

**Exploring the Turbulent 1960's Through a Novel Study of  
*The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963***

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**Introduction**

One of the many themes that teachers of the Talent Development, that is, Academically Gifted Department of my inner-city school district explore is 'The Patterns of Change.' Using this as a basis, as well as the themes of race and justice, I will be working with certified (through testing) Gifted and fifth grade students of higher ability with reading *Birmingham, 1963* by Carole Boston Weatherford as well as the novel *The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis. We will explore the Civil Rights Movement in Charlotte, North Carolina, at that time and culminate our unit with a visit to our local Levine Museum of the New South.

These readings touch on many themes as prejudice, bullying, racism, discrimination, friendships, as seen through the eyes of the Watson's middle son, Kenny, a thirteen year adolescent in the novel; and a fictional witness to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in the Birmingham book. As we read, I expect my students to analyze (2.06) which character they think changes the most in the readings as they take a journey with the writers and record their thoughts in journal writings and discussions. Students will list the positive and negative characteristics (2.09, 3.01) of at least one major and one minor character and how they believe if each changed for better or worse using a chart or Venn diagram (4.02).

Kenny could be considered a gifted student by today's standards, especially when he is asked to recite a Langston Hughes poem in his older brother, Bryon's class. I expect students to see the parallel between Kenny and themselves and the changes they both go through as they learn about the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1960's. The ethnicity of the eleven certified gifted students I work with at my school are seven African-American, two Hispanic, one Asian and Caucasian, with seven of these male and four female. Many times these young, gifted, and black children play down their academic abilities to fit with peers in their neighborhood and we will discuss these

ambiguities throughout the unit. I will be collaborating with the classroom teacher throughout this unit and working with a homogeneous class of high ability fifth graders.

I work with 1.2% certified gifted population as well as about 4% Catalyst/high ability students at a Pre-K to 5<sup>th</sup> grade school with almost 800 students, in a large urban school system in North Carolina. Our school is a county wide magnet with the theme of “Global Economics and Leadership,” thus parents apply for their child to attend and they go through a lottery process. Our ethnic backgrounds are 59% African-American, 26% Hispanic, 7% multi-racial, 4% Asian, and 4% Caucasian with 64% of our students receive free and reduced meals.

Many of our school’s students lack life experiences, especially in the knowledge of what really happened with Civil Rights in the 1960’s, thus using Discovery Education videos and vignettes from computer sites on the Smart Board (3.04), I will bring the past into the present. This will lead to greater understanding, deeper discussions, and higher thinking skills for the students. This unit will be used with academically advanced fifth graders, but can also be used with middle school students as it has some controversial elements with sensitive and advanced material.

## **Rationale**

I grew up in a northern state and though I was young in the 1960’s, I knew of the deaths of John F. Kennedy and his brother, Robert, as well as Martin Luther King Jr., the marches and movements, but I did not totally understand the whole ramifications as the movement was not happening near me and I rarely watched the news on television. Everyone in my neighborhood and school looked like me, the only difference was our sex, but many times all the kids would play games together and blended well.

It was not until I moved to North Carolina, after twenty years in South Florida, when a teacher I teamed with told the class maybe I could speak about separate water fountains, a topic I read about but never experienced, that I realized I needed to expand my horizons. I never read this novel or any book similar to it as a child. It is on a list of possible novels provided by my district for advanced elementary students, thus my fifth grade students read The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963, which is really quite funny, but ends on a serious note. I want to expand on the history of the 1960’s in United States and give my students a strong background of what took place during these tumultuous years.

Through this unit, I will integrate literacy, history, and technology to expose students to this historical fictional novel, and the impact and relevance it has on changes in today's society and justice. The students will begin to understand and appreciate what others before them accomplished so we could have the opportunities we have now, as well as following the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (These are embedded in my unit and described under district standards in appendix). Students will learn key vocabulary (1.02, 1.03), debate and discuss issues presented (1.03), build background knowledge (1.05), and uses reference material (1.04). Though this novel is not global, many of the concepts and themes can relate to our school's magnet theme of Global Awareness and I believe this unit would have a life-long meaning for me and my students. Throughout the unit, the fifth grade students will compare similarities and differences between themselves and the characters (3.01), expanding our global theme.

Hopefully, students will make connections (3.02) and informed judgments about the characters, formulate hypothesis (4.02), present and support arguments (3.03) while using Smart Boards, Discovery Education for videos and vignettes, Socratic seminars, (Our theme for discussion is the more things change, the more they stay the same), and Power Point presentations (4.10) to enhance and publish their products (4.06) to share with classmates over this month long unit (4.05, 4.06).

Socratic Seminar is a structured, student-centered discussion which maximizes student participation, requiring students to read, think and listen critically, and facilitates the clear and convincing development of ideas (2.09). The seminar places the burdens, responsibilities, and rewards of intellectual inquiry on the students' shoulders. (1)

Socratic Seminars are the result of Mortimer Adler, who argues that education should be rooted in three goals: the acquisition of knowledge accomplished through didactic teaching in the content area; the development of intellectual skills through coaching, exercises and practice; and the enlarged understanding of ideas and values through Socratic Questioning and Active Participation. (2)

### **Brief Book Summary**

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* is about a black family of five, Momma, Dad, Bryon, Kenny, and Joetta (Joey). Bryon, a thirteen year old 'juvenile delinquent' goes too far with his adolescent antics, thus he is going to visit and stay with his Grandma Sands, who will straighten him out. Thus, the whole family plans a trip from Flint,

Michigan, to Birmingham, Alabama, in the family car. Along the way, the children learn that things are different outside Flint. The ultimate lesson for the entire family comes on their second day at Grandma's home when a local church is bombed, which changes each member of the family forever.

The book, *Birmingham, 1963*, captures the heartbreak of the tragedy that occurred on Sunday, September 15, 1963, as seen through the eyes of a fictional witness to the bombing through words and pictures.

This unit will start with the text of "Ballad of Birmingham," (see appendix) the poem (2.03) that inspired Christopher Paul Curtis to write the Watson's book. When the daughter in the poem asks permission to attend a civil rights rally, the loving and fearful mother refuses to let her go, but allowed to go to church instead, the daughter dies anyway. Thus, there is no sanctuary in an evil world, Randall seems to say, and one may face horror in the street as well as in the church. (3)

### **Strategies, Activities and Lessons**

Students will use their knowledge of Jacob's Ladder (3.05), which are higher level questions based on Bloom's Taxonomy, and the theme of the cycle of change, as well as Literacy Circles, Socratic Seminar discussions, journal writings (4.02, 5.02, 5.08) and projects to enhance this unit. Another strategy is to bring students back to the 1960's through music, fashion, food, politics, videos, and discussions to have a solid background of the civil rights movement so as to align themselves with the characters (3.02, 3.03). We will role play (4.07) bullying and family relationships as well as invite guest speakers to class, leading to discussions of the dynamics in the novel.

Jacob's Ladder is a learning journey for students which begins with targeted readings from fables, myths, and nonfiction sources and moves through an inquiry process from basic understanding to critical analyses of the texts read. Tasks are organized by skills ladders with questions and activities within each to increase complexity in intellectual demand. Ladder A consists of sequencing, cause and effect, and consequences and implications; Ladder B has details, classification, and generalization questions; and Ladder C uses elements, inferences, and theme and concept questions. (4)

In 1956, Benjamin Bloom identified six levels within the cognitive domain, from the simple recall or recognition of facts, as the lowest level, through increasingly more

complex and abstract mental levels, to the highest order which is classified as evaluation. The levels are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. (5)

Literature Circles are a great way to teach reading by allowing the students to take a more active role in their learning. Students read assigned chapters in the novel and are broken into small groups for discussion. Within the group, students are assigned tasks and are an active participant in their own learning. (6)

Students will work in groups making a Travel Guide with Literacy Circle jobs such as background person, newspaper reporter, timeline creator, biographer, and artist. Students will use cognitive strategies independently and flexibly to monitor comprehension (2.01) and evaluation (2.09) while formulating inferences, conclusions, and generalizations (2.05).

Students will begin the unit by keeping a Watson Reflection Journal (loose leaf binder) where they can add materials and informational worksheets (3.01). The following questions will be part of the pre-reading discussion and unit activities (2.02):

Preview the cover and answer who is involved, what is the novel about, where does the plot take place, the time period, and why is the family going to Birmingham? Students will predict the theme of the novel (2.02).

Attribute webs (This is where student puts a character's name in a center circle with lines to their attributes) or examples (2.04) are created with some traits like prejudice, injustice, courage, consequences, family relationships, loyalty and students tell what words come to mind with these thoughts. Students will elaborate and discussions will follow (3.01).

The author, Christopher Paul Curtis, uses many colloquial expressions, both informal and conversational, and students are to list at least five, and try to figure out the meaning from context clues (1.01). They also give at least three examples of hyperboles, which are obvious exaggerations; similes that make comparisons using like or as; metaphors which are implied comparisons; and personification where human characteristics are given to things used throughout the text(2.04).

One of the themes in the novel is injustice and bullying especially with the secondary characters like Rufus, Cody, Larry Dunn, LJ, and Buphead. Discuss this theme and how you would feel and handle this injustice (2.08, 3.01).

Make two historical tolerance timelines one for an individual (ask family members to assist) and one based on research (3.06). As a class, we will create a Civil Rights Bulletin Board with causes, results, and challenges. An example is given in the Background section using Civil Rights Movement and its connection with Charlotte, North Carolina.

Every pupil will respond (thumbs up or down) and discussion will follow as to agreement or disagreement on these anticipation questions (3.01):

- Being an adult is easier than being a child.
- There's never a funny side to a family argument.
- Innocent people never suffer due to society's problems.
- Brothers and sisters always get along and help one another.
- Does this differ over time?
- Do you think the Watsons were weird?
- Was the mom overprotective?

Students will make a Prediction Chart (2.02) with characters, conflicts, predictions, and tell why. The main thought will be conflict happen, it is how we deal and tolerate it that predicts future moves. Students will map out the story and keep a vocabulary chart (1.05).

Many discussions and Socratic seminars as well as Jacob's Ladder higher level thinking questions will take place throughout the readings (4.03). Students will turn in their notebooks at the end of the unit (5.01-5.08). Students will look up the lyrics of "Under the Boardwalk" and "Yakety Yak" two songs mentioned in the novel (go to YouTube and put in "song name" lyrics), and discuss the words and if they have meaning to your life now. Research amblyopic or "lazy eye" its cause and treatment and share with class (3.06).

Allan G. Johnson in *Privilege, Power and Difference* states how the definition of races have changed over time and how the Irish and many Eastern European people were considered non-white and how the British treated the Irish as an inferior race. Thus, the

underlying concept of the cycle of these changes will be discussed throughout the unit.  
(7)

Students would begin by brainstorming and writing their ideas about cycles in small groups then categorize these ideas (2.02). Next students will discuss a list of patterns and changes that do not occur in cycles. Try to group and name these ideas also. Students will begin to make generalizations about the cyclic patterns of change and analyze their thoughts (3.03).

Some questions to answer in their journal would be: (8)  
Do characters create or break any cycles? Is this intentional? Do any natural cycles play a role in this story? What cycles are imposed by humans on the events? Do any of the cycles change, forming spirals? Are these positive or negative cycles? Explain. Are any of the symbols, images, or analogies found in this novel cyclic, or do they represent a cyclic pattern of change? From whose point of view is this story told? How does the narrative point of view affect your understanding of the events and feelings portrayed in the novel? Discuss your views about this statement, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

### **Unit Plan**

This unit will last a month, and all the activities and strategies can be done throughout the first three weeks when reading of the novel is taking place. During the first week, the novel is introduced and chapters 1-5 are read, followed by chapters 6-10 in week two, and the novel is finished during the third week, with all culminating activities completed in the final week.

### **Background for Timeline**

One activity the students will create is a Civil Rights Timeline using national as well as historical happenings in Charlotte, North Carolina. Here is a guideline: (9)

1948- Truman declares equal treatment of all persons in the armed forces without regard to color, race, religion, or national origin.

1954- Brown Vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, rules segregation in public schools is unconstitutional.

1955- Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat to a white person in the 'colored section' on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama; Rock Hill's St. Anne School desegregates.

1957-Four African American students entered previously all white schools in Charlotte, also four black college students began a sit-in at a Woolworth's counter in Greensboro, NC.

1963-Harvey Gantt became the first African American to desegregate Clemson University, SC; a march on Washington, D.C.; bomb explodes at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and four girls die

1965-Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District had merged five years earlier and was now sued by Vera and Darius Swann for not allowing their son to attend the almost all-white school nearest their home; affirmative action begins

1967- Race riots take place in Newark, NJ, and Detroit, Michigan; Martin Luther King Jr. is killed by James Earl Ray.

1968- President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1968 prohibiting housing discrimination.

1969- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools ordered to desegregate, including busing

1971- Busing began in Charlotte, NC

1974- Charlotte has successful integration "The City That Made Integration Work," Fred Alexander became the first of two African Americans in the NC Senate.

1976- Two African American professors founded the Afro American Cultural Center at UNC-Charlotte

1983-Harvey Gantt elected the first black mayor of Charlotte, a city with only 25% black population

Were the Watson's privileged as compared to other families of the time? Well, I would compare them to my own Northern Caucasian 1960's family.

### *Similarities*

Loving home, mother home  
Rent home  
One TV, car-only dad drove  
Mother bundled up kids  
Only grandmother did not live nearby  
Little extended family  
One troublesome child  
Mother violent (at time)

### *Differences*

owned home  
  
  
  
  
  
father violent (at time)



Thus, I would show kids how my family had more similarities than differences with the Watsons, who also grew up in the North and had similar patterns of family life. I could relate to many of this family's activities and discuss this with students.

In doing research for this unit, I learn that Birmingham, Alabama, was one of the most segregated cities in the United States in 1963. The eyes of the world were upon this city as a flashpoint for the Civil Rights Movement. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was a meeting place for civil rights organizers. The Ku Klux Klan planted nineteen sticks of dynamite under the back steps. The murder of the four innocent girls, which introduces our novel, shocked the nation and turned the tide in the struggle for equality. (10)

### **Technology Resources**

Students will go to [www.googlelittrips.org](http://www.googlelittrips.org) and follow the route the Watsons took on their journey from Flint, Michigan to grandma's home in Birmingham, Alabama. Questions are embedded along the journey which students will add to their journal.

Watch the documentary "Four Little Girls" by Spike Lee (HBO Home Video, 2000). This 102 minute film about the September 15, 1963, church bombing is available in VHS and DVD formats and provides a powerful account of the events leading up to as well as the aftermath of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Sunday School in Birmingham, Alabama.

Might Times: The Children's March (2004) will be viewed. This Academy Award winning documentary film and accompanying resources tell the heroic story of the young people in Birmingham, Alabama, who brought segregation to its knees. (DVD Grades 5 and up) Free from [www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org).

### **News Sites**

[www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/national/longterm/churches/archives1.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/national/longterm/churches/archives1.htm)

<http://afroamhistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa051401a.htm>

[www.discoveryeducation.com](http://www.discoveryeducation.com)

## **Pre-Reading Projects for Unit**

Make an illustrated time line of the Civil Rights Movement, using pictures of the times to illustrate the events. Explain the events to the class and discuss why you chose the photos you did.

Explore the music that was popular in 1963, especially in the African American community. Find recordings or lyrics for songs mentioned in the Watson novel.

What does music tell you about the times? Research two of the artists. How did the fact that they were African Americans influence their careers?

What did people wear in 1963? What fashions were popular for formal wear and casual? What hair styles were in vogue? What was ‘conked hair,’ and how was it conked? Make a poster that gives an idea of how people appeared in 1963.

Who was Martin Luther King Jr.? Research his influence on the Civil Rights Movement. Pick one speech and prepare a reading of it. Make a poster board and annotate it for display.

Make a collage that show how the life of an African American in the late 1950’s or early 1960’s would have differed from that of a white person in the south. Research the “Jim Crow Laws” and show places in your collage where African Americans would have been denied admittance or treated differently or places where their lives were “separate but equal.”

## **Post Reading Thoughts and Activities**

How does Kenny’s life change in the book? What would you include in a survival kit to help Kenny cope when he returns home?

Describe Bryon’s transformation in Birmingham and what were the causes?

Many schools throughout the United States have been named in honor of Martin Luther King, who believed in desegregation. Think of these schools in Charlotte, many

of which are almost all filled with black children. How do you think Mr. King Jr. would feel about this? Research some facts to present to the class.

Change the ending of the book-what if the bombing did not occur, how would the ending of the novel change?

### **Citations**

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2. [www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic](http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic)
3. Harris, Trudier. 1985. Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 41: Afro-American Poets Since 1955. University of North Carolina: Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
4. [http://cfge.wm.edu/curr\\_language.htm](http://cfge.wm.edu/curr_language.htm)
5. <http://www.officeport.com/edu/blooms.htm>
6. <http://www.mrscowan.com/literaturecircle.htm>
7. Johnson, Allan G. Privilege, Power, and Difference. McGraw Hill, 1955, p.22.
8. Pleiss, Mary. 2003. Patterns of Change. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, p.150.
9. [www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html)
10. Weatherford, Carole Brown. Birmingham, 1963. Hopesdale, Pennsylvania: Wordsong, 2007, book jacket.

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(Assessed Date October 1, 2010)

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Infoplease:Encyclopedia, Almanac, Atlas, Biographies, Dictionary, Thesaurus. Free online reference, research, and homework help.-Infoplease.com.  
<http://infoplease.com/spot/c> (Assessed Date October 10, 2010)

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Pless, Mary. Patterns of Change. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 2003.

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“cccoe.net” cccoe.net. <http://cccoe.net> (Assessed Date November 1, 2010)

Johnson, Allan. Privilege, Power, and Difference. New York: McGraw Hill, 1965.

### **Teacher Resources**

<http://homeworkspot.com/high/socialstudeis/civilrights.htm>. Extensive collection of K-12 student reference material.

[www.civilrightsmuseum.org](http://www.civilrightsmuseum.org). This is the official web site for the National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, Tennessee. There is an interesting interactive tour of the museum, but you must do the tour in order and it takes about 25 screens to get to the 1960’s.

[www.watson.org/-lisa/blackghistory](http://www.watson.org/-lisa/blackghistory). A comprehensive set of online articles detailing the entire history of the black Civil Rights movement from the Dread Scott case to 1975.

[www.educationplanet.com/search/history/United\\_States\\_History/Civil\\_Rights\\_Movement](http://www.educationplanet.com/search/history/United_States_History/Civil_Rights_Movement)  
A K-12 Web site designed to help parents, teachers, and students find quality educational resources. Has lesson plans and links to other interesting sites.

### **Civil Rights Movement Resources for Teachers and Students**

Bullard, Sara. Free at Last. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. A year by year review from the early struggles through 1968.

Bridges, Ruby. Through My Eyes. New York: Scholastic, 1999. Ruby Bridges recounts her experience as the first grader who needed federal escorts to integrate an all-white school in New Orleans in 1961.

Engelbert, Phillis. American Civil Rights: Primary Sources. UKL, 1999. Presents 15 historically significant documents, including speeches (“I Have a Dream“ and “Letter from Birmingham Jail“), autobiographical text, and proclamations.

Harding, Vincent and Robin Kelley and Earl Lewis. We Changed the World: African Americans, 1945-1970. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Great photographs!

King, Casey and Linda Barrett Osbourne. Oh Freedom! Kids Talk About the Civil Rights Movements With the People Who Made it Happen. Knopf, 1997. Children interview adults about their civil-rights experiences, helping the reader to understand what it was like to be an African American in the 1960’s.

Levine, Ellen. Freedom’s Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories. New York: Puffin, 2000. People recount their Civil Rights memories, allowing the reader to see what it was like to be an African-American child in the south during the 1960’s.

Lucas, Eileen. Civil Rights: The Long Struggle. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, Inc. 1996. Details the process of the African-American fight for racial justice and equality in an interesting form.

Myers, Walter Dean. Now Is Your Time: The African American Struggle for Freedom. New York: Harper Collins, 1992. This award-winning book provides an in-depth look at the African-American experience from slavery through the Civil Rights era.

Patterson, Charles. The Civil Rights Movement. Facts-on-File, 1995. This title details the African-American struggle for equality and the significance of the Civil Rights Movement in American history.

Rappaport, Doreen. Martin's Big Words. New York: Hyperion Books, 2001. The author weaves her words with Dr. King's into a captivating narrative.

Venable, Rose. The Civil Rights Movement. Chanhassen, MN: The Child's World, 2002. A good summary of the civil rights movement with pictures.

Vernell, Marjorie. Leaders of Black Civil Rights. Portland, OR: Lucent Books, 2000. A collection of biographies of important African-American history.

Weatherford, Carole Boston. Birmingham, 1963. Hopedale, PA: Wordsong, 2007. Photographs and prose as a tribute to the Birmingham victims.

Weatherford, Carole Boston. The African-American Struggle for Legal Equality in American History. Written for middle school students.

## **Appendix**

### **Ballad of Birmingham by Dudley Randall**

“Mother dear, may I go downtown  
    Instead of out to play,  
And march the streets of Birmingham  
    In a Freedom March today?”

“No, baby, no, you may not go,  
    For the dogs are fierce and wild,  
And clubs and hoses, guns and jails  
    Aren't good for a little child.”

“But, mother, I won't be alone.  
    Other children will go with me,  
And march the streets of Birmingham  
    To make our country free.”

“No baby, no, you may not go  
    For I fear those guns will fire.  
But you may go to church instead

And sing in the children's choir.”

She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,  
And bathed rose petal sweet,  
And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,  
And white shoes on her feet.

The mother smiled to know that her child  
Was in the sacred place,  
But that smile was the last smile  
To come upon her face.

For when she heard the explosion,  
Her eyes grew wet and wild.  
She raced through the streets of Birmingham  
Calling for her child.

She raced through bits of glass and brick,  
Then lifted out a shoe.  
“O, here's the shoe my baby wore,  
But, baby, where are you?”

*<http://oldpoetry.com/opoem/59437-Dudley-Randall-Ballad-Of-Birmingham>*

