

YOUNG PEOPLE TAKING A STAND:

From Claudette Colvin to Today

INSTRUCTIONAL NOTES

The objective of this activity, besides building student knowledge about Claudette Colvin and other examples of youth activism, is for students to identify patterns, make generalizations, and note similarities and differences among historic and contemporary examples of youth activism. To do this, it draws heavily on the principles and suggestions about inductive learning laid out here by Jennifer Gonzales of Cult of Pedagogy. It is set up as a slightly modified Jigsaw.

First, have all students read the story of Claudette Colvin, and give them time to jot down their thoughts in the "After you read" section of the handout. It may be helpful to have a short whole-class discussion about the reading to make sure students understand the facts of Colvin's story and to see if they have any questions. You can also have students report back with their responses to the "After you read" prompts, or you may come back to those later in the lesson.

Then, put students into groups (up to 8 students, depending on your class size) to analyze together the other short profiles of youth activists. There are eight young people profiled; if this is too many examples for the number of students in your class, you can choose to drop some.

Assign each student a profile to read. The directions on the student handout tells them what to look for and to be prepared to report back to the group. Note that wherever possible or applicable, each profile includes the young person's age, nationality, and hometown, the date when the activism or mobilization took place, what issue they were/are challenging or taking action on, specific actions and organizing they did, and a relevant quote or comment.

Then have students report back to their small groups so that everyone will have gotten a brief snapshot of the different activists. Next, the whole group works together to plot the events/activism on a timeline and to categorize them in different ways. Using the questions on the student handout that will guide

them through these steps, students will have the chance to analyze and make comparisons.

Finally, students reflect on all of the stories they've examined and on their own learning about youth activism. The final reflection questions can also be given as a written assignment.

Note that the third reflection question aims to give you and your students the opportunity to consider and evaluate key aspects of the writing and study of history, namely who gets remembered, who decides who gets remembered, and what are the implications of the inclusion (or exclusion) of certain people from our collective memory. These themes are also addressed in other parts of this curriculum guide. See especially the background reading on *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*, the Questions to Guide Reading and Discussion of the comic book, and the activity titled "Looking at the Civil Rights Movement Through a Microscope vs. a Telescope."

OPTIONAL EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

Give students the opportunity to research any of these examples of youth activism more deeply. Or let them choose another youth activist (either historic or contemporary) to research.

Provide some guiding questions for their research. They can start by providing more details in answering the basics: who, what, when, where, how, and why. Additional themes or questions for them to consider include: the role young people's parents/families played in their activism; how these young people may have confronted or addressed different forms of oppression/discrimination based on their racial/ethnic background, gender, or social class; how they engaged/engage in coalition-building with other movements or organizations; and how they navigated obstacles they encountered.

SOURCE LIST FOR THIS LESSON

To facilitate further teacher preparation or as an aid for student research on the optional extension activity, sources consulted specifically for creating this activity are listed here.

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PART I: CLAUDETTE COLVIN'S STORY



Claudette Colvin, photographed in 1953. She was 13 years old in this photo.

(Photo credit: Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Claudette_Colvin.jpg)

Claudette Colvin was 15 years old in March 1955 when she was arrested and jailed for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama city bus to a white woman. It was nine months before Rosa Parks's arrest that launched the citywide bus boycott.

Claudette later remembered that it was the weight and power of Black history that kept her pinned

to her seat that day. She said, "It felt like Sojourner Truth was on one side pushing me down, and Harriet Tubman was on the other side of me pushing me down. I couldn't get up." Claudette was arrested and charged with violating state segregation laws and with assault and battery, based on initial (false) claims that she had been disorderly and aggressive during her arrest.

Black people in Montgomery had been talking and thinking about protesting segregation and abuse on the city's buses since at least the year before Claudette's arrest. But some

civil rights leaders, including E.D. Nixon, didn't think that Claudette was the "right" person to be the face of such a challenge. They thought that her young age, her dark complexion, and her family's working-class background could discourage some people in the Black community from rallying behind her and could open the movement to attacks from white people, too. Her later pregnancy out of wedlock, they thought, would be yet another reason that people would not support Claudette.

Their doubts reflected long-standing but highly-debated concerns within the Black community about how best to strengthen and protect itself against white violence. Sometimes, these concerns fed negative stereotypes and could create divisions among Black people based on qualities like skin tone, education level, and social class. Jo Ann Robinson strenuously disagreed with the decision not to pursue Claudette's case. And Rosa Parks, an advisor of the NAACP Youth Council of which Claudette was a member, continued to encourage and support her anyway.

Despite the leaders' decision and the fact that many people didn't know her story until recently, Claudette Colvin played a crucial role in ending segregation on buses in Montgomery. She was one of the plaintiffs in the case of *Browder v. Gayle*, which challenged Montgomery's and the state of Alabama's segregation laws. It was the Supreme Court's decision in that case, declaring those laws unconstitutional, that led the Montgomery Improvement Association to end the bus boycott and celebrate its success.

AFTER YOU READ

Thinking about Claudette Colvin's story and drawing on your own knowledge, write down:

1. Three things you know about young people (past or present) taking action against injustice or oppression.
2. Three things you want to know about other youth activists, past or present.

PART II: EXPLORING GLOBAL EXAMPLES OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACTIVISM

DIRECTIONS

In your small groups, **divide up the examples** of youth activism so that each person is reading at least one. (Your teacher may assign them individually).

Read your assigned example, and be prepared to tell your group mates about it. Keep an eye out for key details so that you can explain things like the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *how*, and *why* of the youth struggle or activist you've read about.

Report back to the group about the youth activism story you read.

Once everyone has reported back, work with your group mates to **think about different ways these examples do (or don't) fit together**.

1. Plot the main events/campaigns on a timeline. What does arranging them this way show you? What does it help you see or understand?
2. On this handout, the stories are just grouped as examples of youth activism. What are some other categories you could put them into? What other ways could you arrange them? What might grouping them differently help to show or highlight?

Go back to your answers to the prompts after Claudette Colvin's story. **Compare and contrast** your responses with your group mates': What did your answers have in common? How were they different?

Reflect on what you've learned about young people's activism in history or in the present. You can consider questions like:

- Why did these young people feel they needed to take action?
- What do you know now that you didn't before?
- Are there lessons for you and your community in these stories? Explain.
- Why is it important to learn about people like Claudette Colvin in history? Can learning about less famous people from the past make a difference today? Explain.
- What do you still want to know more about?

EXAMPLES OF YOUNG PEOPLE TAKING A STAND

BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S MARCH (AKA CHILDREN'S CRUSADE; U.S.A.)

On May 2, 1963, over a thousand Black schoolchildren as young as six years old walked out of their classrooms and gathered at Sixth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. They were preparing to march downtown in protest of policies that had led Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to call Birmingham "the most segregated city in America." Hundreds were arrested and jailed that day, but the protests continued. On May 3, police attacked the young protestors with fire hoses and police dogs. Images of the vicious response were broadcast all over the world and sparked outrage. Freeman Hrabowski III was

12 years old at the time. His parents reluctantly let him participate in the march. They were afraid of what would happen to him and the other children in the protest and in jail if they were arrested. Hrabowski remembers being afraid, too. Now a mathematician and president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, he still draws on his childhood experience in his work with young people today. He explains, "The message is this, the world doesn't have to be the way the world is. That good people can act and the world can be better and so can we." The Birmingham Children's March -- and the violent white reaction to it -- was a key factor that led the Kennedy Administration to take federal action on civil rights.



Police take Black school children to jail after arresting them on May 4, 1963, the third day of the Birmingham Children's March.
(Photo credit: Bill Hudson/AP, via <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/02/20/children-have-changed-america-before-braving-fire-hoses-and-police-dogs-for-civil-rights/>)

CHILDREN'S MANDATE FOR PEACE AND RIGHTS (COLOMBIA)

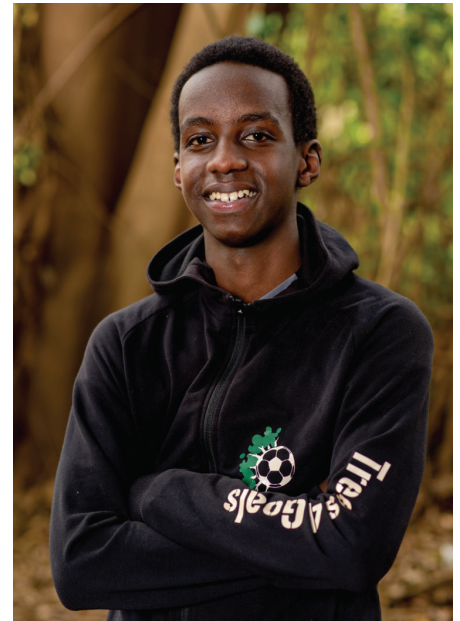
In 1996, Colombia was in the midst of a civil war that had been going on for over 30 years. A 10-year-old girl in the town of Apartadó described her experience at the time: "Here . . . we only know how to write the word 'peace' because we know what letters to use. We do not know its real meaning, but it must be very beautiful." In response to that kind of fear and hopelessness, several organizations coordinated with young people across the country to organize a national youth referendum (a vote) on peace and human rights. On October 25, 1996, over three million Colombian children and teenagers participated in the event. Run just like an official election, the voting happened at thousands of polling stations nationwide. Ballots were printed in newspapers so that young people from anywhere in the country could send in their vote to be counted. The ballots listed 12 rights -- including the right to peace, the right to justice, and the right to an education -- and young people voted on which one they thought was most important. As one of the (adult) organizers at the time explained, the children's mandate was "a letter to adults to demand a better country." Young people also held rallies and marches for peace in small towns and big cities across Colombia. Exactly one year later, nearly 10 million Colombian adults voted on a national Mandate for Peace. It supported the Children's Mandate for Peace and demanded that armed actors in Colombia's civil war respect humanitarian law and find a peaceful end to the conflict. It also called on the national army to forbid any recruitment or enlistment of boys under the age of 18.



Children in Colombia at a peace demonstration in the late 1990s.
(Photo credit: World Children's Prize, <https://worldchildrensprize.org/mayerlydreamtopeace>)

LESEIN MUTUNKEI (KENYA)

When he was younger, Lesein Mutunkei and his family often spent time in the countryside beyond their sprawling hometown of Nairobi. When he was 12 years old, he had the idea to combine two of his passions: soccer and protecting the environment. Lesein decided that every time he scored a goal in soccer, he would plant a tree. This was the beginning of Trees for Goals. His classmates got interested in the idea, too. Lesein wanted to figure out a way to have an even bigger impact. So he decided that he could represent the team effort of a goal by planting eleven trees for each goal instead of just one. (That's one tree for each player on the team.) His school got on board with the idea, and their soccer, rugby, and basketball teams all adopted it. So did Lesein's football (soccer) club. Since starting these efforts with Trees for Goals, Lesein has been joined by more than 5,000 other young people. They've planted well over 11,000 trees so far. Lesein has also been working to educate others on broader issues of climate change and on the problems caused by plastics pollution. He hopes that FIFA (the global football/soccer association) will adopt the Trees for Goals idea and spread the initiative worldwide. In 2020, Lesein was recognized for his efforts when the nonprofit Action for Nature named him as one of their International Young Eco-Heros.



Lesein Mutunkei
(Photo credit: Action for Nature, <https://actionfornature.org/eco-heroes-awards/2020-awards/#lesein>)

AHED TAMIMI (PALESTINE)

Ahed Tamimi was 14 years old when she first gained international attention for challenging an Israeli soldier. Since 1967, the state of Israel has maintained a military occupation that dominates and tries to control every aspect of the lives of people in Palestine, which Israel claims it has a right to rule over. Ahed and others in her village of Nabi Saleh have resisted this occupation, including in the 2015 incident that first made her famous. As a masked soldier tried to take away her 11-year-old brother, she, her mother, and two other women struggled and fought to get him away. Ahed held onto the soldier's arm and bit his hand. In 2017, by then 16, Ahed was arrested and served eight months in an Israeli prison. Her crime?



Ahed Tamimi, photographed in 2015.
(Photo credit: Diaa Hadid, via <https://www.instagram.com/p/7R0fj0zVTH/?hl=en>)

Slapping and kicking heavily armed Israeli soldiers who were stationed near her family's home. Earlier that day she had seen a soldier shoot her 15-year-old cousin in the face with a rubber bullet, seriously wounding him. Ahed's family played a leadership role in the weekly protests held in Nabi Saleh from 2009 to 2017. Her father, her mother, and her brother have all been imprisoned many times. After she was released from prison, Ahed remained proud and defiant. She refuses to see herself as "a victim of the occupation. . . . I always say I am a freedom fighter. So I will not be the victim."

GRETA THUNBERG (SWEDEN)

Greta Thunberg started what would become a global “school strike for climate” movement when she was 15 years old. In August 2018, she started skipping school and spending her days protesting alone in front of the Parliament building in her native Sweden. An election was coming up, and Greta was tired of her own government’s failure to seriously address the crisis of climate change. Soon other students joined her in her protest, and together they started the hashtag #FridaysforFuture. They urged young people all over the world to skip school on Fridays (or a Friday) and push for political action to fight climate change. The first global strike happened in March 2019. It brought together an estimated one million strikers participating in thousands of strikes in about 150 countries. It was followed by numerous massive protests all over the world throughout 2019. Greta has used her international reputation to keep pressure on policy makers. In June 2021, she called out world leaders who met at a gathering in the United Kingdom for failing to take serious action to address climate change while also traveling (by private jet), consuming (lots of red meat and lobster on the menu), and being entertained (by British air force aerobatics) in ways that were clearly harmful for the environment.



Greta Thunberg outside the Swedish Parliament in 2018.
(Photo credit: Anders Hellberg, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greta_Thunberg_4.jpg)

SOWETO STUDENT UPRISING (SOUTH AFRICA)

For over 50 years, the country of South Africa was run by a white minority government that enforced a system of racial segregation called apartheid. The effects of apartheid were especially obvious in education, where Black students attended crowded, underfunded schools designed to reinforce white supremacy. Most classes and subjects were taught in English. But in the mid-1970s, the government announced that schools would also have to teach many classes in Afrikaans. Afrikaans was the language most associated with apartheid rule, so students immediately objected to being forced to learn it. Antoinette Sithole was 15 at the time. She



Students march through the streets of Soweto on June 16, 1976.
(Photo credit: via <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising>)

remembered preparing for a student-led march set for June 16, 1976 to protest the policy. “We were a little bit scared, you know, but we felt free already. It was like, ‘Now we are taking the streets of Soweto with a message.’” As they made their way towards a nearby soccer stadium, their numbers grew to over 10,000. Police tried to stop them along the route -- first with tear gas and warning shots into the air, and then by firing live ammunition into the crowd. The first person killed by police that day was a 13-year-old boy named Hector Pietersen. He was Antoinette’s little brother. Protests continued in Soweto for several days. During that time, police killed at least 176 (up to as many as 700) people and wounded about 4,000 more. The protests and their violent suppression sparked student uprisings across South Africa. Photos of the police violence during the Soweto protest caused international outrage. In 1977, the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously to ban countries from selling weapons to South Africa.

SAI VIGNESH (INDIA)

When Sai was 15 years old, the monsoon rains in his hometown of Chennai caused devastating flooding. Seeing countless animals suffering from a lack of food or shelter during this time led him to start his work to save and protect them. He has been at it ever since. He founded the Almighty Animal Care Trust in 2017. Sai has rescued hundreds of dogs and cats, finding new homes for many of them. He has led spay/neuter and vaccination campaigns to promote animal health. Besides dogs and cats, Sai has also rescued cows, goats, and pigs from abuse. Since 2018, he has been working to build and maintain an animal sanctuary to house, feed, and care for abandoned, abused, or neglected animals. A donor gave the land to build the shelter, and Sai is constantly working to raise more funds to keep it going. It is home to more than 80 animals. Sai works with several veterinarians who help to provide medical care for animals that may be sick or injured. Sai has now graduated from high school and helps to fund the shelter by working part-time as a web developer. His efforts have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as donations have decreased at the same time that more animals have been abandoned. But for Sai, his mission is clear: "It might be tiring, but at the end of the day, I have made a difference in the lives of these animals. I have to be there for them because they don't have a voice in our society."



Sai Vignesh with some of the dogs he's rescued.
(Photo credit: Sai Vignesh, via <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/animal-sanctuary-chennai-under-threat-closing-heres-how-you-can-help-132448>)

MALALA YOUSAFZAI (PAKISTAN)

In January 2009, the BBC started publishing a blog called "Diary of a Pakistani Schoolgirl." It shared the experiences of an anonymous 11-year-old girl who lived in the Swat Valley in Pakistan, not far from the border with Afghanistan. At the time, this region was ruled by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which imposed an extreme interpretation of Islamic law on people of the region. This included closing many schools and banning girls' education. The young blogger wrote about her experiences as a schoolgirl in this context. The world later learned her name: Malala Yousafzai. Malala remained an outspoken and public advocate for girls' education in her home region. In October 2012, she and two other girls were shot in an attempted assassination by Ehsanullah Ehsan, who was the spokesman of the TTP. Malala was on her way home from school after taking an exam and was shot in the head. Seriously wounded, she was soon taken from Pakistan to a hospital in the United Kingdom. Threats against Malala continued, so her family relocated to the U.K. In 2014, while she was still in high school, Malala and her father founded the Malala Fund, a nonprofit that has dedicated itself to "working for a world where every girl can learn and lead." That year Malala was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize along with Kailash Satyarthi, an education and anti-child labor advocate from India. At just 17, Malala was the youngest person to ever win this prestigious peace prize. In 2020, she graduated from Oxford University. She continues to advocate for girls' education and leadership around the world.



Malala Yousafzai, photographed in 2014.

(Photo credit: Southbank Centre, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Malala_Yousafzai.jpg)