



A Story of Revising Social Studies Units in the Midst of Racial Isolation

Johnny Bell

University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA



ABSTRACT

Black teachers encounter various microaggressions in and around schools that make the profession taxing (King, 2016). While hurdling relational challenges, Dr. Bell funneled his energy and revised two units for fourth and fifth grade students in the learning community. One unit, *Events Leading Up to the American Revolution* received limited edits due to the restraint of planning time and COVID19 quarantine mandates before implementation. The second unit, *Activism*, received a major overhaul as it was originally cut short during the Spring 2020 semester. This article reflects Dr. Bell's account of the year spent revising both Social Studies units that students engaged in. He includes the events that led to the decision to focus on Social Studies content and the reactions of students and their involvement as they learned content and participated in class discussions. His students enjoyed the interactive lessons, although a majority of the planning was done by him without much collaboration from his team members. As a result, this experience has inspired him to find an opportunity to develop a secondary social studies course.

Published July 2024

Corresponding Author

Johnny Bell

jbelle@pky.ufl.edu

DOI [10.29173/assert73](https://doi.org/10.29173/assert73)

Pages: 38-47

Distributed under
[Creative Commons
Attribution-Non-Commercial
4.0 International \(CC BY-
NC 4.0\)](#).

Copyright: Ownership of this article's copyright remains with the author(s), subject to the Creative Commons license.

Keywords African-American history, activism, diversity, revision, social studies

How to cite this article (APA): Bell, J. (2024) A story of revising social studies units in midst of racial isolation. *Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers*, 6(1), 38-47. <https://doi.org/10.29173/assert73>

INTRODUCTION

This article will take you on the journey of a Black male educator who is passionate about supporting students and maintaining his own well-being. His story is laced with a love of social studies, learning, and sharing the stories of marginalized figures in history.

The fourth and fifth-grade learning community (4/5 LC) spent hours collaborating on topics ranging from planning field trips, discussing student needs, and brainstorming other professional responsibilities. The team of seven teachers comprised three partnerships; half of the educators taught math and writing content while their partners delivered instruction for reading and science. Each of the four subjects was taught daily, which is common in Florida public schools due to the state assessments. Social studies was squeezed in once a week on Wednesdays.

During the fall semester, the unit was titled *Events Leading Up to the American Revolution*, with the next unit on *Activism* during the spring semester. This was originally planned for the Spring 2020 semester, but the COVID-19 pandemic paused the development of the unit. At this time, state lawmakers passed legislation to decapitate diversity in education. Oklahoma, Arizona, and Tennessee already passed education reforms by the start of the 2021-2022 school year; other states such as Florida would soon follow. Table 1 models the two-year, semester loop of the 4/5 LC’s Social Studies units.

Table 1

Pacing of Social Studies Units

Year “A” 2021-2022		Year “B” 2020-2021	
Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
<i>Events Leading Up to the American Revolution</i>	<i>Activism</i>	<i>Early Colonizers and Indigenous People</i>	<i>Westward Expansion</i>

THE ISSUE

Conflicting Interests

A major critical incident between me and a learning community member also magnified the divide between the team and me. When two white teachers openly supported another teacher’s use of a derogatory word for Black people, I realized that I was on my own. This intensified my desire to infuse diversity into the Social Studies curriculum because white teachers—especially 4/5 LC

educators- would not share the impact of minorities on the birth of the United States. The hushed tones and administrative whispers to sweep the critical incident under the rug modeled why I doubted the integrity of white educators.

This was shocking because I taught in a K-12 public school that advertises a diverse, inclusive, well-rounded philosophy. Like many minority educators, I was the only minority teacher in our team of seven educators, compared to most schools where nearly 80% of teachers identify as white (Hinchcliffe, 2019; Sun, 2018). Our school claims to match Florida public school student enrollment demographics by percentage. Over the previous two years, I observed different microaggressions towards myself and other minority students. Like many predominantly white schools (PWI), this one operated on the norms of the white majority (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013).

As the lone teacher of color, I felt a duty to support minority students' social and emotional needs by including the experiences of marginalized people (Bell, 2023). Simultaneously, I realized through a series of "*Did you know*" and "*Have you heard about*" questions that students had limited knowledge of historical events based on grade-level benchmarks for Social Studies; that school year coincided with my second year in a doctoral program, which motivated me to increase my knowledge of historical and present ramifications of policies that impact teachers, schools, and society. Although I was a full-time educator and doctoral student promoting the publication of my second Young Adult fiction novel, I decided to revise the unit.

REVISIONS

Events Leading Up to the American Revolution Unit

I began by researching state standards and contemplating what voices were missing from the content. My research included incorporating sources such as Equal Justice Initiative (eji.org). As I scabbled for time to make the unit inclusive, I incorporated age-appropriate visuals such as videos and images for students. My knowledge increased, which resulted in more enriching lessons with literature and research on minorities during the American Revolution.

Class conversations began with the Boston Massacre and notable casualty Crispus Attucks. Students learned about Indigenous Peoples' conflict between choosing which side to support—Loyalists or Patriots. It was exciting to watch their curiosity grow as discussions erupted amongst them. They hung on the edge of their seats when we learned about different spies, including Black and French spies such as James Armistead Lafayette. When we discussed the Boston Tea Party, students quickly connected to this early example of activism—they linked *the* Boston Tea Party to the

thousands of people who protested after the George Floyd murder.

Students were also shocked to learn that Paul Revere had assistance on his famous midnight ride from a Black archaeologist named Wentworth Cheswell. The most powerful lesson occurred when we discussed the first Continental Congress. Most of the class casually glanced at a picture of older men wearing wigs in ugly clothing until I posed a question: *What do you notice about the group of early American leaders?* The students unwrapped the founding leaders' image to decipher whether it was a group of wealthy, landowning white men. I shared that Abigail Adams—former First Lady of President John Adams—passionately pleaded with her husband and the other men to not forget about pursuing rights for women. A white girl blurted out, “Man, that just isn’t right!” These facts left students bewildered and motivated me to continue revisions.

Re-shifting the Work

Working solo after the disheartening restorative practice meeting left me emotionally drained but lit a fire within to persevere with the social studies inquiry work. With a full doctoral student course load and other professional and personal requirements, I realized more time was needed to revise the unit to a satisfactory level completely. This led me to shift my focus toward working ahead on the Activism Unit for the upcoming Spring semester. While sitting in a required team meeting, I petitioned for the opportunity to create the upcoming Activism Unit. None of the fourth and fifth-grade learning community teachers objected.

For the Activism Unit, I repeated the steps of studying state standards, benchmarks, and resources. Concurrently, Florida politicians executed their plot to terminate diversity-enriched curricula in public schools and collegiate courses. Nonetheless, I persevered with the formation and creation of the lessons. I juggled time between doctoral coursework and teaching responsibilities. The unit was over two-thirds complete when we returned for the Spring semester. As with the minority-infused revisions in the previous unit, I wanted to know whether team members would follow the equity-focused Activism lessons and guided script.

Activism Unit

We began with the once-popular *Kid President* (How to Change the World, 2013) who discussed how to change the world. Students engaged from the onset utilizing strategies such as three-column notes and think-pair-share. I also included a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “A riot is the language of the unheard,” (King, Wallace interview, September 27, 1966) and reminded students of our previous unit when we learned about the Boston Tea Party. Our brief, 35-minute lessons

focused on learning about different types of activism, forms of activism, and activists. We navigated topics and people involved in Civil Rights and Women’s Rights, such as Title IX in 1972 and Representative Patsy Mink. Children learned about the conflict between Susan Anthony and Ida B. Wells on their polarizing stances on rights for women of color. Students were intrigued when we discussed *their* rights as children and learned the painful price peers their age incur, such as Malala Yousafzai.

My partner teacher checked in to see how the unit was progressing. She was the only one on the team who contributed by finding an age-appropriate book—*Kid Activists: True Tales of Childhood from Champions of Change* (Stevenson, 2019)—that covered the encounters of many activists such as Nelson Mandella, Helen Keller, and Autumn Peltier. Pages were uploaded onto the slides, allowing students to read aloud and view pictures from the book. As we concluded the unit, students openly shared their knowledge on activism topics such as gun violence, police brutality, and mental health. The highlight was receiving emails from parents expressing thanks that we were covering such topics.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

My academic research focuses on the stories of Black male elementary teachers (BMETs). Although we are in different states with varying years of experience, our stories were similar. Veteran minority teachers have stories that mimic my own. They/we encounter pressure due to the rarity of them/us in PWIs (Kelly, 2007). Three critical reminders are to remain vigilant, educate yourself, and stay assertive. Additionally, we must continue to watch out for microaggressions against ourselves, our children, and our cultures, as the white majority seeks to force us to assimilate. Furthermore, we must continue to educate ourselves on the history of our people and about educational policies, so we understand what rights we have in the workplace. Lastly, we must continue to advocate for ourselves and our future.

Q & A WITH Johnny Bell

Question #1

Teacher’s Question:

What advice would you offer to educators who want to follow your approach in states that have limited the teaching of diversity and/or African American History?

Johnny Bell's Response:

I recommend finding like-minded educators and establishing a support group for the emotional toil and to network and gain ideas for the unit, lesson, or course. As the quote says, "Many hands make light work." Finding others who have similar interests helps on multiple fronts- not only does it lighten your load, but other perspectives are brought in that can fill in the gaps in your abilities. Other teachers can help you create a cross-curricular unit. One of the great travesties in education is that our children cannot learn how different subjects are related and how skills from one subject can help them succeed in other classes.

Enjoy being uncomfortable because this is where you grow the most as a professional and a person. Consider how much you grew in your first two years in education--mainly because you were learning how to teach, build relationships effectively, and manage the professional requirements. There will be pushback from every angle- a student, a parent, and even a colleague. While you may not always be aware, be prepared to articulate your professional stance on why this topic is necessary. One of my go-to lines is paraphrased by Spanish writer and philosopher George Santayana, "those who do not [learn] history are doomed to repeat it."

Question #2***Teacher's Question:***

What instructional materials and strategies best support students to engage critically with instructional materials which include diverse voices and experiences?

Johnny Bell's Response:

Search for content and voices that best relate to your students. Children- like adults- need an opportunity to digest content by having independent processing time and collaborative thinking. One internal difficulty I experienced was determining the level of guidance and direction of our whole-group conversations. Ideally, I preferred to allow small-group collaboration to increase participation, but I felt the best way to supervise was to discuss the whole group.

Some concrete recommendations are to avoid dichotomous questions and incorporate critical thinking terminology. I referred to [Webb's Depth of Knowledge Chart](#) to help with my questioning. At the elementary level, I did not sense children had enough background knowledge but may have experienced microaggressions they could not verbalize. In my position as a teacher of color, this provided space to help minority students articulate and make connections to historical events of the past and present.

Also, get out of the way! Don't limit activities and sources to your preconceived notions. Take chances by incorporating videos, pictures, and stories to help educate your students. To be honest, our children hear our voices so much that someone new may potentially draw a higher level of attention. I firmly believe that growth occurs just outside our comfort zone. So, be willing to get uncomfortable.

Question #3**Teacher's Question:**

How can colleagues resolve a 'critical incident' related to diversity when one or more colleagues has been harmed?

Johnny Bell's Response:

This is difficult, especially if the aggressor and other witnesses refuse to acknowledge the damage and feelings of the receiver. In my case, it was/is difficult to resolve because there has been a collection of critical incidents (Bott & Tourist, 2016; Curtis et al., 2020; Pui-lan et al., 2005) I experienced in the previous three years leading up to the major event, including being denied admission to the school for my then-fiancé (now, wife's) children for an entire school year. In my case, some events not only affected me as a professional but affected my personal life. Also, some of those white teachers will not make eye contact with me in the hallway.

Restorative circles are a great starting place, but it doesn't mean a healthy resolution will always be reached. Sometimes, you learn the mindset of others. For example, in our meeting, only one white teacher shared that the critical incident led them to do their own research to understand the ramifications of what happened, but two other white teachers displayed their beliefs by doubling down in support of the aggressor's volatile language.

One of the greatest challenges- I perceive- was the inability for white colleagues to shift their thoughts and step into a different viewpoint of an incident. This was magnified by literature in my dissertation (Battey et al., 2018; Carothers et al., 2019; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013) and my findings from the BMETs that were participants. Teachers of color have less of a challenge of viewing different perspectives because we are used to things such as code-switching and being conscious of how we move in white-dominant spaces (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Milner, 2020).

Question #4**Teacher's Question:**

What advice would you offer to White educators as to how they can support teachers and students of color in our current context?

Johnny Bell's Response:

Do your own research about the oppression minorities have and continue to suffer. Read literature from authors such as bell hooks, Dr. Bettina Love, Robin DiAngelo, and Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings are some popular researchers.

Examine your social groups. Who is in your innermost circle of friends? Who attends your church? What teachers choose to come visit you during planning? Who do you live with? How do you hear people comment about events in society?

Truly examine yourself. It's okay to look in the mirror and realize you were wrong about something. We as

people are born stubborn and with an innate belief that our way is right (look at any toddler). However, as we grow and learn, we realize that we are really learning and evolving humans. The day we stop desiring growth and self-improvement is the day we stop growing as people.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

What are some strategies or practices that you engaged in as a Black educator to practice and prioritize self-care?

Johnny Bell's Response:

During the months following the major critical incident, I vented to a Black classmate in the doctoral program. He talked me off the proverbial ledge and helped me maintain focus throughout the remainder of the program. For the remainder of that school year, I removed myself from any non-mandated meetings with the team and did everything- eating lunch, grading work, making lesson plans in the safety of my classroom instead of operating in the learning community "fishbowl" (office). The "fishbowl" has workstations for each team member, a large meeting table, a printer, and other miscellaneous items that teachers use. While reflecting, I really didn't practice self-care. Instead, I dove head-first into my dissertation topic by allowing my passion to improve the quality of work.

Some habits of self-care that I try to practice at school is to spend about five minutes at the end of each day in horizontal reflection. I recount the events of the day and consider what went well and what didn't; what comments did I miss that were potentially triggering and how can I respond to future challenges if they repeat themselves? I also leave work *at* work. Like a demotivational poster said, "homework is preparing kids for unpaid overtime." I do not take work home and I let students know that I have a life outside of school. I try to have a continual activity at home such as DIY projects.

REFERENCES

- Batthey, D., Leyva, L., Williams, I., Belizario, V., Greco, R., and Shah, R. (2018). Racial (mis) match in middle school mathematics classrooms: Relational interactions as a racialized mechanism. *Harvard Educational Review*, 88(4), 455-482.
- Bell, J. (2023). *Blacked-out: Narratives of Black male elementary teachers*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Florida. ProQuest.
- Bott, G., and Tourish, D. (2016). The critical incident technique reappraised: Using critical incidents to illuminate organizational practices and build theory. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 11(4), 276-300.

- Carothers, D., Hasan, A., and Houdyshell, M. (2019). Teacher shortages and cultural mismatch: District and university collaboration for recruiting. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 10(3), pp. 39-63.
- Curtis-Boles, H., Chupina, A. G., & Okubo, Y. (2020). Social justice challenges: Students of color and critical incidents in the graduate classroom. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 14(2), 100-108.
- Downey, D. and Pribesh, S. (2004). When race matters: Teachers' evaluations of students' classroom behavior. *Sociology of Education*, 77(4), pp. 267-282.
- Hinchcliffe, K. (2019). NC's teacher diversity gap: Where are the Black and Brown teachers?
<https://www.wral.com/nc-s-teacher-diversity-gap-where-are-the-black-and-brown-teachers/18129132/>
- Kelly, H. (2007). Racial tokenism in the school workplace: An exploratory study of black teachers in overwhelmingly white schools. *Educational Studies*, 41(3), 230-254.
- King, J. (2016). The invisible tax on teachers of color. *The Washington Post*, 1-4.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-invisible-tax-on-black-teachers/2016/05/15/6b7bea06-16f7-11e6-aa55-670cabef46e0_story.html
- McGrady, P. and Reynolds, J. (2013). Racial Mismatch in the Classroom: Beyond Black- white Differences. *American Sociological Association*, 86(1), 3-17.
- Milner, R. (2020). Black teacher: White school, *Theory into Practice*, 59(4), pp. 400-408.
- Participant. (2013, December 13). *How to Change the World*. [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4z7gDsSKUmU>
- Pui-lan, K., Brown, W., Delamarter, S., Frank, T., Marshall, J., Menn, E., and Riggs, M. (2005). Taken with surprise: Critical incidents in teaching. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 8(1), 35-46.
- Stevenson, R. (2019). *Kid Activists: True Tales of Childhood from Champions of Change*. Dreamscape Media 2020.
- Sun, M. (2018). Black teachers' retention and transfer patterns in North Carolina: How do patterns vary by teacher effectiveness, subject, and school conditions? *AREA Open*, 4(3), 1-23.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Johnny Bell

I am an assistant professor with secondary teaching responsibilities at the University of Florida. My ultimate, professional goal is to become well-rounded on the history of Black American experiences in the United States, as well as blending the stories of Latinx and other minority groups into academia. In reaching these goals, I hope to work within the k-12 setting to make academic histories, which rarely travel beyond the ivory tower, more accessible to students. I am inspired to do this work due to experiences as a minority educator, and the stories from generations before me. My research focuses on lessons and inquiries that incorporate interdisciplinary skills. When I am not teaching and studying, I enjoy watching basketball, traveling, and staying active through exercise. After publishing two Young Adult fiction novels that feature Black and Brown characters, I have become active through social media on Twitter and Instagram (@johnnybellbooks), and operate two websites currently, www.johnnybellbooks.com and www.bearlyblessed.com.