The Civil Rights Movement has traditionally been taught according to a top-down approach, focusing only on “well-known heroes, heroines, and watershed moments” in the short time span of the mid-1950s to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Anderson, 2018).

This approach has led students to believe that the movement achieved its goal of racial equality and “there is nothing left to fight for in regard to equity” (Anderson, 2018).

The bottom-up teaching approach focuses on the changemakers at the grassroots level.
Top-Down v. Bottom-Up Teaching of Civil Rights

**Top Down Approach**

- “Short Civil Rights Movement”

- Civil Rights Movement begins with Rosa Park’s “sit-in” on the bus and concludes with the Voting Rights Act

- Emphasis on national leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy

**Bottom Up Approach**

- “Long Civil Rights Movement”

- Civil Rights Movement begins with the Abolitionist Movement and continues as an ongoing quest

- Emphasis on the key role played by grassroots activists
Traditional Approach to Teaching Civil Rights

The “naïve, top-down, normative perspective on movement history,” referred to as the “master narrative,” begins with the U.S. Supreme Court striking down segregation in public schools in Brown v. Board of Education (1954); Rosa Parks then refuses to get up from her seat for a white man; boycotts, marches, and sit-ins emerge; Dr. King speaks of equality in his “I Have a Dream Speech,” Congress passes the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act and freedom and equality are achieved (Payne, 2006).
Problems with Traditional Narrative of the Movement

- “Creates the impression that historical dynamism resides among elites – usually white, usually male, usually educated – and that nonelites lacked agency” (Payne, 2006)

- Fails to examine the class, regional, and ideological divisions within the African-American community and how these divisions “shaped response to oppression” (Payne, 2006).

- Spreads gender bias by ignoring the women who played key leadership roles in the Movement (Payne, 2006);

- Suppresses the contributions of LGBT African-Americans to the Movement (“The role of gay men and lesbians in the Civil Rights Movement,” n.d.). Skipped over are Pauli Murray, Bayard Rustin, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and Audre Lorde.
Audre Lorde

A self-described “Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, warrior, poet, mother, Audre Lorde wrote, “From my membership in all of these groups I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sizes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression” (‘Audre Lorde on Screen,’ 2018).
What Happens after 1965?

- Dowd Hall (2005) asserts that the Movement is condensed into a “master narrative” spanning only a decade in a way that “distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals” (pp. 1233-1234).

- By ending the narrative in 1965, the focus is removed from Black Power, the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, and the “urban rebellions” that took place post-1965 in response to Dr. King’s assassination, police violence, economic injustice, and educational inequality (Sanchez, 2016).

- Omitted is Dr. King’s own disillusionment, when he stated his dream “had turned into a nightmare” (Sanchez, 2016). King’s opposition to the Vietnam War and his alliance with “Black Power proponents” is also suppressed (Sanchez, 2016).
The Black Power Protest that Rocked the World

- 1968 Mexico City Olympics
- Tommie Smith and John Carlos (gold and bronze medal winners) engaged in silent protest on the world stage to call out the continuing racial injustice in the United States.
- Smith and Carlos removed their shoes to protest poverty; wore beads to protest lynching, and “lowered their heads in defiance and raised their fists in a Black Power salute that rocked the world” (Brown, 2017).
The Black Power Protest that Rocked the World


At the time, the crowd booed and screamed; Smith and Carlos were ordered to leave Olympic Stadium; and were suspended from the U.S. Track Team.
Inequality and continuing segregation in public schools;
Continued segregation in cities;
Erosion of minority voting rights;
Weakening of the labor movement;
Income inequality;
Hair discrimination (CROWN Act)
Institutional racism;
Police violence; and
Prison industrial complex
(Dowd Hall, 2005, p. 1261)

“As Black Lives Matter activists once again take up the fight against racial inequity and police brutality, excavating the long, grassroots history for students is crucial if we hope to use the past to inform our struggles today” (Sanchez, 2016).
Switching the Framework

• By switching from a top down approach to a bottom up framework of teaching civil rights, we recognize the grassroots activists (the unsung heroes and heroines) who played instrumental roles in effectuating change (Anderson, 2018).

• By shedding light on the extraordinary work of “ordinary” grassroots activists, we empower our students to realize that they too can be changemakers.

“It is only through examining history that you become aware of where you stand within the continuum of change.” ~ John Lewis
Rosa Parks was a lifelong activist for civil rights, serving as branch secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, advancing voter registration, “seeking justice for Black victims of white brutality and sexual violence,” advocating for wrongfully accused Black men and women, and “pressing for desegregation of schools and public spaces”; Rosa had prior run-ins with the same bus driver, who had previously evicted her from the bus. On Dec. 1, 1955, the bus driver called the police to arrest her. Rosa asked the police: “Why do you push us around?” (Theoharis, 2015).

Following her arrest, Rosa played a key role with the Montgomery Improvement Association, which organized the bus boycott (Menkart, Murray, View, 2004).

“People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

- Rosa Parks
Rosa Parks traveled across the U.S. in 1956, making appearances on behalf of the bus boycott and the NAACP.
- Septima Clark, a dedicated teacher and social justice advocate, “pioneered the link between education and political organizing, especially political organizing aimed at gaining the right to vote.”

- In keeping with her motto of “Literacy means liberation,” Clark developed Citizenship Schools to teach adult literacy, civics, engage students in critical thinking, and develop community leaders who would take up the torch for social justice.

- Clark’s work paved the way for the Freedom Schools of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC Digital Gateway: Septima Clark, n.d.).
Grassroots Heroine: Ella Baker

Throughout her life she championed the power of the people, especially students, to make social change.

I have always thought that what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others.

- Ella Baker -

- Served as a field worker and branch director of the NAACP;

- Founded “In Friendship” to fight Jim Crow laws in the South;

- Served as a key organizer of Dr. King’s SCLC;

- Following the Greensboro sit-ins, she committed to helping student activists become leaders of the Movement, founding the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee;

- Joined with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) to organize the Freedom Rides, Freedom Summer, and Freedom Schools (“Who was Ella Baker?, n.d.).
Resources for Teaching Civil Rights

- Civil Rights Teaching.org – Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching: [https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/](https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/)

- “Eyes on the Prize, America’s Civil Rights Movement” on Facing History and Ourselves website: [https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/eyes-prize-americas-civil-rights-movement](https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/eyes-prize-americas-civil-rights-movement)

- Teaching Tolerance (Southern Poverty Law Center’s educational resources to teach “social justice and anti-bias): [https://www.tolerance.org/topics](https://www.tolerance.org/topics)

- Zinn Education Project: Teaching Peoples History: [https://www.zinnedproject.org/](https://www.zinnedproject.org/)


• Who was Ella Baker? (n.d.). Retrieved from https://ellabakercenter.org/about/who-was-ella-baker?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI0bOfku6f5wIVtSCTBh2w0w18EAAYASAAEgLT1fD_BwE
• Figure 1: Landmark cases: Brown v. Board of Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/supremecourt/rights/landmark_brown.html

• Figure 2: Pauli Murray (2019, July). Queer saint who stood for racial and gender equality: https://qspirit.net/pauli-murray-queer-saint/

• Figure 3: Audre Lorde on Screen. (2018, September). https://directedbywomen.com/events-directory/audre-lorde-on-screen/


• Figure 6: Lind, D. (2016, December 1). 50-year-old article shows how the myth of Rosa Parks was made. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/2015/12/2/9834798/rosa-parks-tired-civil-rights
• Figure 7. Rosa Park’s Poster. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/civil-rights-era.html

• Figure 8. Septima Clark - Marian Wright Edelman Quote. Schools Classes Quotes. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://quotestats.com/topic/school-classes-quotes/