Title of Lesson:  
*The Makings of a Great Leader: The Childhood of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
<th>Class Size: 25-30</th>
<th>Time/Duration of Lesson:</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Grades 3-4 but may be modified to fit grades 2 and 5 as well. May be taught as a joint social studies and writing workshop unit.</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Seven 45 minute periods (approximately a one-two week study)</td>
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Guiding Questions:
- What was Martin like when he was a child? Can you recall specific stories that showed his courage or other character traits?
- How did Martin deal with tough problems when he was your age? What did he do? Who did he go to for help or understanding?
- How do you think Martin’s parents and family influenced him as he was growing up?
- What are some ways we can be more like Martin Luther King Jr. in our lives?
- What do you most admire about Martin Luther King Jr.?
- How do your parents/families influence you or guide you when you have a problem?
- Why do you think Ruby Bridges was brave? What did she do?

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson focuses on the early life of Martin Luther King Jr. Through multiple anecdotes about Martin’s childhood experiences and several read-alouds about Martin’s life and accomplishments, students will get to know this great man and how he became such an amazing leader for the Civil Rights Movement. Students will also study the story of Ruby Bridges to further make a connection with this historical time period. The children will examine the events that took place in both Martin and Ruby’s childhood and identify the challenges these children faced as well as recognize the courage and personal struggle of each child. Students will also see how Martin learned to be a leader from his family and from distinguished mentors such as Mahatma Gandhi.

Lesson Content:

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia on January 15, 1929. He was originally named Michael after his father but when Martin turned four years old; his father changed both their names to Martin. They called him M.L. As a little boy, he enjoyed sports. He and his friends played football, baseball, and basketball.

His father was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue and wielded great influence in the black community. Martin loved listening to his father preach on Sunday mornings. The Christian faith was a big part of Martin’s life and Martin felt that “the church had always been a second home” (King, p.4) for him. His father was a strong role model and
Martin admired his genuine Christian character, describing Martin Sr. as a “man of real integrity, deeply committed to moral and ethical principles” (King, p.5). He further recalled that his father had a very dynamic personality and had a physical presence, weighing about 220 pounds. He was a sharecropper’s son and started getting a high school education and never stopped until he had finished all four years at Morehouse College in Atlanta. There would be three generations of Kings at Morehouse once Martin attended. Martin Sr. was the kind of “father who always put his family first... and who knew the art of saving and budgeting...so that he was able to provide the basic necessities of life with little strain” (King, p.5). Martin never felt like he had to struggle as a child. He always knew he had what he needed, that his father would provide for him and that he could always go to his parents for help with any problem. This feeling of security allowed him to develop confidence in himself due to the way he was raised. It led him to believe that there was a better way for all people years later.

Martin’s mother, Mrs. Alberta Williams King was a teacher. She was a very devout person with a deep commitment to the Christian faith. Unlike, Martin’s father, Mrs. King was more easy-going and soft-spoken, therefore seeming warm and approachable. She was the daughter of A.D. Williams, a successful minister and she grew up rather comfortably. She despised the system of segregation and always tried to instill a sense of self-respect in all her children from the very start. The most important lesson that she taught Martin was that he should feel a “sense of somebodiness” and that he was “as good as anyone” (King, p. 3-4). She explained the segregation system of the South as a social condition rather than a natural order. She clearly stated that she was opposed to the system and that Martin must never allow segregation to make him feel inferior.

Martin also had an older sister named Christine and a younger brother named Alfred Daniel. All three children sang in the church choir and they all played piano too. When Martin was six years old, he lost a white friend who had been one of his companions since the age of three. They always played games together even though the boy did not live in Martin’s community. His father owned a store across the street from Martin’s home so he usually saw the boy everyday. After Martin and this white boy started school, the boy told Martin that his father forbade him to play with Martin any longer. Martin was hurt and confused. He did not understand why his friend could no longer play with him and discussed the situation with his parents that evening at dinner. For the first time, Martin was made aware of the race problem. He had never been conscious of it before. He was shocked by the anecdotes that his parents shared with him about how they had been treated by whites. Martin felt determined to hate every white person but his parents taught him that he “should not hate the white man, but that it was (his) duty as a Christian to love him” (King, p7). Martin reflected on how this would be possible- to love a race of people who hated him and who took away from him his very best childhood friend.

Martin had always had resentment toward the system of segregation and felt that it was a grave injustice. He wrote about a trip he took with his father to a shoe store downtown. They sat down at the first empty seats in the front of the store. A young white clerk asked them to move to the rear of the store. Martin’s father immediately responded, “There’s nothing wrong with these seats. We’re quite comfortable here.” The clerk said that Martin and his dad had to move to the back of the store or he would refuse to serve them. Martin’s father replied, “We’ll either buy shoes sitting here or we won’t buy shoes at all.” Martin and his dad walked out of the store. This was the first time Martin had ever seen his father so furious. His father told him, “I don’t care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it” (King,
When Martin was just eight years old, he was downtown in a store, when all of a sudden, someone slapped him. He heard a voice say, “You are the nigger that stepped on my foot.” He looked up and saw a white lady. He was unprepared to retaliate and when he finally shared the event with his mother, she grew extremely upset, and they left the store right away. Incidents such as this fueled Martin’s eventual need to lead the way in correcting the inequalities that he saw and experienced himself while growing up. He knew that he should not feel inferior and yet the whites around him treated him and his family as such. These experiences conflicted with his faith and his upbringing. Events such as this one became seeds out of which Martin’s conviction and strong leadership developed.

Another incident occurred when Martin attended Booker T. Washington High School. He had to take the bus to the other side of town everyday just to get to school. He remembered going to the back of the bus everyday with the whites seated in the front and the blacks seated in the back. Martin was especially disturbed by the fact that even when there were no whites on the bus, black people could not sit down in the front. They were only allowed to stand over the empty seats. Martin could not help but leave his mind up front in those seats. He often said to himself, “One of these days, I’m going to put my body up where my mind is” (King, p.9). And indeed he did.

Martin was a very intelligent and accomplished student who loved to read. He was brilliant in school, participated in oratorical contests and was a high achiever who skipped two grades. He graduated from secondary school when he was only fifteen. The summer before he left for college, Martin went to Simsbury, Connecticut and worked for a summer on a tobacco farm to earn some extra money for school. His father was against Martin taking a job because he never wanted his children to experience the oppressive work conditions in a place that employed both whites and blacks. However, it was here that Martin learned that poor whites were just as exploited as the black man. He became deeply conscious of the many injustices in society. Contrary to what Martin’s father thought would happen, Martin actually had a positive experience in Connecticut being free from the conditions of segregation. In fact, he found it tremendously difficult to return to Georgia after the summer was over. It did not make sense to Martin as to why he could freely ride on a train from New York to Washington and had to change over to a Jim Crow car at the nation’s capital in order to make his way home to Atlanta (King, p11-12). He realized that separate was always unequal and the very idea of separation did something to his sense of dignity and self-respect.

In 1944, Martin went to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. All the teachers and the students matriculating there were African-American. The following summer, he worked in Atlanta and was infuriated when he witnessed that blacks were being compensated much less than whites were for doing the same labor. He began to imagine how he could work to change this unfair reality. At Morehouse, he read David Henry Thoreau’s essay “On Civil Disobedience” for the first time. It was his first encounter with nonviolent resistance. Martin was fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system. He reread the essay many times. He became convinced that non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good (King, p.14).

In 1948, Martin graduated from college. He was only nineteen years old. He became a minister like his father but he also wanted to continue his education and went to Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania for three years. There, he poured over the social and ethical theories of great philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hobbes,
Bentham, Mill and Locke. He also became very familiar with the work of Karl Marx. His readings of Marx convinced him that truth is neither found in Marxism or in traditional capitalism. Each represents a partial truth. Then one Sunday afternoon, Martin traveled to Philadelphia to hear a sermon by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University- a man who had recently returned from a trip to India. He spoke about the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Martin found Dr. Johnson’s presentation and Gandhi’s ideas on nonviolent resistance to be awe-inspiring. He was moved by the Salt March to the sea and but Gandhi’s many fasts to help his people move toward peace and nonviolence. He also embraced the concept of satyagraha or “truth-force” and found deep significance in this philosophy. Before reading Gandhi, Martin had believed that religion and the teachings of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships, that the “turn the other cheek” and the “love your enemies” of the Holy Bible could only be applied to families and friendships.

He now saw that Gandhi’s philosophies of love and nonviolence could effectively be applied to achieve social reform. These ideas could be applied not only with individuals in conflict but could also be applied to racial groups and nations in conflict with each other (King, p.23-24). Martin became conscious that “Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above the mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.” Love was an undeniable compelling tool for both social and collective transformation. Martin finally had his answer. He would pursue this Gandhian method of love and nonviolence in achieving his goals for social reform and equality for all people in the United States. He felt both moral and intellectual satisfaction in Gandhi’s ideas especially in comparison to all the other great philosophers he had been studying. They all seemed to lack something but the Gandhian way felt right to Martin in his heart, his mind and in his soul. This was now the beginning of the Martin Luther King Jr. that changed the history and the face of our nation for generations to come.

This unit of study is designed with elementary school aged children in mind. Students will more easily be able to identify with the child “Martin” and with young Ruby Bridges’ bravery than with the leader Martin Luther King Jr. They will be able to see racism and inequality through a child’s eyes and relate to the difficulties that Martin and Ruby both experienced. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the story of Ruby Bridges, she is a young black girl who was one of the first students to be integrated into a mostly white school during the time of Jim Crow laws. She suffered great ridicule and threats from students and other people around her. She was afraid to go to school but she pressed on and her quiet courage and determination slowly began to change the face of the south. She was truly a pioneer in the process of desegregation. Stories about children like Martin and Ruby will show our students that they too can stand up for themselves and what they believe is right. Martin and Ruby serve as role models and their stories serve as a new lens into the past for our young pupils.

New York State Content Standards:

**ELA Standard 1:** Students will listen, speak, read, and write for information and understanding. As listeners and readers, students will collect data, facts, and ideas; discover relationships, concepts, and generalizations.

**ELA Standard 2:** Students will relate texts and performances to their own lives; and develop an understanding of the diverse social, historical, and cultural dimensions the texts and
performances represent.

**SS Standard 1E**: Students will know the roots of American culture, its development from many different traditions and the ways many people from a variety of groups and backgrounds played a role in creating it.

**SS Standard 2E**: Students will distinguish between near and distant past and interpret simple timelines. They will develop timelines that display important events and eras from world history.

**Materials Needed:**
- The book *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles and George Ford (Scholastic Bookshelf, 2004)
- The book *Through My Eyes* by Ruby Bridges (Scholastic Press, 1999)
- The film *Ruby Bridges* produced by Disney (1998)
- The book *A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.* by David A. Adler
- The book *Free At Last: The Story of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Dorling Kindersley Readers) by Angela Bull
- The book *Martin Luther King Jr. and the March on Washington* by Frances E. Ruffin
- The book Martin’s *Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* by Doreen Rappaport
- The book *I Have A Dream* by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Writers Notebook or reading response journal
- A large roll of brown butcher paper measuring 2-3 ft high
- Markers, crayons, pencils
- Rulers

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**

1. Write a response about what happened to Martin and his dad at the shoe store? Why do you think Martin’s dad became so angry? Do you think it was justified? What would you or your parents have done if you were in the same situation?

2. Read aloud all the picture books listed above that are related to the life and achievements of Martin Luther King Jr. over the course of a few days. Have the students create a timeline of important events of King’s life. They can work in small groups of three or four students. The timelines may be illustrated and should be completed on large brown butcher roll paper about measuring about 2’high x 4’ wide.

3. Teach students about the power of song and prayer in the Civil Rights Movement particularly during sit-ins and in the jails. Teach students a few simple spirituals like “We Shall Overcome” and “This Little Light of Mine”. Have the students incorporate these songs into a play or presentation along with the rap poem from the Gandhi Unit of Study that follows this study. The children may wear costumes such as dresses, ties and jackets and then don caps backwards and giant gold chains and begin the rap portion of the performance.
4. Read aloud the picture books about Ruby Bridges listed above. Ask the students to reflect on Ruby’s courage and how she was similar to Dr. King and how she was different from him. Students can complete a Venn Diagram logging what Ruby and Martin have in common in the center of the diagram and what is different about them in the outer circles of the diagram.

5. Students may also write a biographical summary on Ruby’s life and present the report with photos of Ruby along with a reflective statement about how they feel about her actions and what they would have done if they had to face what Ruby faced in school. You want the students to make a personal connection to the text as well as text-to-text connections with the books on MLK’s life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
