

# Joining the Movement

*Peter Levine*

**Students often seek empowerment through social movements. Educators can help them gain sophistication on how movements work.**

Many students gain empowerment by participating in social movements, like Black Lives Matter, Turning Point USA, the Sunrise Movement, Young America's Foundation, and others. When millions struck for action on climate change last September, their number included thousands of U.S. students who walked out of school to support this cause. Learning that happens in such movements can complement in-school learning. In fact, as a long-time researcher and advocate for civic education, I'd argue that social movements are among the most powerful settings for civic education in our society.

Young people are often drawn to movements through attending a protest or rally. Between 2016 and 2018, the proportion of U.S. young people who said they participated in protests more than tripled, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, overall involvement in movements has remained steady or increased while other forms of U.S. civic engagement have shrunk. In 1970, a majority of American adults either attended a church weekly, belonged to a union, or both. Today, only one-third engage in those traditional bulwarks of civil society.<sup>2</sup>

Educators should understand the potential value for students of getting immersed in a cause. Participation can lift students' sense of agency and their civic savvy. And school-based civic education can complement the empowerment that comes from social movements. But for that to happen, young people must have a deeper appreciation of social movements, and greater sophistication about how they work.

## Deepening Understanding of Social Change

Although teachers should be impartial about the political issues that social movements raise, and never push their own views or favored movements, they have a role to play in deepening students' understanding of social change—which many Americans lack.

For instance, many Americans think of social movements as (1) masses of individuals with (2) opinions who (3) protest. But movements aren't just protesters with demands. They are complex, evolving structures that create opportunities for internal discussion and learning, personal growth, and even careers. Educators at all levels should adopt a nuanced, comprehensive view of social movements that goes well beyond marches—so they can help students do the same. At appropriate instructional moments, teachers might discuss with students key characteristics of social movements, such as:

- A healthy movement reflects diverse views on its own core issues and is a site of debate. Its agenda usually shifts and develops over time, and it presents ideas that aren't simply opinions. Facts and theories; ideals and principles; and cultural elements like stories and songs are as important as participants' opinions in understanding a well-rounded movement.
- A movement almost always comprises organizations with their own structures, leaders, members, and bank accounts. The American Civil Rights Movement, for example, was a complex structure comprising the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (a network of churches), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and other components. Some of today's movements present themselves as loose, voluntary networks of equals. But even

an anti-hierarchical movement like Occupy Wall Street develops norms and procedures that go beyond individuals.

- Seasoned grassroots leaders know that protests are mainly opportunities for recruiting people to do the more important work of a large effort for a cause, such as organizing strikes, occupations, and boycotts; raising money for litigation and ballot initiatives; and recruiting and supporting candidates for public office.

When young people grasp these nuances about social movements, they'll be better able to evaluate groups they encounter and even see what might be done to strengthen a worthy movement. Educators should also keep in mind that some movements are better for youth development than others. A movement can be a rich forum for nuanced debate, or a cult-like group that imposes purity-tests on members and shuns outsiders. It can be dominated by charismatic leaders, or well-organized along democratic principles. When appropriate, we might help a student who's thinking of joining some group consider its qualities (more on that later).

## Social Studies Teachers' Role

Social studies teachers should ensure that students learn how movements have worked historically. We often present classic examples in misleading ways that leave students without a full understanding of the diverse roles that make efforts for progress work—and of roles *they* could play in meaningful causes.

For instance, many people think Rosa Parks was a tired seamstress who just decided one afternoon not to give up her seat to a white passenger on a segregated bus. They see Martin Luther King, Jr., as not only the leader but the driving force of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, when Parks was arrested on the bus, she had been, for 12 years, an organizer and investigator for the Alabama NAACP. She had focused primarily on sexual violence against Black women, which was a salient issue because white drivers often harassed African American women passengers.<sup>3</sup> Parks and other Montgomery leaders used her arrest to launch an effective boycott and recruited King as one of their spokespeople. King didn't cause the movement; it recruited him to play a key role.

Understanding the dynamics within past movements prepares students for effective participation in today's social movements. Teachers of history and civics should make sure students don't equate social movements with things like marching in a public space or spreading slogans through social media, but understand the larger picture.

## SPUD: Helping Youth Evaluate Movements

Not all youth movements are beneficial; some—like fascism—have been blatantly harmful. It's important to guide students in assessing whether any movement that seeks to attract youth truly empowers people in a positive way. One tool we might use to do so is the SPUD framework, which evaluates movements along four dimensions:<sup>4</sup>

S = Scale: Strong movements recruit large numbers of individuals and groups.

P = Pluralism: Effective movements encompass people with diverse perspectives and backgrounds.

U = Unity: Movements should come together behind shared demands.

D = Depth: Positive movements help participants grow in knowledge, skill, and wisdom.

When we help students find movements that will involve them in healthy social action, they can learn more about democracy and their own power.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> CIRCLE. (2015, Oct. 15). "CIRCLE Poll: So much for slacktivism as youth translate online engagement to offline political action."
- <sup>2</sup> Atwell, M. N., Bridgeland, J., & Levine, P. (2017). *Civic deserts: America's civic health challenge*. Washington, D.C.: National Conference on Citizenship.
- <sup>3</sup> McGuire, D. (2010). *At the dark end of the street: Black women, rape, and resistance*. New York: Vintage.
- <sup>4</sup> For more information on using the SPUD framework to evaluate social movements, see my 2018 article in the *Journal of Public Deliberation*, "Habermas with a whiff of tear gas: Nonviolent campaigns and deliberation in an era of authoritarianism."

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