



Using Harvey Milk to Discuss Nonviolent Activism

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We talk about Harvey Milk as part of our conversations about nonviolent civil rights leaders and movements. In this study, which lasts about 6 weeks and eventually culminates in a social action plan and project, we spend time talking about Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Harvey Milk and Shirin Ebadi (a leader who is currently working for women's and children's rights in Iran). We work in this order (chronologically) and it works well this way. We spend about 3 days on Milk, using morning work, discussion at meetings, activities and homework to find out and process what he did and worked for. We also watch parts of "The Times of Harvey Milk" — obviously, these portions are selected carefully because it is not a movie made for 8 year olds, but there is a lot of actual footage of his campaigns, etc. The Candlelight March is also incredible for the kids to see.

I've used the book, The Harvey Milk Story, in a couple of different ways to complement and get this part of the study rolling. It works because there is a context to the story for the kids—of rights and fighting for rights. They are already trained to look for nonviolent ways to protest injustice. Milk becomes another example of an activist. One way I have done this is to read the book with them and talk it through as we go. I usually ask questions to tease out 1) his background, where he lived, worked, grew up, etc, 2) the kinds of injustice he saw in San Francisco 3) the methods he used to effect change and 4) the similarities he shared with other leaders of movements. Along with various other things, I want them to see that people can work from the inside out—becoming a part of the government or the system to make change happen. Up until Milk, they have only seen people who fought against the system from outside of the system.

The other way I have done this is by creating passages (2)—the first on the first 2 ideas up there and the second on the last two from above. I give this out in the morning when the kids arrive and they read it just like they would a passage on Chavez. It is taken almost verbatim from the book. There is nothing "special" or "different" about reading about Milk, then, and I have found that this works well, too, establishing the tone in the room from the morning on. There is a portion of the passages, like the book, that states what the terms gay/straight/lesbian and

homosexual/heterosexual mean. This helps the kids who have never heard these terms before (they get smaller every year!) and they usually bring this to the discussion then.

The other interesting thing that I have noticed about these conversations—well, there are lots of interesting things really, but one — is that they want to know a lot about Joe Campbell and Scott Smith. Usually I have a picture or two ready to show them. Just like I had a picture or two of Coretta Scott King for MLK, as people who supported these leaders. For Milk, though, this leads to a conversation about marriage and gay marriage. In the past, this has been something that the kids have felt really strongly about and have wanted to or actually written letters to Congress, etc. regarding gay marriage initiatives. That, then, becomes their social action project — It's really neat and organic, really comes from the kids.

The Harvey Milk Story
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