Although the civil rights movement in the United States occurred more than 50 years ago, voter suppression, as witnessed in the 2012 election, for diverse groups of people continues. The information presented in this article supports the teaching and learning of social studies within early childhood and elementary grades as teachers and students consider and examine issues and problems concerning those who have been disenfranchised as voters within the United States. The use of historic role models, artwork, musical lyrics, and primary documents are various ways to assist young learners as they analyze and confront controversial issues such as discrimination within a pluralistic society. Through research, young learners can construct narratives from the present to make meaning from historical figures, events, and places of the past. Children’s understandings of historical people and events that took action against discriminatory practices and opportunities to expand learning about the topic may enable them to take the lead to make our democracy a reality for life, liberty and happiness.

**Key Words:** Voting Rights, Democracy, Liberty, Civics, Education, History

**Introduction**

It has been 50 years since the peak of the civil rights movement in the United States. In the 2012 election, voter suppression was widespread for diverse groups of people in our nation. Countless constituents lingered in lines for hours simply to vote.

Although slavery and segregation ended through numerous acts of legislation, most voters fail to critically consider why laws have not abolished discriminatory practice, as evidenced by recurrent acts of voter suppression (Kates, 2006). Uninformed Americans believe prior legislation created voter equality. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011), only 1 in 5 eighth graders are proficient in civics. Readers and mathematicians are necessary; however, a populace without historians, sociologists, scientists, and economists is unacceptable. Students need to be educated of their rights and how to exercise them within our nation’s democracy. This is currently a weighty failure in early childhood and elementary education. There are historic aspects to consider prior to teaching students about the legislation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA), the 2006 Amendments to the Voter Rights Act of 1965, and the voting rights marches in Selma, Alabama. Included below are ways transformational teachers can enable students to study civics and become activists for liberty and voting rights.

**Section Five of the Voting Rights Act**

In 1963, prior to two vital pieces of legislation on voter rights, fewer than 25% of the African Americans in Selma, Alabama, were registered to vote. Hence, only 1 out of 100 eligible voters in Selma were registered to vote. In spite of legislation enabling the right to vote,
poll taxes and other tactics such as literacy tests kept African Americans from registering and entering voting booths. Teachers too were part of the disenfranchised African American population. Their voting rights were nonexistent. If 8 and 9-year-old children in Selma demonstrated and marched for liberty with their teachers for the right to vote, it is relevant to teach voter history.

Now that a majority of the U. S. Supreme Court decided to remove Section Five from the Voting Rights Act, states moved to revamp voting districts through gerrymandering. Old Jim Crow tactics are resurrected. In some states, the resurgence of voter disenfranchisement already has occurred. Such states as Texas, New York, Florida, Ohio, and North Carolina have high gerrymandering rates. Gerrymandering is alive and well which is a process to establish political voting advantage by redesigning district boundaries. Other states raced to enact voter identification requirements, including Florida, Texas, and North Carolina, among others. Changes in the law may have occurred, as some of the Justices recently suggested when releasing their decision. The ripple effect of the changes, however, is ushering Jim Crow back and denying liberty into the states through to educational issues.

Change certainly has occurred in Kindergarten-12 education, as civics and historical thinking are scarcely taught because neither is tested (NCSS, 2007; Sunal & Haas, 2010). The right to vote was an election issue in the United States 50 years ago; it reappeared in 2012, and likely will continue to be problematic. People were denied voting rights in the 2012 election, waiting hours to vote and asked for identification. Now, especially since the most recent Supreme Court ruling, lawsuits will flood states’ systems to further gerrymander areas to maximize voting blocs. These are topics for students’ discussion. Throughout the history of the United States, every newly immigrated diverse group, sometimes termed as “others,” experienced subjugation and was subjected to discriminatory practices (Belloni Mignatti, 2010). The United States, which is driven by socioeconomic class, is once again spiraling back into old patterns of discrimination (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). As economist Paul Krugman (2013) reflected on July 4th, voting is simultaneously celebrated as a right in our democracy while people in poverty as well as people of color are disenfranchised from that very right. As Maxine Greene (1995) reiterated while the United States always has embraced a history filled with accounts of newly immigrant people from various international countries (Bausum, 2009; Levstik & Barton, 2011), the often hidden side of this history was prejudice, bigotry, hostility, and discrimination for people of color, diversity, and religious difference. This situation is not limited to the United States, but is a global experience. It is assumed that in a democracy such as ours, however, there will be free and fair elections. Human rights and liberty are expected. Laws, in theory, should apply to all citizens; yet, our history demonstrates otherwise.

Voting Rights and Selma, Alabama

The Edmund Pettus Bridge stretches across the Alabama River on the southern edge of Selma. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, approximately 600 civil rights marchers attempted to cross the bridge in a peaceful effort to demonstrate against the denial of voting rights and to commemorate the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, who had been shot by an Alabama state trooper three weeks earlier while trying to protect his mother during a demonstration. The bridge is only about four blocks from the Brown Chapel, where this and many other civil rights marches had begun. The protesters planned to walk 50 miles to the state capital of Montgomery, Alabama.
they started over the bridge, Alabama state troopers met them, telling the crowd to turn back. The troopers sprayed clouds of tear gas, and horses trampled many demonstrators on the bridge. They were attacked and beaten with bullwhips and clubs. Among the marchers, 17 were hospitalized. Because of the intense bloodshed, this day became known as “Bloody Sunday.” Television brought this horrific treatment of human beings of color on Bloody Sunday into the living rooms of a nation of people who were deeply disturbed by the violence perpetrated upon peaceful marchers. Two weeks later, on March 21, the Selma-to-Montgomery march started again. Federal protection accompanied the scores of demonstrators and protestors that came from all over the United States to march in solidarity for voting rights, justice, and equality.

By 1966, 60% of the African Americans in Selma were registered to vote. The Jim Crow laws, however, continued to oppress not only African American adults, but certainly also oppressed African American children, as evidenced in their schooling. Black segregated schools received far less money than white schools. They had fewer books and were provided with inferior buildings and playgrounds (Bausum, 2009). Teachers in black schools were paid less than teachers in white schools; moreover, the same school boards ruled over both black and white schools in most southern states. Gaps in historical knowledge about the Jim Crow era exist for children and educators in schools today (Loder-Jackson, 2011). Is the United States moving backward relative to liberties for all? Has the populace and the Supreme Court not learned from voter legislation and civil rights history regarding liberty for all?

**Transformational Education**

In 1967 on Law Day, President Lyndon B. Johnson said in Proclamation 3770: “I ask not blind obedience, but enlightened obedience…. But American’s fidelity to law must be eternal.” (Proclamation 3770, 1967). Is enlightened obedience what five Justices recently voted against? The “fidelity to the law” isn’t eternal. This is the tragedy (Kaplan, 2013). Students seldom learn about a lack of liberty concerning the voting rights history in text and trade books or through the study of nonfiction literature (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Rarely do school children learn about U.S. Supreme Court cases. Interdisciplinary lessons are offered infrequently for students to critically explore and deeply think about controversial issues. Vestiges of the past have escalated in countless expressions by ongoing incidents of discrimination against diverse people who are not in the dominant upper middle class that excludes most Americans (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Many of the Americans who are excluded are people of color, immigrant status, or from the lower social economic strata. Are students entering a time of “blind obedience” to which President Johnson referred? What can social studies teachers who promote social justice do to transform education for students to protect liberty and happiness in the democracy?

**Teaching Ideas**

Kindergarten-12 teachers can bring civics and history to life for students in the United States by focusing on issues comparable to the true meaning of liberty, happiness, freedom, and equality within a democracy. In-depth studies are easily integrated into all content areas, especially literacy, through historic role models, artwork, musical lyrics, and primary documents that promote respect for the richness and robustness of democracy and pluralistic ideals. Photographs, from the past and present eras, tell stories for students of all ages to observe. Students can investigate gaps, inequities, and problems with legislation that are in opposition to
liberty and democracy. Students can study voter tactics, as children generally understand the concept of fairness. Further, they can research democratic principles. Using such a research approach will allow students to autonomously determine whether or not liberty and freedom is in jeopardy for some within the democratic republic of the United States of America.

These are selected ways through which students can make connections. It is essential for students to continue to learn about the past and take a stand to make liberty and democracy better for themselves and others. Children are the present, and they will lead us into the future. Children can make a positive civic difference in the world and the nation when given opportunities to do so. Liberty dynamically changes the “home of the free” when educators offer all young citizens the chance to study and learn to lead in the present for the future of our democracy.

References

Web-Based References

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