

Young Voices, Real Change: Learning from the Children's March of 1963

Unit Overview

This is an interdisciplinary instructional unit designed to build students' background knowledge of growing up in the segregated south, practice and develop specific literacy skills, and understand the components of civic action through an in-depth study of the Children's March of 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. The unit examines how young people played a pivotal role in The Birmingham Campaign and The Civil Rights Movement and uses that historical example to help students understand the power of youth voice to respond to a real-world problem or challenge to promote social change in their community.

The unit culminates in a project-based learning task in which students will identify an "-ism" (such as racism, classism, or ableism) they believe negatively impacts their community and design a safe, respectful, and ethical plan to inform their peers and encourage age-appropriate youth activism. Students are not encouraged to organize protests but rather develop thoughtful strategies for awareness, communication, and peer engagement.

Alabama State Standards

English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-8.1 – Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly and implicitly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-8.6 – Determine an author's point of view or purpose and analyze how it is conveyed

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-8.9 – Analyze two or more texts addressing similar themes or topics

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-8.1 – Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence (Reflection: Is King's approach still effective today?).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6-8.9 – Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis and research (Modern "Letter from [Your City]" activity).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.1 – Engage effectively in collaborative discussions (Group comparison charts and debates).

Social Studies

D2.Civ.2.6-8 – Explain specific roles played by citizens in influencing government

D2.Civ.10.6-8 – Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives in civic discussions.

D2.His.2.6-8 – Classify series of historical events and developments as examples of change and continuity

D2.His.14.6-8 – Explain multiple causes and effects of events and developments (Impact of Birmingham Campaign and King's letter).

Notes

- This unit is designed for middle school students grades 6–8, and is adaptable for grades 9–10.
- The driving question behind this unit: How can young people identify unfair ideas in their own community and take positive peaceful action to make change - just like students did in Birmingham in the 1960s?
- Throughout this unit students will:
 - Understand the restrictions young people faced due to City Ordinances in Birmingham.
 - Understand how the events of the Children's Movement impacted those City Ordinances
 - Identify an “-ism” they believe exists within their school or community.
 - Analyze its impact on young people.
 - Design youth-friendly guidelines that encourage positive, nonviolent activism to address the issue.

Daily Plans

Day 1

Materials needed: Taxonomy chart, Gallery Walk Slideshow and Answer Sheet

1. Vocabulary Taxonomy (words associated with Birmingham, 1963)
 - The teacher will introduce the Vocabulary Terms [here](#) for this unit. The teacher will lead a discussion with students on how the terms are connected.
 - Students will participate in a Virtual Gallery Walk [here](#) as a pre-test to evaluate if students can identify the visual cues of each picture to determine the vocabulary term (from the Taxonomy) being demonstrated and record their response on the answer sheet. [here](#)

- The teacher will solicit volunteers to share their responses and identify the visual cues that support their answers. (It is acceptable for student responses to vary based on visual cues)

2. Reflection Questions

- Did the images from the gallery walk help you better understand what daily life and the fight for civil rights looked like in Birmingham in 1963? Describe one image that stood out to you. Explain your answer.
- After viewing the images of Birmingham in 1963, what do you think it might have felt like to live there during that time? What details from the images helped shape your thinking?

Day 2

Materials: “Mighty Times” video, Observation Checklist, Letter from a Birmingham Jail graphic organizer, Accountable Talk handout, Discussion flow chart

1. Video: “Mighty Times – The Children’s March”

- Students will watch a short YouTube video (stop: 6:50) that provides historical context for why Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to Birmingham in 1963, leading to his arrest and the writing of “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in response to criticism from local clergy.
- While viewing, students will complete an Observation Checklist [here](#) using the prompts *I See...*, *I Hear...*, *I Wonder...* to actively process key ideas and questions. (The teacher will repeat the video clip at least twice to ensure students have adequate access to the textual evidence needed to complete the graphic organizer.)
- The teacher will then solicit volunteers to share their responses.

2. Small Group Activity: Letter from a Birmingham Jail

- The video clip ends with Coretta Scott King responding to reporters asking if Dr. King was “in solitary confinement”. This will provide a transition to discussing the goal(s) for reading this historic letter. Students will be placed into Reading Teams and assigned specific quadrants of a graphic organizer [here](#) prompting each group to closely analyze different aspects of the text and collaboratively build understanding of King’s purpose, audience, and message by providing the textual evidence for the prompts.

3. Whole Group Debrief

- The teacher will provide each team a set of Accountable Talk Stems that can be used to connect both texts. These specific stems [here](#) will help students structure discussions connecting The Children’s March video clip and Dr. King’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and improve their communication skills through purposeful dialogue. The teacher will facilitate the discussion by asking Guided Questions [here](#) to help students scaffold responses, clarify questions/responses, and provide immediate feedback.

Day 3

Materials: Readers’ Theater Script, Student self-assessment

1. Quick Write Activity

- Students will respond to the following:
“You knew you grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, if...” (excerpt)

(I have) fond memories and photos of such fun and happy places like Cascade Plunge, Kiddieland, and Joy Young.

I grew up in Birmingham in the ‘50’s, but my memories are much more conflicted.

Having moved to “the big city” from a small town, I was excited about the move.

We lived in a very nice neighborhood. Most families were professionals who also had children my age. Fun family times. Chasing June bugs, lightning bugs, playing cowboys and Indians, hide and seek, etc.

However, my excitement quickly changed to one of confusion, sometimes anger. There were so many “don’ts” and “cants”.

- Janice Wilson

- The teacher will display the excerpt on the board and students will Turn & Talk with their neighbor to share their ideas of what they believe the “don’ts” and “cants” were back in 1963 based on the previous lessons.

2. Performance Task – Readers Theater

- Students will actively read and participate in a Readers Theater presentation [here](#) that provides students an opportunity to “act out” scenes that reflect the daily life of

most youth growing up in 1963 Birmingham. This task is important because it strengthens both reading fluency *and* comprehension at the same time—without putting pressure on students to memorize lines. This script is based on the social media column written by Janice Wilson. [Here](#)

- Reflection: Each student will complete a self-assessment of their reading/participation. [Here](#)

Day 4

Materials: Janice Kelsey interview video, Venn Diagram handout

1. The teacher will display the following quote in the classroom to introduce the role of Foot Soldiers. (see Taxonomy) – **“Marching for freedom led to many days in jail.”**
 - Students will view an interview featuring Janice Kelsey. [here](#)
 - The teacher will solicit volunteers to share their ideas if they believe going to jail was worth it.
 - EXAMPLE OF KEY POINTS TO HIGHLIGHT WITH STUDENTS:
Janice Kelsey explains that she often drove by the fair grounds, but had never been there because Blacks were not allowed. This provides context to further explain the goals of The Birmingham Campaign (to end segregation in public facilities and local businesses).
2. Choice Board Assignment: “A foot soldier’s story”
 - *Overview: This choice board is designed to give students options of which KIDS/foot soldier’s story they are most interested in investigating after watching the videoclip/story on James Bevel (who is credited with encouraging young people to get involved). They will demonstrate active reading skills by 1) accessing the oral histories by using the links provided on the choice board, 2) compare and contrast the textual evidence to record on the Three Domain Venn Diagram, and 3) classify where their responses should be recorded on the diagram.*
 - The teacher will facilitate a whole group discussion to model how the Venn Diagram must be completed. The “FREE SPACE” (center) will be the one foot soldier story all students will have in common documented on their Venn because Rev. James Bevel was the chief organizer who encouraged the children/youth to “fill the jails”. (see tool kit [here](#)). This format provides access to multiple oral histories of their choice and at their own pace. The active links enable students to engage with the video as non-print text because they are able to practice listening comprehension and visual literacy (interpreting images, gestures, tone).

3. “A foot soldier’s story” – Three domain Venn Diagram

- The teacher will remind students their answers must come directly from what they hear and see in the videos (textual evidence)
- The teacher will post the anchor charts (see tool kit) for students to use to help guide their responses.
- Students will compare and contrast the experiences of two Foot Soldiers from the Birmingham Children’s March while connecting them to the leadership and message of Rev. James Bevel.
 - Center = Leadership & message of Rev. James Bevel
 - Outer circles = Individual Foot Soldier experiences
 - Overlaps = Shared experiences and themes
 - Every answer must come from the videos
- **Reflection Activity:** What happened during and right after the Children’s March? (Check all that apply and explain.)
 - ☐ Students were arrested
 - ☐ The protests were shown on TV and in newspapers
 - ☐ National leaders began paying attention
 - ☐ City leaders were pressured to respond
 - ☐ Other: _____
- Explain one result you think was most important:

Day 5

Materials: PBL Task Checklist, Grading rubric

1. PBL Overview

- The teacher will provide an overview of the Project-Based Learning Task (PBL). Students will actively explore and address a real-world problem by creating a Youth Activism Guide.
- The Students will complete a *Youth Activism Proposal* that includes:
 - Identification of a modern-day “-ism”
 - Explanation of its impact on students or the community
 - Guidelines for informing peers
 - Strategies for safe, nonviolent, and ethical youth engagement
 - Reflection on lessons learned from the Children’s MarchProducts may include written guides, presentations, posters, or digital media, depending on instructional preference.

2. What is an -ism?

- The teacher will provide students with an active definition of -ism.
 - The teacher will also encourage students to frame their critical thinking around noticing patterns or rules, not blaming individuals.
 - Students will use available technology (individually or in small groups) to research and identify one “-ism” they believe exists in their community or school.
 - Students will complete the PBL Task Checklist to plan their project. [Here](#)
 - The teacher will evaluate student’s projects using the proposed rubric. [Here](#)
-

Funding

This project is supported by the Alabama Humanities Alliance, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the Alabama Humanities Alliance or the National Endowment for the Humanities.