

A Framework for Using Notable Social Studies Picture Books in High School

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and Darren Guido

High school students love when teachers read them a story. They'll take their earbuds out to listen. They'll put down their phones to scrutinize the playful art of a picture book. They'll ponder why certain nonfiction stories are missing from their textbooks. And they'll readily debate which aspects of history should and should not be presented to younger students.

While the extant literature on secondary educators' use of picture books is small, scholars have asserted the value of using picture books for secondary student motivation and engagement, especially in content area classes.¹ Like all good literature, picture books contain rich vocabulary and gripping narratives with the additional benefit of aesthetic appeal. Nonfiction picture books offer excellent opportunities for critical exploration. Authors and illustrators make important choices regarding what to include and what to leave out with regard to hard truths, made accessible for even our youngest learners. Older students can learn a great deal by deliberating whether the simplifications in picture book texts are justified.

Picture Books Provide both Historical Content and Effective Differentiation

For nearly every social studies topic, from the Atlantic Slave Trade to the Stonewall uprising, there is a picture book that has distilled the topic down to its essence. Picture books supply engaging and accessible entry points for critical textual analysis while also providing those students with

learning challenges and those new to speaking English access to the curriculum.² The complexity found in their details enable more sophisticated readers to pick up on nuance and interpretation. Exploring picture books with students can be a highly engaging way to begin a new unit of study or to provide a valuable comparison for students after examining primary sources.

In this article, we assert that picture books should not be limited to elementary school use. Picture books provide an ideal companion to often dry curricular textbooks and offer secondary schools what Sims-Bishop calls windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors into experiences far beyond the classroom.³ We introduce teachers to a framework for using nonfiction picture books with their secondary students and present a website with related high school lesson plans and valuable resources.⁴

Picture Books Facilitate Critical Thinking

Beyond being an effective way to differentiate instruction, picture books can teach higher-order thinking skills and enable integration of both Curriculum Standards for Social Studies and English Language Arts Standards for History/Social Studies.⁵ When students learn to critically analyze a picture book, they can then apply those analysis skills to more challenging primary and secondary sources. They can integrate knowledge and ideas from these sources, examine key details, and use picture books as a comparison

to accounts of historical records. Further, utilizing picture book reviews and critical inquiry questions as extensions from these texts, students can explore the positionalities of authors, illustrators, text selectors, teachers, and reviewers. These strategies allow them to question the status quo, enhance critical thinking, and provide multiple positions from which to examine a story.

Picture books thereby become excellent venues for facilitating controversial conversations and interrogating notions of power and perspective.⁶ Crowley and King advocated for the use of critical inquiry to identify and confront social injustices “with the goal of transforming those unjust social relations.”⁷ In reviewing texts, Thomas asserted the need for critical literacies to interrogate materials, asking:

What (or whose) view of the world, or kinds of behaviors are presented as normal by the text? Why is the text written that way? How else could it have been written? What assumptions does the text make about age, gender, [class], and culture (including the age, gender, and culture of its readers)? Who is silenced (and heard) here?⁸

Picture books can enrich high school students’ discussions and provide inspiration for debates and Socratic Seminars as they examine these and other related questions (see the framework on page 147 for more). These books allow students to extend their thinking and to make connections to the experiences presented while also providing room to challenge dominant textbook narratives. Ultimately, picture books serve as significant, though underutilized, resources for secondary student learning.

Why Must We Urgently Engage with These Texts?

Picture books can help balance a long-standing lack of representation in texts and teaching materials. By ninth grade, students have experienced years of textbooks that overwhelmingly privilege stories of American exceptionalism, or worse, thinly veiled white supremacy,⁹ limiting students’ access to counterstories. While

American schools are rapidly diversifying, textbooks and children’s literature aren’t keeping pace. As the National Center for Education Statistics and the Children’s Cooperative Book Center (CCBC) found, both educators and their classroom reading material remain overwhelmingly white.¹⁰ In a 2021 study of the representation of children’s texts, scholars found significant gaps in books that featured characters who were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) inclusion in texts was not part of the CCBC picture book data until 2018; however, the lack of texts representative of students’ sexuality and gender has been well documented. The dearth of representative K-12 literature surrounding BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ (which includes Intersex and Asexual people) focused texts provides yet another urgent opportunity for exploration and critical engagement in social studies classrooms.

Thomas cautions readers that choosing books with “diverse” characters is simply not enough. Classroom libraries that are several years old are likely to have less representation or may hold problematic narratives.¹¹ These challenges necessitate the inclusion of recently published works, especially those written by historically marginalized communities. Teachers must update classroom libraries and lessons with books that focus on counternarratives and diverse perspectives. While it may not be possible to choose new textbooks each year, teachers can extend high school students’ access to diverse perspectives with picture books. The annual *NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People* (NSSTB) list presents an excellent opportunity to learn about such texts. The Notable Social Studies Trade Books committee, a group of social studies educators, scholars, and librarians, read these new texts and review them for their merit in meeting social studies themes as well as their relevance to classroom practice. This list is a consistent place to find titles about a variety of people and cultures. Current and past lists are available here: www.socialstudies.org/notable-social-studies-trade-books.¹²

Using Picture Books in the High School Classroom: A Framework

Our five-step framework helps secondary students analyze, discuss, and learn from picture books. Using this model, teachers encourage students to (1) “meet” the book’s creators, (2) critically question the text, (3) analyze the illustrations, (4) compare text to primary and secondary sources, and ultimately (5) apply their learning by taking action.

Through this framework, Common Core State Standards are addressed as students examine the treatment of a topic or event, integrate knowledge, and analyze multiple sources. The framework’s questions were drawn from high school classroom examples and take inspiration from critical and anti-bias models to engage students in discussions of power and perspective.

Questions from the Framework for Using Picture Books in the High School Classroom

Step 1: Meet the Creators

- Who wrote/illustrated this text?
- Why is this story important to them?
- What other perspectives are there on this topic? (*Teachers can facilitate conversation on this topic by providing reviews of the text from multiple perspectives. Did any reviewers critique the book? If so, why?*)

Step 2: Comprehension Check

- Who are the main characters?
- Where and when does the story take place?
- Why is that era/year/date important?
- Why do you think the character reacted this way?
- How does the author describe...?

Step 3: Illustration Inquiry

- Who/what is shown in the illustration?
- Who/what is missing?
- Why do you think the illustrator created the image this way?
 - Look at specific colors, techniques, etc.
- Why is this illustration important?

Step 4: Compare Primary and Secondary Sources

- What facts did you learn only from your textbook?
- What facts did you learn only from the picture book?
 - What added context did reading reviews offer?
 - What knowledge was gained from the primary and secondary sources?
- What conflicts did you find in these sources, if any?
- Which sources were most valuable and why?

Step 5: Take Action, Reflect and Apply their Learning

- Write to the author & illustrator asking questions about their work.
- Rewrite a portion of the text from a different perspective, or revise a portion for accuracy.
- Draw an illustration from a different perspective.
- Summarize the text in creative ways:
 - Create a documentary, music video, book trailer, dance, play, short story, or song to represent this story.

Applying Knowledge

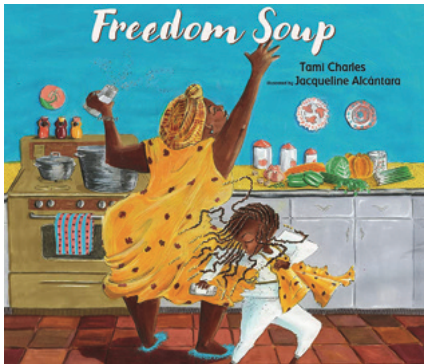
- Hold a Socratic seminar or Structured Academic Controversy.
- Research a person/place/or event from the picture book.

Taking Action

- Write to local community groups, politicians, or school leaders to advocate for change.
- Publish students’ songs/videos/recordings of their research in action.
- Update a relevant Wikipedia page adding content based on your investigation.
- Write to textbook companies regarding suggested additions for the next edition.

Example Lesson Plans

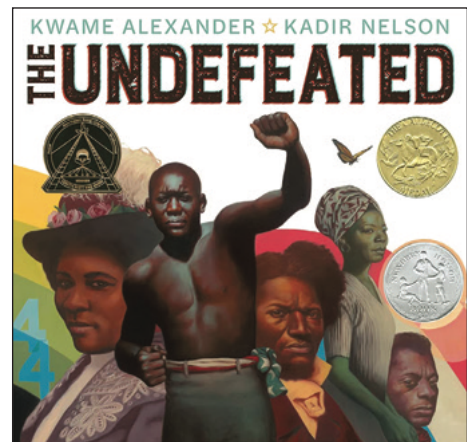
For an illustration of the power, beauty, and contention found in recent Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, we've selected four books from a past list to illustrate the framework's use with high school students. While the selected texts address all 10 NCSS social studies themes, they also support Common Core State Standards integration of literacy and social studies standards. We have included a brief synopsis of each book and links to companion lesson plans. Readers will find additional book details in the reference section at <https://sites.google.com/view/notabletradebookplans20/home>. There you can also find the complete lesson plans, links to sources, and the Framework at a Glance. We are grateful to the diverse scholars and teaching colleagues from the represented communities who previewed these lesson plans. This work was greatly enhanced on account of their labor.¹³



Freedom Soup tells the story of how Ti Gran, young Belle's grandmother, teaches Belle to make freedom soup. While cooking, she shares the history of the Haitian Revolution. In reading and historical source exploration, students consider the Haitian Revolution and its continued impacts.

Using the Picture Books in the High School Framework, tenth-grade students in a diverse public school near Seattle studied *Freedom Soup*.¹⁴ After hearing the story read aloud by their teacher, coauthor Jennifer Pontius-Vandenberg, students spent the next class period on the first three steps of the framework. They watched a video of author Tami Charles explaining the significance of Haiti's Independence Day soup.¹⁵ Then, students completed comprehension questions and pored over illustrations. Students spent the next seven days

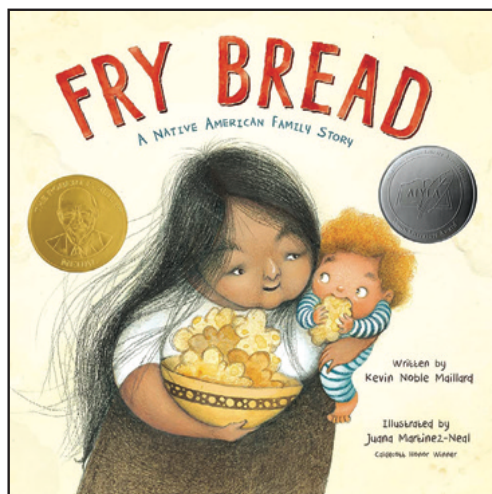
on the fourth step of the framework, comparing *Freedom Soup* to primary sources and other texts (both fiction and nonfiction) about the Haitian Revolution. They concluded the unit by participating in a Socratic Seminar related to a speech by Frederick Douglass (who was U.S. ambassador to Haiti from 1889-1891), debated reparations, and wrote essays regarding the exclusion of the Haitian Revolution from their textbook. NCSS themes **134789**



The Undefeated. Kwame Alexander's poem-turned-picture book is written in gratitude to the brilliance, sacrifice, and long-standing history of Black Americans.¹⁶

This love letter to Black life celebrates the perseverance and accomplishments of activists, writers, musicians, athletes, and other historical figures. Our accompanying lesson plan supports students' investigation into stories of the undefeated, the unbroken, and the unspeakable. After listening to interviews with Kwame Alexander and renowned illustrator Kadir Nelson, who explain their motivation for creating the book, students are challenged to relate their own experiences with those in the text and images. Students then research more deeply the stories and events identified. NCSS themes **124569**

Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story, explores the resistance of Indigenous nations and families through the creation of a traditional food. The peritext introduces readers to Indigenous histories and nations across the United States while sharing the joy of making the ancestral flat dough bread.

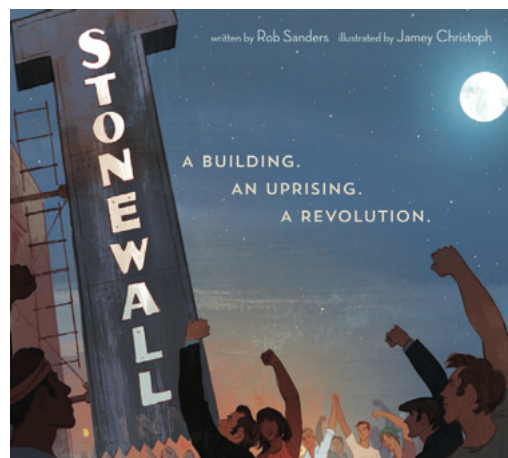


Our companion high school lesson plan invites students to compare the ways that *Fry Bread* presents “place” and other themes with online maps from <https://native-land.ca> and suggests excerpts from Mendoza and Reese’s young people’s adaptation of Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States*. This serves as an impetus for discussing colonization, forced removal, and the contemporary lives of Indigenous nations.¹⁷ After reading the picture book, students examine interviews with the author, read Indigenous youths’ candid reviews, and closely explore illustrations to consider multiple perspectives on Indigenous past and present. Additional resources include readings, podcasts, and links to sources such as Reese and Mendoza’s *American Indians in Children’s Literature Blogspot*.¹⁸ NCSS Themes: 12368

Stonewall: A Building. An Uprising, A Revolution. Narrated by the Stonewall Inn itself, this book chronicles the building’s beginnings as a horse stall to its renown as the site of the 1969 Stonewall uprising.

The text draws readers into conversation with aspects of the evening in historical context and provides primary sources in the end pages.

Our accompanying high school lesson plan invites students to extend the building’s narrative and addresses critiques about the erasure of people of color, bisexuals, and trans women who lead the charge at Stonewall.¹⁹ Students then review the picture book’s images and text alongside



primary source documents from the Library of Congress²⁰ and popular websites. The author’s interviews, podcasts, and examples of youth in action invite further discussion, revision, and extension of the story. NCSS themes 1345610

No matter how careful you are when selecting a text, you may inadvertently include one with problematic elements beyond the scope of your identity. For example, when preparing this article, we selected *Stonewall: An Uprising*. Though the text is a visually appealing window into the Stonewall uprising, it fails to include trans leaders of color who were central to the uprising.* As white cisgender educators, our positionality did not lead us to initially critique the text. After using the framework to research texts, prepare lessons, and question multiple sources, we came to understand the inclusion of the text would necessitate critical review despite its recommendation by the 2020 Notables committee. Therefore, along with the book, we offer a lesson plan that provides students access to primary source materials to critically analyze its content. This finding and initial concern over the content provided by white teachers addressing diverse topics in the classroom led us to share the lessons, materials, and reviewer feedback with colleagues of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and gendered identities. Based on their comments, we’ve added suggested links, materials, and modified lessons to more authentically represent communities. We recognize the continued need to challenge our biases and work to understand the views of others when selecting materials for social studies instruction.

*Laura Jimenez, “Erasure by Any Other Name,” *BookToss* <https://booktoss.org/2019/06/04/erasure-by-any-other-name>.

A note about bias: All educators, regardless of background, have been impacted by the materials, methods, and beliefs of their communities and upbringing. It's important that educators examine their own biases before using texts about cultures and events with which they may not identify. Resources for educators seeking to improve their knowledge of bias include Harvard's Project Implicit, which provides free tests for teachers to uncover hidden biases, and resources on the effects of these biases from Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance).²¹

Conclusion

Teaching history armed with only a textbook and a dense curriculum guide is tough. But whimsy and nostalgia shouldn't be contained to only elementary classrooms. Picture books can bridge the divide, bringing joy and simultaneous criticality to older readers. The scholastic benefits of using picture books in secondary classrooms include ways to differentiate instruction, teach higher-order thinking skills, and enable integration of both

NCSS's *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People* is produced in collaboration with the Children's Book Council (CBC) and includes more than 100 books selected by an NCSS-appointed committee. If you love children's literature, consider applying to be on the selection committee. Each year, some 15 reviewers read, evaluate, and select children's trade books for the annual list. Those who serve on the committee read approximately 180 books for young people (from picture books to young adult novels) between July and December, meet online in January to finalize the list, write annotations for selected books, and present in person at the subsequent NCSS national conference. NCSS members who are teachers, social studies/literature specialists, or librarian/media specialists in any educational setting (kindergarten through university), and can serve a three-year term are encouraged to apply at www.socialstudies.org/get-involved/notable-committee-application.

USING PICTURE BOOKS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM A FRAMEWORK:

STEP 1. MEET THE CREATORS

Listen to or watch an author and/or illustrator interview, allowing students to hear directly from the text's creators. Consider motivations and positionality of these individuals.



STEP 2. COMPREHENSION CHECK

Ask questions to deepen student understanding of the text. Consider picking a significant line from the text and asking students to explain the meaning.



STEP 3. ILLUSTRATION INQUIRY

Encourage students to look closely at one or two illustrations. Explore the meaning, representation, and complexity in the images.



STEP 4. COMPARE WITH PRIMARY & SECONDARY SOURCES

Use primary and secondary sources like photographs, documents, or other texts. What different material can be learned from different sources?



STEP 5. TAKE ACTION/ APPLY THE LEARNING

Reflect, apply learning, and take action using the picture book as inspiration. How might students use what they've learned to improve the world around them?

RECOMMENDED FOR USE WITH NOTABLE
SOCIAL STUDIES TRADE BOOKS

<https://www.socialstudies.org/notable-social-studies-trade-books>

social studies themes and Common Core State Standards.

Our suggested framework and picture book lesson plans encourage the application of higher-order analysis skills and the use of multiple primary and secondary sources to explore the positionalities of authors, illustrators, text selectors, reviewers, and oneself. Using picture books enables students to question the status quo, enhance classroom discussions, and examine multiple perspectives. Even better, picture books bring joy and wonder to high school classrooms where teens preoccupied with Twitch streams, track practices, and friendship dramas can absorb the magic of a beautifully crafted picture book. ■

Notes

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9. Donald Yacovone, “Teaching White Supremacy: The Textbook Battle Over Race in American History,” Harvard.edu video (April 13, 2021), www.youtube.com/watch?v=10klTwsKeIg.
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11. Thomas, “Stories Still Matter.”
12. *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People*, National Council for the Social Studies, www.socialstudies.org/notable-social-studies-trade-books.
13. Khalid El-Hakim (founder of the Black History 101 Museum), Xin Li (Assistant Professor, University of Houston), Regena Nelson (Urban Teacher Residency Program Director, Western Michigan University), Dara Savage (instructional coach), Nena Todd (historic sites supervisor for DE), in discussion and email communication with the authors, March 2022.
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