I had them discuss what they found with their table groups. After about ten minutes, I had a representative from each group come up to the board to circle what stood out for them on the photograph. They noticed that the person in the front, Eckford, was the only African American in the photo. The students described Eckford as being “uninterested or even oblivious to the rage of the crowd.” Her sunglasses allow her to “hide in plain sight.” One girl wrote, “What stands out for me is the solidarity of [Eckford] who is being verbally assaulted by the white women around her. She isn’t flinching or fighting back.” The white women behind her seemed angry and one student noticed “her glare, almost of disgust. Then I see the lady next to her screaming, very loudly and violently.” They also noticed the soldiers standing in the back and wondered why they were there because they are doing nothing. However, one boy reflected on the fact that there is “military present, so something dangerous must be happening.” They also picked out the white man on the far right side who was smiling. None of the students was familiar with the photograph and no one could figure out why there seemed to be so much anger and tension. After our group discussion, I told them the story behind the photograph—how Elizabeth Eckford ended up at Central High School alone on what was to be the first day of school for the “Little Rock Nine” and how she was finally able to escape the angry crowd because one woman, a teacher, helped her get on a bus to go home. At this time, I shared the Anti-Defamation League’s Pyramid of Hate (http://archive.adl.org/education/courttv/pyramid_of_hate.pdf) with the class discussing how the photograph shows all levels of hate except genocide. We also discussed how we participate in hate without always realizing it, as described on the pyramid in the areas of “Prejudiced Attitudes” and “Acts of Prejudice.” The response of the students was interesting because they immediately identified acts such as telling belittling jokes as evidence of prejudice attitudes but they struggled with challenging these jokes. One boy said it is easy to say what we should not do in class but in the cafeteria or in the halls, it becomes a different situation. They all agreed that, even though they know it is the right thing to do, it is not easy to stick up for those who need it. Another student explained that no one wants to become the target so it is easier to ignore a situation than it is to get involved. I used this opportunity to make a connection to Warriors Don’t Cry by asking...
my students how they would feel if other students spit on them on every day in school. How would they feel if they had their heels stepped on every day until they bled? How would they feel if they had their books knocked out of their arms every day? If when they went to class no one would talk to them—not even teachers? This is what happened to nine students who attended Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, because they dared to integrate an all-white school in 1957. I asked them if they would have stood by or if they would have done something to stop it. I ended by telling them to think about these questions because we would be coming back to them when we read the book.

The second text was the video *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*. The video, produced by Teaching Tolerance in association with HBO, tells the story of how the children of Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 marched against the oppression and violence that had gripped their city for more than five years. Facing police dogs, fire hoses, and jail, the students of Birmingham marched for their freedom for several days before the city leaders finally agreed to end segregation in the city. My students completed the accompanying viewing guide published by Teaching Tolerance that also served as the basis of our large-group discussion after watching the video. The right to resist an unjust government is a belief that goes back to our country’s founding fathers as delivered in the Declaration of Independence and we need to teach our students that they also have the right to resist injustice. Resistance leads to rebellion and rebellion means claiming the right to protest an injustice. Paulo Freire, in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, believes that the “attitude of rebellion [is] one of the most promising aspects of our political life”—not because I espoused it as a form of action, but because it represented a symptom of advancement, an introduction to a more complete humanity” (32). My students learned that by rebelling, the students of Birmingham regained their humanity because, instead of fearing the police, they were happy to be arrested as a demonstration of their empowerment to be a part of the solution for the racism and segregation that existed. Students were surprised that it was the teenagers and children of Birmingham who did the protesting because the adults would lose their jobs and homes if they did the protesting. We ended this lesson with a written reflection on a quote by Maria Harris: “Silence in the face of evil, allowing the false word to pass, is corrosive and deadly not only to the victim, but also to the bystander. Such silence corrupts not only our world but also us and our spirituality” (127). Many students wrote that ignoring injustices allowed them to become comfortable with the status quo, and eventually not to see the acts as hurtful. A few wondered what they would do if placed in similar circumstances—would they be willing to risk their lives to protect others? This is often what happens with the bystanders. They know they should do something but their fears hold them back.

The final piece was Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” As noted in the Common Core State Standards, to become college and career ready, our students “must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought . . . [that] offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students’ own thinking and writing (National Governors Association 35). King’s letter offers the foundation and reasoning for a nonviolent protest by examining just and unjust laws and arguing that we have a moral obligation for civil disobedience. In small groups, we dissected King’s arguments using the Toulmin Model of Argumentation (we had been discussing the model for use in our persuasive writing; see http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~digger/305/toulmin_model.htm). I wanted the students to look beyond King’s surface message and to discover how the construction of the letter supported his purpose. Students were surprised to find how carefully constructed King’s argument really is. He did not use emotional appeals; instead he clearly stated facts directly refuting the Christian ministers’ arguments against the demonstrations. It is King’s control and “eloquence of language,” as the students noted, that supports his purpose. Many students asked if there is a recording of King reciting the letter because his voice is so strong that they could hear it in their heads.

I want my students to be aware of the forces that push them to conform to the status quo so they can challenge those forces. I want my students to
know that some of the people who came before them who changed the world by resisting the status quo were teenagers. I want to instill in my students a sense of hope in the arena of struggle because “it stirs in us the need to look at the world anew, to question what we have created, to wonder what is worthwhile for human beings to know and experience—and hope because we gesture toward the future, toward the impending, toward the outcome of the new” (Ayers 9). I know the vast majority of my students are not going to become English teachers nor will all of them graduate from a traditional four-year college. I also know that, for some, English is not their favorite subject. All of this is OK with me. My job is to prepare students for what their future holds—whatever that may be. And, if I can sneak in a little appreciation for some literature and get them to enjoy a book, then that just makes my year that much better. As educators, we have to learn to know and to accept our students for who they are and where they are in their lives. Teaching is a social relationship and that relationship acts as a gateway that, when closed, makes student access to academic information excessively difficult. But, when that gateway is open, students are able to become independent problem solvers and independent thinkers.

We have a challenge before us to teach students to be active participants in a democratic society. To make this happen, students must realize that they have a voice—that their views matter—simply because they are members of a democratic society where all views matter.

**Works Cited**


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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Students will identify how Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream of nonviolent conflict resolution is reinterpreted in modern texts in the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “I Have a Dream: Exploring Nonviolence in Young Adult Texts.” Additional work prompts discussion on how nonviolence is portrayed through characterization and conflict. Students will be formally assessed on a thesis essay that addresses the Six Kingian Principles of Nonviolence. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/have-dream-exploring-nonviolence-30509.html