HOW SHOULD WE REMEMBER ROSA PARKS?

— Hilary Claire

Rosa Parks died in October 2005, aged 92. It's a life story which resonates with any age group. In a recent visit to a nursery, I saw 4 year olds who had lined up the chairs to make a bus, playing out Rosa's refusal to move from her seat. She is a significant person for KS1 history and an iconic figure for Black History Month: in her lifetime named 'Mother of the Civil Rights Movement', accorded a Congressional Medal in 1999, and one of the very few who has lain in State on Capitol Hill in Washington on her death, as flags throughout the USA flew at half mast. But more than that – when we consider the ripple effects of huge campaigns elsewhere on attitudes here, we also have a way into British post war history.

Using Rosa's story as my vehicle, I want to explore in this article, the kind of messages we give children about significant people and events, and how we get them thinking about the role of individuals in campaigns. How we teach, what we emphasise, what we ask of children depends on the ways we think about history ourselves. As teachers we are faced with dilemmas. We want and certainly can teach about Rosa Parks in KS1, but how shall we do this without falling into simplistic and possibly falsified interpretations? In KS2 how can we contextualize Parks' significance and make sure that other people both well known or lesser known foot soldiers, are acknowledged. In short, how do we help children get a grasp of historical significance?

When we teach about Rosa Parks or any other significant figure, we are working not just with a fascinating narrative, but the central concepts in history – the rate and trajectory of change, how we attribute causes and consequences, and how we interpret people's contributions and events.

So here are some of the questions I'd like to share with you.

Significance of Rosa's gesture in the wider civil rights movement?

A weary 42 year old black seamstress refuses at the end of a long working day to give up her seat on the bus, in defiance of the Montgomery Race Laws. Her defiance, the story goes, sparks the civil rights movement. She is arrested, the NAACP[1] of which she is a member take up the cause – they have been looking for an appropriate person whose personal life would withstand hostile press

Rosa Parks in 1955 (with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the background.) *National Archives*

investigations (hence the decision not to take Claudette Colvin's case into the public domain. Claudette had also refused to move from her bus seat 9 months before and was going to court. But unlike Rosa, Claudette is 15, pregnant and unmarried, prone to public outbursts ….) I leave readers to go through the many detailed accounts on the web of how Martin Luther King now became the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was the first in a set of campaigns which over a decade challenged every aspect of inequality and injustice suffered by the black population of America (see refs below).

Parks is careful to explain that she did not change things alone. 'Four decades later' she said, 'I am still uncomfortable with the credit given to me for starting the bus boycott. I would like [people] to know I was not the only person involved. I was just one of many who fought for freedom.'

'Mrs. Parks's arrest was the precipitating factor rather than the cause of the protest,' Dr. King wrote in his 1958 book, "Stride Toward Freedom". 'The cause lay deep in the record of similar injustices.'

So Rosa was not the mother of the Civil Rights Movement, in the sense of its originator; nor did she act alone. In the Bus Boycott she was the figurehead chosen – post hoc – to launch a campaign orchestrated by NAACP and led by Martin Luther King and others. Does her significance boil down to this?

In what sense did Rosa's act mark the beginning of the Civil Rights' campaign?

Some of the people who led the movement in the 60s had been active for years, such as Bayard Rustin, Thurgood Marshall, E.D. Nixon and Medgar Evers. Earlier in the twentieth century people like William Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Booker T Washington had headed influential movements for black equality. People had been defying the segregated seats regulations on the buses for many years, and had been arrested, including Rosa herself, who had fallen foul of the same bus driver ten years before. The Women's Political Council, was set up in 1946 in response to the mistreatment of black bus riders. So, the Civil Rights movement did not suddenly start with the Montgomery Bus Boycott though this was undoubtedly the first event to hit the headlines in the mid 50s and heralded a campaign that gathered force and legitimacy over the next 15 years. Rosa's case was not actually the one taken to the Supreme Court which ruled against segregation and ended the boycott in 1956. That was Browder v. Gayle.

Here then is an opportunity for an infusion of *chronology* to help children – at least in KS2 – appreciate that *change* seldom happens suddenly and without much prior effort. It is also an opportunity within Black History Month or as part of work on significant figures, to introduce other names of importance.

Interpreting Rosa Parks

Should we play into the myth of a lone (elderly) Cinderella figure, weary, footsore, limping on to a bus, collapsing on to a seat, only to be shunted off by a rude, racist, white bus driver. Or do we stick with what Rosa herself has insisted – she was no more tired than usual. In her autobiography she wrote:

> *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.*

She went to the middle seats which were actually 'allowed' for blacks, as long as there were spaces for white passengers to sit, and refused, in her own words, to move because she was tired of being humiliated and '*..would have to know for once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen of Montgomery, Alabama.*' She accepted the threat of arrest saying:

> *I was very determined to let it be known how it felt to be treated in that manner – discriminated against. I was thinking mostly about how inconvenienced I was – stopping me from going home and doing my work – something I had not expected. When I did realize, I*

The Montgomery Sheriff's Department's photo of Rosa Parks, taken when she was arrested on February 22, 1956.

faced it, and it was quite a challenge to be arrested. I did not really know what would happen. I didn't feel especially frightened. I felt more annoyed than frightened.

So Rosa was not just a 'tired seamstress with aching feet' but a political activist within NAACP[1] who had been involved in previous discussions about an appropriate opportunity to take segregation to court. She had been its secretary and had undertaken a significant amount of much less newsworthy work. She had tried to register to vote on numerous occasions – and failed. The bus gesture was not premeditated, but the NAACP knew her as a thoroughly reliable activist when they selected her case to start the boycott. This does not in any way detract from what she did. Remember that three other black people on the bus duly gave up their seats when the bus driver threatened them. Rosa did not. She didn't shout, or make a fuss when the driver said he would have her arrested. She just stayed sitting. That took courage and conviction – as well as determination to protest against discrimination. E.D. Nixon, the local civil rights leader, believed that this was the case that could be used to examine the constitutionality of Montgomery's segregation laws. Rosa talked it over with her mother and husband and agreed. During a midnight meeting of the Women's Political Council, 35,000 handbills were mimeographed for distribution to all black schools the next morning. The message was simple:

We are...asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial... You can afford to stay out of school for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off the buses Monday.

At a church rally that night, blacks unanimously agreed to continue the boycott until these demands were met: that they be treated with courtesy, that black drivers be hired, and that seating in the middle of the bus go on a first-come basis.

After the trial, in which Rosa was found guilty and fined as expected, the Montgomery Improvement Association was formed. The civil rights activists present elected as their president a newcomer to Montgomery, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. That evening, addressing a crowd gathered at the Holt Street Baptist Church, King declared 'There comes a time that people get tired.' It was the start of a campaign that would change America, and continues to inspire people faced with injustice, all round the world.

Once we are concerned to give children an historically accurate idea of a campaign, and not just concentrate on one individual's action, it is not hard to see how to translate this into classroom action. As soon as the other actors come on the scene, we start to allow for an interpretation in which Rosa's defiance is the catalyst for mass action, not the lone gesture it is sometimes made out to be. We need E.D Nixon, the Women's Council members, people who distribute leaflets and try and persuade others to boycott the buses, the people at the meetings and the church rally, and a young Martin Luther King. A campaign is more than the actions of one person.

Consequences for Rosa and continuity in the Campaign

The publicity which resulted from her case and the boycott lost Rosa her job, and she and her husband and mother moved from Montgomery to Detroit. In Detroit Rosa continued to work for Civil Rights and till late in life she was still active in fighting racial injustice. With her husband Raymond she created a special program called 'Pathways to Freedom', for young people age 11-18 sponsoring children to travel across the country tracing the Underground Railroad, visiting the scenes of critical events in the civil rights movement and learning aspects of America's history.

Significance of Rosa's gesture of defiance - wider consequences

Older children might trace how the Bus Boycott led both to Martin Luther King's rise in the movement and how the peaceful but ultimately effective strategies first tried in 1956 in Montgomery, viz. boycott, mass demonstration plus court case – eventually overturned much of the racist legislation in the South. There is room to learn about many other activists – some probably more significant than Rosa, though their names are less known – Daisy Bates, Fanie Lou Hamer, Medgar Evers, Rustin Bayard among them. With younger children it would be enough to have experience of a wider movement than just the defiant gesture, through telling a longer and more complete story about what she did.

References

1. NAACP - National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People

Resources and websites

www.nytimes.com/2005/10/25/national/25parks.html?ex=1145851200&en=4b6bd4603f35dfef&ei=5087&excamp=GGGNrosaparks (New York Times obituary)

www.grandtimes.com/rosa.html – useful summary of Rosa's story

http://teacher.scholastic.com/rosa/interview.htm#brave – this site has an interview with Rosa Parks about how she felt in defying the bus driver and could be the basis for some hot seating or role play

www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/parks01.html

www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/par0int-1 – an interview with Rosa Parks done quite late in her life about influence of her mother, importance of reading etc.

Children's books

Benjamin, Anne. 1996, *Young Rosa Parks: Civil Rights Heroine*. Troll

Giovanni, N, 2006, Rosa, illustrated by Brian Collier, Henry Holt and Co (Caldecott Medal 2006)

Parks, R et al, 1999, *I Am Rosa Parks*, Easy-to-Read, Puffin

Parks, R with Haskins, J, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (Paperback)

Ringgold,F, *If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks*, Aladdin Books, paperback

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