

# MLK's Life as a Theme in the Waldorf Curriculum

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## Introduction and Caveat

Let me begin this curriculum sharing with a caveat. As a White educator and school administrator, I want to acknowledge that my choice to center Martin Luther King, Jr.'s biography as the focal point of this piece can be seen as problematic in several ways: as a further example of tokenism (one famous Black figure standing in for many), as leaning heavily once again on a well-known figure rather than lifting up new or different voices, as prioritizing messages of non-violence and "fitting in" rather than uprising and revolutionary change. I've grappled with each of these critiques myself along the way.

Nevertheless, I chose to work with MLK's biography as a way to "think through" the task of bringing African-American history into the core of the Waldorf curriculum precisely *because* he is the most publicly celebrated African-American in the United States. As the only Black person currently recognized with a national holiday, MLK and the day that celebrates his life can and should be central to American Waldorf schools' festival life and curriculum. It shouldn't be the *only* time we celebrate Black history and culture, nor should MLK be the *only* example of a Black "holy troublemaker" we lift up, nor should we focus *only* on moments of Black suffering, and resistance to suffering.

With all of this in view, I have gathered a number of resources that other teachers may find helpful. With these materials, our educational community can reach what is admittedly a very low baseline: *a step beyond the assemblies, bulletin board displays, and days of service that celebrate MLK in order to encompass deeper study of the man, his work, and the many people and causes intersecting his biography. This work should be woven through our curriculum as seamlessly and elegantly as any other aspect of our students' learning.*

This work can begin as early as Nursery (yes, Nursery!) and continue up through 12th grade. Because my school, Brooklyn Waldorf School, is pre-K through Grade 8, I've focused on these grades here. As I hope I can demonstrate, looking at King's life's work in terms of the developmental stages outlined by Steiner and others, and mapping aspects of King's biography onto the themes of each grade, can serve as a useful example of how other such figures, themes, and non-Western

histories could be integrated into the curriculum in an authentic and meaningful way.

My hope for the children would be that by encountering Martin Luther King each year in a different facet of his identity and work, students will come to feel that they know him and his many colleagues deeply, thereby forming a living picture of him that they would retain for the rest of their lives. On a spiritual level, I believe that these sorts of living pictures connect us in a very real way to the individualities whose lives we study, and that both teachers and students will be spiritually renewed as a result of deeper engagement with a human being of such deep and lasting profundity.

One final warning: The curricular guide that follows is very much a work in progress. Its assemblage just began in January 2021 as an attempt to compile work already going on in our school classrooms, with additions which are yet far from complete. It is intended to be a living compilation that grows each year as teachers add new resources or re-think new ways of weaving aspects of MLK's life and work into the developmental themes of each grade. It is also the product of many minds. Much of the work comes from colleagues at Brooklyn Waldorf and other schools, as well as many, many educators outside the Waldorf community. I also would like to thank those BIPOC folx in the Waldorf movement who have done this work for decades, patiently and sometimes impatiently keeping me honest, accountable, and on my toes. You all know who you are. Thank you.

Note: All internet resources are indicated with the name of the hosting website and the title of the webpage, which could be found by using the search function on the hosting website (or on any good internet search engine).

## Early Childhood: MLK as a Person

### Theme

MLK as a little boy, as a son, as a father. Teachers can use these books and resources to form their own stories or puppet shows.

### Resources

*The Story of Martin Luther King Jr.* by Johnny Ray Moore, illustrations by Amy Wummer (WorthyKids,

2015). A board book that is truthful but also positive for very young children.

Articles for teachers on MLK's boyhood that could offer some details for stories:

Time.com: "What Martin Luther King Jr. Was Like as a Child"

[Washingtonpost.com](http://Washingtonpost.com): "What was Martin Luther King Jr. like as a child? A prankster and 'an ordinary kid.'"

"Freedom, Freedom, Let It Ring" - A song (not in the mood of the fifth) with lyrics that could be made into a circle game or re-set to different music. Just be sure to credit the author, who is a Black preschool teacher. [Youtube.com](http://Youtube.com): "Preschool songs - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. song - Littlestorybug"

## Grade 1: MLK's Big Birthday

### Theme

Who is MLK? Why do we celebrate his life and legacy? The idea for the first grade is to create a sense of Martin Luther King being so important, so amazing that the whole country celebrates his birthday every year.

### Resources

*Why do we celebrate MLK Jr Day?* By Michaela Seymour (The Rosen Publishing Group, 2018).

A biography told by "Kid President" presented in a three and a half minutes video; it could be adapted into a story. [Youtube.com](http://Youtube.com): "The Story of Martin Luther King Jr. by Kid President"

## Grade 2: MLK and Others as Heroes or Saints

### Theme

Many schools have already made a place for MLK in the current second grade curriculum, as it's relatively easy to envision him as one of the "holy troublemakers" highlighted in this year. This could be an opportunity to feature a number of other heroes from the Civil Rights era, particularly children or current individuals continuing the struggle for equal rights.

### Resources

#### The Ruby Bridges Story:

*The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles, illustrations by George Ford (Scholastic, 1995).

Lesson plan from the *Martin Luther King, Jr. Research & Education Institute* at Stanford University – a rich resource of lessons plans for all grades: [Kinginstitute.stanford.edu](http://Kinginstitute.stanford.edu): "Delivering Justice: Westley Wallace Law and the Fight for Civil Rights"

[Kinginstitute.stanford.edu](http://Kinginstitute.stanford.edu): "Lesson Plan: Ruby Bridges"

[Scholastic.com](http://Scholastic.com): "Ruby Bridges: A Simple Act of Courage Lesson Plans and Teaching Resources"

#### Stacey Abrams

Teachers could use this "kid interview" to glean facts for a biographical story of this contemporary citizen rights activist:

[Kpcnotebook.scholastic.com](http://Kpcnotebook.scholastic.com): "One-on-One with Stacey Abrams"

#### Rosa Parks

*Rosa* by Nikki Giovanni, illustrations by Bryan Collier (Square Fish, 2007).

#### Claudette Colvin

This is a teacher resource intended for older students, but it is also an excellent resource for preparing a biographical story. [Zinnedproject.org](http://Zinnedproject.org): "Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice"

#### Multiple Heroes

*Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints* by Daneen Akers (Watchfire Media, 2019).

*Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* by Vashti Harrison (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2017).

## Grade 3: MLK as a Freedom Leader

### Theme

Third grade is a year to tell stories of liberation and of moving towards freedom. MLK's deep connection to Biblical stories and his own resonance with the figure of Moses make for an excellent opportunity to tie the MLK story to the general third grade curriculum, for example through the story of the March on Washington, as well as other freedom marches. A connection can also be made to the power of prophetic speech: Moses' speeches to the Israelites as well as short quotes from MLK's "I Have a Dream" and "Mountaintop" speeches.

### Resources

#### March on Washington

*A Sweet Smell of Roses* by Angela Johnson, illustrations by Eric Velasquez (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005).

#### MLK's Life and Speeches

*Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* by Doreen Rappaport, illustrations by Bryan Collier (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2001). This is picture book biography, but teachers could spread this reading out over a few days, as the book includes lots of "stories within stories" that might need unpacking.

### Children's March

*Let the Children March* by Monica Clark-Robinson, illustrations by Frank Morrison (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

A short *Newsela* article on the Children's March can be found at [Newsela.com](https://newsela.com): "Children marched in the streets to help end segregation"

### Grade 4: Civil Rights in Our Town or Neighborhood

#### Theme

Local Geography and Local History are themes of the fourth grade. In Brooklyn Waldorf School, we focused on "Boycott in Bed-Stuy"—the story of the boycotts organized by CORE, FOCUS, and other groups in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. This part of the curriculum should be as localized as possible. Check your local library, historical society, or interview older residents to find out how the Civil Rights movement played out in your school's geographical community. Another appropriate focus would be on a civil rights issue happening right now: local individuals working for Black Lives Matter, for AAPI civil rights, or migrant workers. Invite an activist to speak to the class.

#### General Resource

*Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, edited by Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (NYU Press, 2005).

This collection offers 13 informative articles on various Black Freedom organizations, events, and stories.

#### Examples from Brooklyn Waldorf School Resources about Brooklyn

The Museum of the City of New York website: [www.mcny.org](http://www.mcny.org): "Civil Rights in Brooklyn: Behind the Scenes, New York at its Core"

[Youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...): "From Bed-Stuy to Harlem: The City Confronts Civil Rights"

[Brownstoner.com](http://www.brownstoner.com): "Remembering Brooklyn's Civil Rights Activists and the Fight for a Better Bed Stuy"

[Alicebernstein.net](http://www.alicebernstein.net): "Remembering the Civil Rights Struggle in Brooklyn"

#### Oral Histories

Our school's board members Jelani Mashiriki and Kojo Campbell come from a prominent Bed-Stuy family that was very much involved in Civil Rights activism in Brooklyn in the 1960s and 70s. They regularly present

an oral history account of this activism, including the role the school building played in the community.

### Grade 5: The Freedom Riders or MLK and Gandhi

#### Theme

The fifth grade's focus on North American geography dovetails nicely with the history of the Freedom Riders, whose commitment to desegregation took them on long-distance bus journeys across the American South. Mapping, reports on individual Freedom Riders, or projects on specific cities are just some of the opportunities teachers have for folding in MLK's connection (or not) to these groups. Alternatively, the focus on ancient Hinduism in this grade provides an opportunity to highlight MLK's connection to Gandhi and his philosophy.

#### Resources

##### Freedom Rides

[Learningforjustice.org](http://Learningforjustice.org): "Freedom Riders"

[Amightygirl.com](http://Amightygirl.com): "The 12-Year-Old Who Defied the KKK To Help Civil Rights Activists After Their Bus Was Firebombed"

A map of the freedom riders' journeys is included on the Britannica Kids entry "Freedom Riders" at [kids.britannica.com](http://kids.britannica.com).

##### MLK and Gandhi

A lesson plan that introduces Gandhi's practice of nonviolence and how MLK and others adapted it for the American civil rights struggle: [kinginstitute.stanford.edu](http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu): "Lesson Plan: Nonviolence in the Indian and African-American Freedom Struggles"

##### Book for middle grade readers:

*Threads of Peace: How Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Changed the World* by Uma Krishnaswami (forthcoming: Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books, August 2021).

### Grade 6: MLK and Voting Rights

#### Theme

Diving deeper into the issue of voting rights offers opportunities for comparative work with other aspects of the fifth and sixth grade curricula, such as looking at the history of representative democracy and how Athens, Rome, and other democracies created voting systems that included certain members and excluded others. Looking at the math of voting, "literacy" tests, and other concrete systems of the voting process appeals to the sixth graders' either/or thinking and helps them move from a simple "Everyone should be

able to vote” stance to “How do we make it more or less possible for people to vote?” This can lead to conversations about the ongoing fight for voting rights in the current political scene.

### Resources

Many different voting rights resources from *Learning for Justice* (formerly known as “Teaching Tolerance”): [Learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org): “Voting and Voices Classroom Resources”

A particularly helpful article on this website can be used for engaging students in a study of how voter suppression actually works in a given state: [Learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org): “Teaching the Truth About Voter Suppression”

Resources from *Facing History and Ourselves* on current events and voting rights: [facinghistory.org](https://facinghistory.org): “Voting Rights in the United States”

A helpful article from *Newsela* on how voting is difficult now; the article can be adjusted for different reading levels: [Newsela.com](https://newsela.com): “How voting in the U.S. is harder than just checking a box”

## Grade 7: MLK and his Vision for a “World House” (MLK’s relationships with other marginalized groups)

### Theme

Riffing broadly off the theme of exploration and discovery, as well as the 13-years-old emerging sense of personal identity, the seventh grade presents a perfect opportunity to focus on MLK’s expansive view of coalition building, as well as his personal relationships with people of all backgrounds. In particular, the theme offers an opportunity for students to explore different facets of identity through biographies of LGBTQ+ leaders in the Civil Rights movement. Teachers could also expand to include MLK’s anti-poverty work towards the end of his life, when he made coalitions with poor people across racial and cultural lines.

### Resources

LGBTQ+ bios (for teacher prep)

[Learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org): “Pauli Murray: Fighting Jane and Jim Crow”

Pauli Murray was a Black, gender fluid attorney who literally wrote the book (a legal compendium) that enabled the NAACP and others to launch all the landmark lawsuits such as *Brown v Board of Ed*, etc. Her preferred pronouns were she/her, but she unapologetically identified as a man publicly at a time (1930s on) when it was unheard of to do so. She was a follower of

Gandhi and later in life became the first female African-American Episcopal priest.

[Learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org): “Bayard Rustin: The Fight for Civil and Gay Rights”

Bayard Rustin was a Black, openly gay civil rights organizer who introduced MLK to the teachings of Gandhi, made pilgrimages to India to learn the methods of protest and non-violent resistance used there, and became the teacher and conversation partner of nearly every well-known civil rights leader of the 1940s onwards. Rustin organized the March on Washington, as well as co-founded CORE with Pauli Murray and others. It is hard to overstate his impact on the Civil Rights movement. He is less known than his peers because MLK had him work behind the scenes as his personal assistant and secretary in order to protect him from the legal ramifications of his identity as a gay man, as well as the hate from some of his fellow organizers who disapproved of his unapologetically gay lifestyle.

Both Murray and Rustin have short bios on the King Institute site, due to the inspiration they drew from Gandhi for non-violent resistance. [Kinginstitute.stanford.edu](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu): “Early Disciples of Gandhi’s Principle of Nonviolence”

Another helpful resource from the King Institute is a lesson plan that contextualizes King’s belief in welcoming and building coalitions with other marginalized groups, using his concept of a “World House.” [Kinginstitute.stanford.edu](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu): “Lesson Plan: Building King’s World House - Diversity and Inclusion”

## Grade 8: Contemporary Black Lives Matter Movement

### Theme

By eighth grade, the students are ready to talk about revolutions. The most obvious point of overlap in our current context is the Black Lives Matter movement, about which students can learn and further compare it with the earlier civil rights work done by MLK and others. By following the spiral curriculum outlined here, eighth graders will have a fairly nuanced understanding of these issues—indeed better than that of most adult Americans. The focus in this grade is on contemporary manifestations of the impulse to create equity for Black Americans.

### Resources

*BLM Lesson Plans for Middle School* from D.C. Area Educators for Social Justice:

[Dareaeducators4socialjustice.org/black-lives-matter](https://dareaeducators4socialjustice.org/black-lives-matter/): “Resources for Middle and High School”

From *Learning for Justice* on BLM:  
[Learningforjustice.org](https://www.learningforjustice.org/): "Why Teaching Black Lives Matter Matters"

For the most recent articles on BLM to get you up to date, check on Newsela.com, which also ranks its materials' reading (lexile) level.

### Additional Resources

There are so many different directions to take lessons that have their root in MLK's life, teaching, and legacy. The items included here are samples to give an idea of the resources that are already out there. As each school delves deeper into the work of reimagining what a truly inclusive, equitable, place-based American Waldorf curriculum looks like, we need to encourage all teachers (specialty subjects included) to explore the deep work that has been going on for decades in mainstream educational settings. We have much to learn from our colleagues there, particularly BIPOC educators. We can always adapt the lessons to fit our aesthetics and developmental stages, but we have a responsibility to take up this work.

#### Spanish

*Minute by Minute Spanish*, which offers teaching materials for several other languages as well as ESL, offers a song in Spanish as well as an associated lesson plan.

[Minutebyspanish.com](https://www.minutebyspanish.com/): "Dr. Martin Luther King Honored by Spanish-Speaking Countries – Spanish Class Lesson for Civil Rights Day – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day"

#### Mandarin

##### Miss Panda Chinese:

[Misspandachinese.com](https://www.misspandachinese.com/): "Chinese Through Story Martin Luther King A Poem"

#### Math

This is a piece about polling data around the civil rights movement in the 1960's coming from the website "Not Awful and Boring Ideas for Teaching Statistics":

[Notawfulandboring.blogspot.com](https://www.notawfulandboring.blogspot.com/): "Izadi's 'Black Lives Matter and America's long history of resisting civil rights protesters'"

#### Music

[Carnegiehall.org](https://www.carnegiehall.org/): *Learning "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around"*

The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, a rich resource for lesson plans and themes for all grades, suggests a songbook on Civil Rights songs:

[Kinginstitute.stanford.edu](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/): "Nobody Gonna Turn Me 'Round: Stories & Songs of the Civil Rights Movement"

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