



Bus Boycott Dramatization for First and Second Grade

By Maggie Nolan Donovan

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Introduction

Among the many ways of responding to stories of resistance in my classroom, by far the most popular, year after year, is playacting. This choice seems natural to me because children love to act out stories, and resistance stories are inherently dramatic. Drama is a compelling way for child actors to walk around in the world of civil rights activists; to experience what they experienced; to feel, in a very real way, the emotions that such scenarios raise; and to internalize the activists' interpretation of these experiences.

When we create plays in our classroom, we have no scripts, no costumes, some chairs as scenery, and we are our own audience. The plays are about 15 minutes long, and they always include the singing of Freedom Songs because that is historically accurate and because it turns the play into a musical. Typically, half the class—ten or eleven children—is in the play, and the other half is the audience. Then we switch: Actors become audience; audience members become actors. This alternating is important because it enables children to experience the story twice, as well as from two different points of view, actor and audience member.

We begin by considering the whole story and breaking it into scenes; each scene has a climactic moment. We talk about how people would feel in such circumstances. We choose parts, and since we act out the stories more than once, children usually get to play the part they want. We think of some key lines that actors might say. The rest of the dialogue is spontaneous. We create an open space in the classroom for the stage, and arrange furniture, mostly chairs, to represent scenery. We talk about the role of the audience; in these dramas, it is to watch and listen attentively, and after the play is over, to provide feedback to the actors. The first time around, the performance is usually a little tentative and silly, but before long, students are acting with power and conviction.

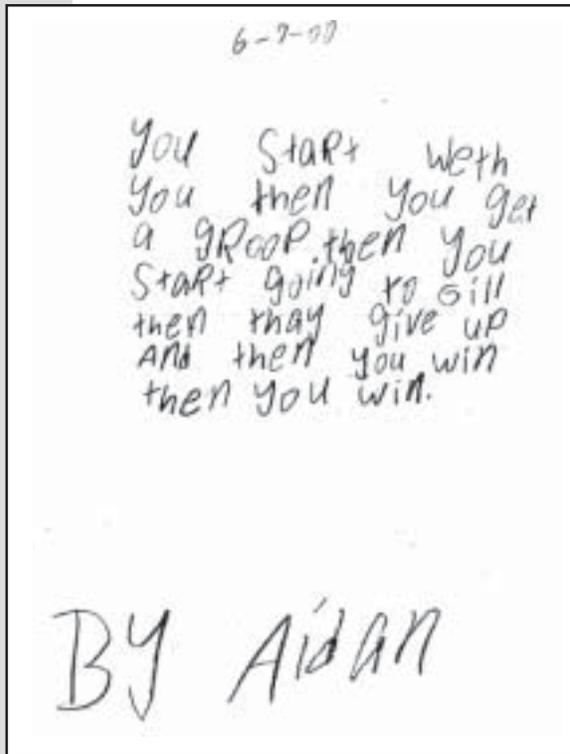
If ever a story was meant to be dramatized, it's the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The dramatic nature of this story is both its strength and its weakness. The strength is obvious; the weakness is that the drama may give the message that the whole story (and the whole Civil Rights Movement) comes down to one moment in which Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat. It is essential that children understand what came before and after this moment.

Tell students the story of the boycott. For example, tell students that before her arrest Rosa Parks was a seasoned activist who worked with the NAACP. After her arrest, many people, including Martin Luther King, E. D. Nixon, and Jo Ann Robinson, formed the Montgomery Improvement Association, which organized the boycott. The classroom play needs to tell the whole story.

Procedure

When first graders act out this drama, we begin by writing down possible scenes on chart paper. This is a very participatory process. Often students open the play with the scene in which Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat, but occasionally they begin with an earlier scene in which African Americans do give up their seats. This way we see the "before" and the "after." I let students decide how to begin. Either way, we always include a depiction of African Americans going in the front door of the bus, paying their fares, then getting off and reentering through the back door. This indignity has a strong effect on students, who find it so outrageous that they always include it. The "bus," of course, is a couple of rows of chairs.

Other scenes usually include Rosa Parks being fingerprinted, an act that also interests children; Martin Luther King Jr. speaking; other people refusing to give up their seats and being arrested; people walking to work; and people hearing the news that a Supreme Court decision has struck down segregated seating.



You start with you. Then you get a group. Then you start going to jail. Then they give up. And then you win. Then you win.

"How to Organize,"

by Aidan, a student in Maggie Donovan's classroom in June, 2000.

The play usually ends with a bus scene in which everyone sits where they please, always accompanied by the singing of "If You Miss Me from the Back of the Bus." [See Culture section.] Once the scenes are chosen, we decide on roles in an informal way. The only rule we have is that casting isn't based either on the skin color or the gender of the children in the class. The characters include Rosa Parks, the bus driver, black passengers, white passengers, the man who wants Rosa Parks's seat, the police, Martin Luther King Jr., and the boycotters.

The people who need the most coaching are those playing the other passengers. Children tend to sit passively until I ask them what they might be saying to their friends sitting next to them if they were black and if their friends were white. Imagining this dialogue really brings the play to life and helps children understand the passengers' points of view. I also spend time talking with students about what they think Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King might have said to each other in strategy sessions and what they would have said to the crowds who met in churches to plan and sustain the boycott. I have seen a young child begin to speak in a stilted and artificial way as Rosa Parks but then catch fire and speak with passion and eloquence from the heart. The crowd in the church usually responds with genuine fervor and then, when the singing starts, everyone in the room is swept up in the drama and authenticity of the performance.

I think the key to making the play real is the discussions with the actors. For example, I might say, "Rosa, look at your friends here. You're getting arrested and they're just sitting here. Tell them how that makes you feel. Tell them what you want them to do!" Or I might say to black passengers, "Okay. You have to choose. This is your chance to really change things. Back down now and things will stay the same. Keep on and you've got a chance to make things different. I know it's scary, but do you like the way it is now? What are you going to do?" To people at mass meetings, I give two contradictory messages. First I say things like, "How can you walk to work? It will take hours and hours. How will you get your work done? How about your own family?"

Who's taking care of them while you're out walking?" Then I switch gears and say things like: "On the other hand, what about your family? Do you want your children riding on the back of a bus? Drinking from colored-only water fountains?" I don't need to say too much of this before the actors get involved and take over. I don't follow this practice with the actors playing white people. These parts are secondary; the focus of the play is on the boycotters. I talk with these actors enough so that they understand the views of the persons they're playing. This doesn't mean that some white roles aren't popular. Children like the role of bus driver, the man who demands Rosa's seat, and police officers. Sometimes students, on their own, write little scripts for themselves of things they want to remember to say; some classes make protest signs as well as signs announcing the boycott and the mass meetings.

After we've done the play twice and everyone has played a part, we talk about what we thought were the best parts and how we might improve the play as a whole. Depending on time constraints and energy levels, we either do the play two more times or wait until the next day. I always take still photographs and put them in an album, which is yet another way of telling the story.

I have often done this play with first graders; I have also done it with fourth and first graders together. In that case, I work collaboratively with my colleague, a fourth-grade teacher. In that scenario, pairs of children, a fourth and a first grader, choose four scenes from the story to illustrate on a large sheet of paper. Then they choose one of their four scenes to act out. They usually work with another pair of students so that four children, sometimes six, are in a scene. This leads not to a whole play, but to a series of scenes. Sometimes the same scene is presented as it is interpreted by three or four groups of children. This is effective because each group adds something distinctive to its interpretation. We videotape these performances so that children can critique and enjoy them later.

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Maggie Nolan Donovan worked for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from 1963 to 1967 during the Civil Rights Movement. She has taught young children on Cape Cod for 30 years. She also teaches teachers at the Wheelock College Graduate School in Boston, Massachusetts, and is a teacher-researcher with Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She considers teaching social justice as the central mission of her professional life.