

Complicating Master Narratives with Primary Sources in a Fourth Grade Guided Inquiry

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The *College, Career, and Civil Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* guides teachers to initiate complex inquiries by sparking students' disciplinary literacy and critical analysis of rich sources.¹ With effective scaffolding and engaging content, elementary students can explore and contextualize complex historical topics.² Age-appropriate trade books supplemented with primary sources are one pathway.

Trade books that highlight a single person's successes, overshadowing other people's contributions, are called "master narratives."³ These problematic texts emphasize the struggles and victories of one iconic figure while overlooking the efforts and sacrifices of many people. The iconic figure's successes often appear to be predestined and total, in contrast with the

actions taken by many that were often hard-fought and only partially successful.

Contrasting with master narratives that give a top-down view, social history offers bottom-up perspectives that highlight the contributions of ordinary citizens to movements and historical events. Master narratives of well-known figures can be supplemented with primary sources that represent social history.⁴ This article gets to social history by first asking questions about civil rights icons. We detail fourth-graders' responses to the question, "How did Frederick Douglass and Dr. Martin Luther King, who lived in different centuries, work 'together'?"

Sidebar 1. Trade Books Used in this Unit of Study

Books about Martin Luther King, Jr.

McNamara, Margaret. *Martin Luther King Jr. Day*. New York: Simon Spotlight, 2007.

Nelson, Robin. *Martin Luther King Jr. Day*. New York: Lerner Classroom, 2002.

Patrick, Denise Lewis. *A Lesson for Martin Luther King Jr.* New York: Simon Spotlight, 2003.

Books about Frederick Douglass

Rappaport, Doreen. *Frederick's Journey: The Life of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Jump at the Sun, 2015.

Shaffer, Jody Jensen. *What's Your Story, Frederick Douglass?* New York: Lerner Classroom, 2016.



Sidebar 2. Content Analysis Questions (A Representative Sampling)

Students were to answer “Yes,” “No,” or “Maybe” to each question and to include relevant page numbers.

Questions about biographies of Frederick Douglass

1. Slaves were treated horribly. They were whipped, underfed, and under-clothed even in the winter. They could be sold away from their family at any time. Very few slaves ever escaped to freedom or were given freedom by their master. While few people actually owned slaves, very few whites ever treated slaves and freed ex-slaves well. It was illegal to teach a slave to read or to help a slave escape.

- a. Did the book describe how slavery was violent?
 - b. Did the book describe how slaves were underfed and under-clothed?
 - c. Did the book describe how slaves could be sold away from their family?
 - d. Did the book describe how few enslaved people ever experienced freedom?
 - e. Did the book describe how slaves and ex-slaves were not treated well by slave owners and white Americans?
2. Did the book describe how Frederick Douglass ...
- a. Was born into slavery?
 - b. Was separated from his mother at a young age?
 - c. Likely had a father who was also his “owner”?
 - d. Was taught to read and write by a kind slave owner’s wife?
 - e. Taught dozens of other slaves to read by preaching the Bible?
 - f. Escaped to freedom by going north?

Questions about biographies of Dr. Martin L. King, Jr.

1. When describing segregation, did the author mention that it had different elements, like:

- a. Social segregation (i.e., separate schools, drinking fountains, restaurants)?
- b. Political segregation (i.e., voting restrictions for African Americans)?
- c. Economic segregation (i.e. limited job prospects and lower pay for equal work for African Americans)?

2. Dr. King said that the three biggest evils in the world are materialism (greedy people ignoring poor people), militarism (when people use war to solve conflicts), and racism (the belief that one ethnic group is superior to others). Did the book describe Dr. King’s:

- a. Opposition to segregation (like 1A, 1B, & 1C above)?
- b. War on Poverty (to end poverty in America)?
- c. Anti-war efforts (to prevent U.S. involvement in wars)?

3. Did the book mention that Dr. King faced resistance from:

- a. People in the government?
- b. Racist, white supremacy organizations?
- c. Many other white Americans?

4. Today, Martin Luther King Day is a national holiday. But, not everyone thought that special designation was a good idea. Many people opposed it for a long time. He was killed in 1968, but the federal (national) holiday was not established until the late 1980s, and it wasn’t recognized by every state until 2000. How did the book characterize the establishment of Martin Luther King Day as a national holiday?

- a. As something that many people wanted, but many others contested and resisted?
- b. As something that everyone wanted? (which is not historically accurate)

Step One: Analyzing Trade Books and Primary Sources

The four-week intervention integrated social studies with reading, writing, and word study classes, each of which were 40 minutes. In week one, students read three trade books about King and two about Douglass. (Sidebar 1, p. 20). Grants provided each student in the classroom a copy of all five books.⁵ Each book presented some different details about a person's life. Denise Lewis Patrick's book centers on Dr. King's racially traumatic boyhood experiences; Margaret MacNamara's book covers his adult life; and Robin Nelson's book surveys his legacy. Correspondingly, the trade books about Frederick Douglass's by Doreen Rappaport and by Jody Jensen Shaffer each describe, in different ways, Douglass's experiences and accomplishments. Students read each trade book, answered questions individually, and discussed what they were learning in small groups.⁶

Closed questions (Sidebar 2, p. 21) prompted students to recognize how trade books detailed, minimized, or disregarded important aspects about King and Douglass. The prompts positioned students to scrutinize the text and subtext for details they might overlook if they were simply reading to comprehend. Students worked one week, during reading class and part of writing class, to scrutinize the books. Close reading of diverse sources is a key element of the C3 Framework.

Step Two: Primary Source Analysis

During weeks one and two, as part of writing class, and all during word-study class, students examined a collection of primary sources. A dozen documents from the Library of Congress were selected to fill the gaps identified in these master narratives (the biographies mentioned above). Each day, the teacher modeled how to scrutinize the text, and how to uncover subtext, using observations and inferences.

Students worked in small groups to complete the tasks. Reading prompts were individualized for each source to guide scrutiny using civic and historical lenses (see Dimension 2 of the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework, Sidebar 3).

The prompts helped students extract meaning and determine significance, per Dimension 3. Primary sources (from a dozen documents) and accompanying prompts (spoken by the teacher) filled gaps in the historical narratives that students and teachers identified together during close reading. (Sidebar 4)

Sidebar 4. Two Examples of Reading Prompts (Spoken by the Teacher) to Help with the Analysis of Primary Sources

Prompt for the Era of Abolition: "This is an advertisement for a slave sale. If you look closely, you can see the names, ages, and "capacity" (jobs) of the enslaved people. Do you see how they are numbered? There are 25 in total. Why are they grouped? [Answer: These appear to be family groups.] What happens to these people if you split up the group by buying one or two, but not all of the group?"

Source. Louis D. De Saussure, "Gang Of 25 Sea Island Cotton and Rice Negroes." Newspaper Roll #4428, 06, no.37: 02 (1852). American Memory Collection Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850–1920. Library of Congress. See also Duke University, repository.duke.edu/dc/eea/B0317.

Prompt for the Civil Rights Era: Prompt: "During the March on Washington, many African Americans peacefully demonstrated. Look carefully at the signs people are holding in this photo. What are they asking for? Describe the people you see in the photo."

Source. Warren K. Leffler, photographer. Civil rights march on Washington, D.C. / WKL. Washington D.C. (1963)., www.loc.gov/item/2003654393/.

Sidebar 3. Four Dimensions of the Inquiry Arc

From the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

Primary source analysis enabled students to fill gaps in master narratives. From the 1852 advertisement, students recognize how family separation was common under American chattel slavery, a question posed during trade book analysis (Sidebar 2, Frederick Douglass, Question 1.c.). This source illustrates an underemphasized point in the master narratives about Douglass.

The photo from 1963 details how ordinary Americans, particularly black women, contributed mightily to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Most selected biographies centered on King and male colleagues. The photo also reveals how advocates sought specific goals, like integrated housing, desegregated schools, enfranchisement, and various other civil liberties, which were topics posed during trade book analysis (see Sidebar 2, Dr. King, Questions 1a, 1b, 1c). This photo exposes historical elements that are often unrecognized in master narratives for young readers about King.

Primary sources offer elements of social history and a counter story to the master narratives when they include aspects of ordinary people’s experiences or show their contributions to the changes often credited only to King or Douglass. Through such analysis, students better grasped how racist practices negatively impacted African Americans, remained over centuries, and sparked activism led—but not singularly determined—by Douglass and King.

Step Three: Close Readings of Trade Books

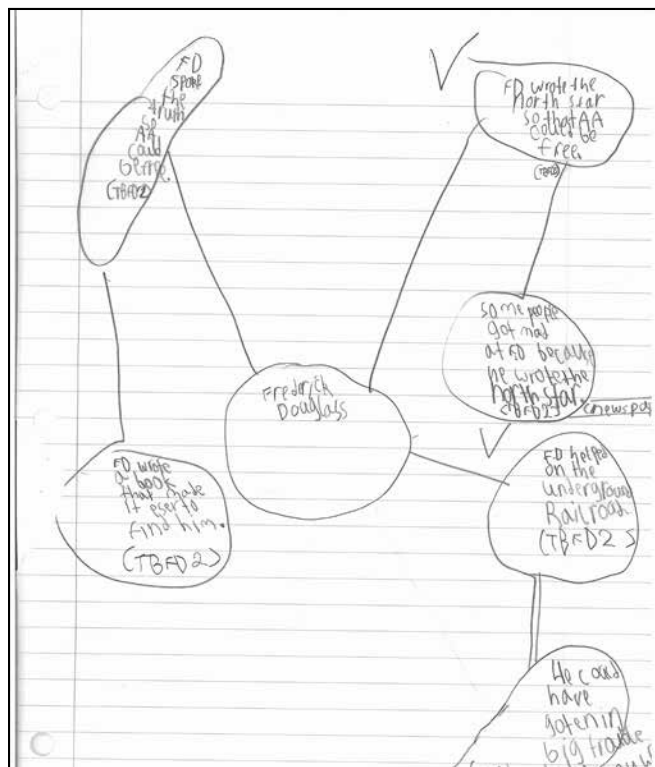
During the second week in reading and part of writing classes, students refined understandings about King, Douglass, and African Americans’ lived experiences during two additional close re-readings of the five trade books. With deliberately open questions, the re-readings enabled students to carefully reconsider overlooked items using understandings developed from previous primary source analysis. As students, more fully informed, returned to the books, the re-readings were more intentional. Further, the queries sparked analysis during which students used disciplinary vocabulary from history and civics. For example, on the second reading through a book, the teacher might ask, “In what ways were relationships and/or the workplace affected by racial prejudice?”

On the third reading through a book, the question was “How were the basic human rights of African Americans affected by racial prejudice?” And a final question was: “How is this text similar to or different from other trade books? Be specific.” By the second week’s end, students had reexamined five trade books and a dozen primary sources. The fourth-graders were prepared to communicate their understandings.

Step Four: Writing Project

Writing is a process. Effective scaffolding can help students draft, edit, and refine their thoughts.⁷ To prepare to write an evidentiary essay, students first articulated ideas on a four-part *concept map*: human rights abuses, the historical fig-

ures’ social connections and goals, Douglass’s significance, and King’s importance. The four-part concept map enabled students to visually organize and connect their ideas. During reading, writing, and word study classes on the first day of week three, students constructed and refined their four-part concept map. The teacher’s feedback (which appears in blue pen in the image here), helped students arrange and enhance their understandings.

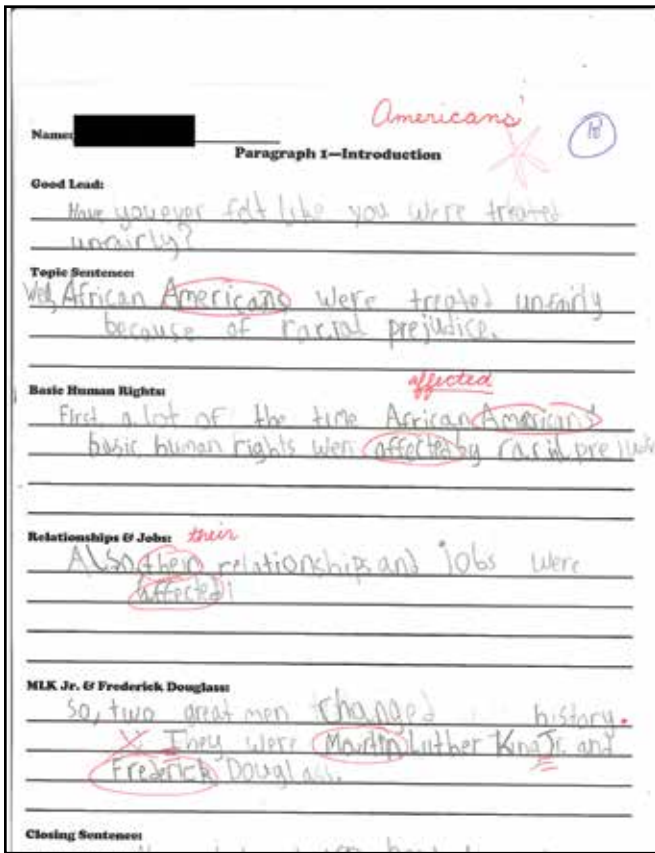


Next, students write a six-part *skeleton outline*—an introduction, the four elements noted in the concept map, and conclusion—to help them compartmentalize components into small, manageable chunks. Students captured essential ideas about King, Douglass, the challenges both faced, and the effects of discrimination on African Americans. For each of the six parts of the essay, students articulated a topic sentence, a supporting concept, and supporting examples from texts. Students received the teacher’s personalized feedback daily (red ink indicates the teacher’s writing efforts on different days). In reading, writing, and word study classes during the third week’s second and third days, students completed their six-part skeleton outline.

Students used ideas organized on concept maps, notes from primary and secondary source analysis, and the six-part outline as guideposts to draft their evidence-based essay. They worked individually and collaboratively to compose, edit, and refine their essay.

During week three’s fourth and fifth days, most students finished their initial draft. Various supports scaffolded students’ writing with scaled degrees of teacher- and student-control. On

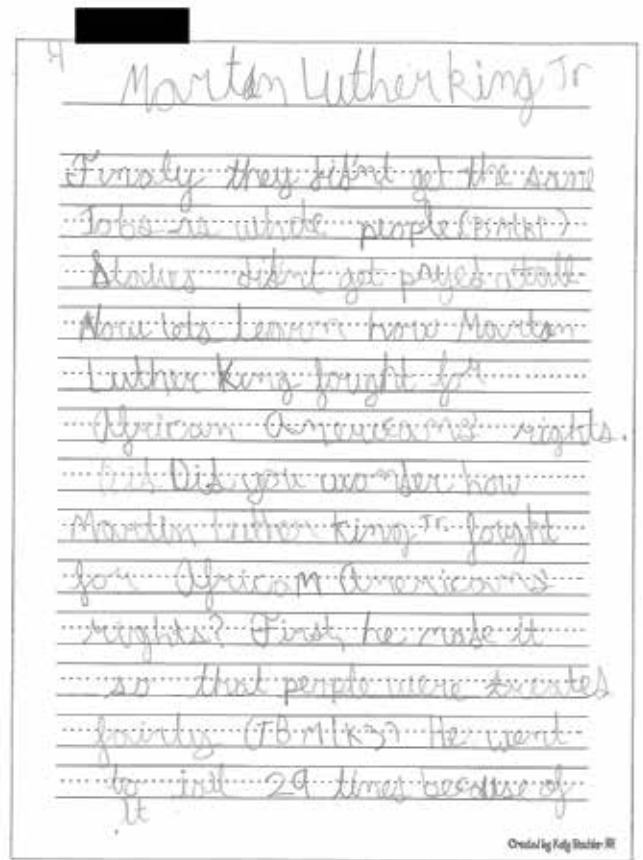
a daily basis, prompts were given for simple grammar-assisted peer- and individual-review. At opportune times before students arrived, the teacher completed individual feedback for topic, supporting, and transition sentences. The teacher met two to three times with each child, during class, to give individualized attention, and to help each student substantiate statements by using the most appropriate sources. In these multifaceted and repeated ways throughout the fourth week, students enhanced the clarity and complexity of their evidentiary essays over multiple drafts.



As a braided rope reinforces individual strands, so too the processes of teacher-led discussion, individual review, and peer review reinforce each other. These processes of composing and editing highlight how students developed, communicated, and critiqued conclusions, which is integral to Dimension Four of the Inquiry Arc.

Several important patterns appeared in Carla’s (a pseudonym), and other students’, final essays. First, students integrated diverse sources to historicize Frederick Douglass, Dr. King, and their time periods. While a notable accomplishment for fourth-graders’ historical writings, the benefits went deeper. Written arguments drew evidence from primary and secondary sources in nearly every sentence. Students used primary sources to fill the gaps in master narratives, using a shorthand we invented in class to distinguish primary sources (“PS”) from trade books (“TB”), and to identify historical figures (Frederick Douglass, “FD”; and Martin Luther King, Jr., “MLK”). In

the work sample shown below (page 4 from the final essay), the student cited a primary source (“PS.MLK.1”) showing marchers’ different messages on various protest signs, as well as a trade book (“TB.MLK.3”) detailing that King “went to jail 29 times.” The former source demonstrated ordinary folks’ contributions. The latter showed how King’s active leadership involved more than giving speeches (he risked arrest numerous times, spent days in jail, and he and his family were constantly at risk of physical harm, a point unmentioned in two of the trade books). Without primary sources and competing master narratives, readers are left only with King’s influential oratory. Fourth-graders’ written arguments revealed that students were constructing understandings extracted from diverse, and at times divergent sources.



Through their writing, students recognized King and Douglass as change agents, but also saw the reactionary responses of their fellow citizens and government officials. For instance, Carla noted, “Douglass wrote *The North Star* so that African Americans could be free (TB.FD.2). Some people got mad at him because he wrote the newspaper. Next, he helped people on the Underground Railroad. He could have gotten in big trouble...” The students detailed the tensions between continuity and change, between radical advocacy and reactionary resistance. Throughout her essay, Carla demonstrated Douglass’s historical significance. As is common in master narratives, the trade books focused on Douglass’s significance

and not the resistance, which was sometimes violent, that he repeatedly confronted.

Students articulated the convergences and divergences between slavery and segregation. They captured the ripple effects of marginalization on ordinary African Americans. Carla wrote, “A lot of the time African Americans’ basic human rights were affected by racial prejudices.” She gave and cited concrete examples to support her argument: “[Under segregation, African Americans] didn’t get the same jobs as white people (PS.MLK.7). Slaves didn’t get paid at all.” Carla contextualized the similar strains Douglass, King, and all African Americans faced under slavery and segregation. The trade books centered exclusively on either Douglass and slavery or King and segregation, but this inquiry enabled students to draw connections between primary and secondary sources they could not make by simply reading the master narratives. Students’ final writing melded social history with master narratives using diverse, sometimes divergent, sources.

Conclusion

Elementary students deserve engaging texts and effective tasks for a guided inquiry. Carefully-selected primary sources supplemented the trade books’ problematic master narratives. Multiple close readings ensured students unearthed meaning from primary and secondary sources. Multistep scaffolding enhanced the criticality, complexity, and clarity in students’ writing, which was an effective culmination.

Teachers may consider using trade books’ counter-narratives to directly challenge other books’ master narratives. Sojourner Truth and Ella Baker, for instance, are robust examples that offsets master narratives’ patriarchy. The Religious Society of Friends (or Quakers) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (or SNCC) are examples of organized groups that counterpoise the top-down nature of master narratives. Master narratives are particularly problematic in slavery-based and civil rights curricula.⁸

We demonstrated how one teacher challenged master narratives in two ways. First, by providing primary source material to fill in gaps in master narratives; second, by offering additional information within reading prompts (like question four, above, addressing the biographies of Dr. King) to help students recognize hidden, yet important details.

Elementary students deserve the learning opportunities like those described in this article. These sources and strategies enabled fourth-graders to deeply engage in inquiry, critical thinking, and disciplinary literacy. The reading and writing scaffolding are lengthy, but practical and effective. While Frederick Douglass and Dr. King never met and were separated by a century, fourth-graders charted the connections in their stories, demonstrated the significance of these connections, and challenged the master narratives in meaningful ways. By recognizing how Douglass and King took action as citizens to alter social, cultural, economic, and political institutions,

students better realize the agency they themselves possess to shape change in the 21st century, thus finding their own connections to Douglass, King, and the many people who were also part of the struggle.⁹

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), 83. A free pdf of the C3 Framework is at www.socialstudies.org/c3. The paperback book (with explanatory essays) is available for purchase at www.socialstudies.org/store.
2. National Council for the Social Studies, “Powerful, Purposeful Pedagogy in Elementary School Social Studies” (Washington DC: NCSS, 2017), <https://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerfulandpurposeful>.
3. The term “master narrative” seems to have originated with Julian Bond, as quoted in Charles Payne, “The View from the Trenches,” in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968* by Steven F. Lawson and Charles M. Payne (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 108–109.
4. John Bickford and Cynthia Rich, “Using Disciplinary Literacy to Fill the Historical Gaps in Trade Books,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 30, no. 2 (2017): 8–11; Jennifer Frost, “Using ‘Master Narratives’ to Teach History: The Case of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The History Teacher* 45, no. 3 (2012): 437–446; LaGarrett King, “When Lions Write History: Black History Textbooks, African-American Educators, and the Alternative Black Curriculum in Social Studies Education, 1890–1940,” *Multicultural Education* 22, no. 1 (2014): 2–11.
5. We thank the Eastern Illinois College of Education Research Grant and the Eastern Illinois Faculty Development and Innovative Partnership Grant for financial support to implement our project.
6. John Bickford, “Assessing and Addressing the Historical (mis)representations of the Civil Rights Movement within Children’s Literature,” *The History Teacher* 48, no. 4 (2015): 693–736; John Bickford and Cynthia Rich, “Examining the Representations of Slavery within Children’s Literature,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 9, no. 1 (2014): 66–94; John Bickford and Lieren Schuette, “Trade Books’ Historical Representation of the Black Freedom Movement, Slavery through Civil Rights,” *Journal of Children’s Literature* 41, no. 1 (2016): 20–43.
7. John Bickford, “Primary Elementary Students’ Historical Literacy, Thinking, and Argumentation about Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan,” *The History Teacher* 51, no. 2 (2018): 269–292; Bruce Fehn and Kim Heckart, “Producing a Documentary in the Third Grade: Reaching All Students through Movie Making,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 25, no. 3 (2013): 18–22; Bruce VanSledright, “Fifth Graders Investigating History in the Classroom: Results from a Researcher-Practitioner Design Experiment,” *The Elementary School Journal* 103, no. 2 (2002): 131–160.
8. Bethany Jay and Cynthia Lyerly, *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016); Deborah Menkart, Alana Murray, and Jenice View, *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching* (Teaching for Change, Poverty & Race Research Action Council, and Rethinking Hard Schools, 2004); Kate Shuster, Bethany Jay and Cynthia Lyerly, *Teaching Hard History: A Framework for Teaching American Slavery* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018); Teaching Tolerance, *Teaching the Movement: The Standards We Deserve* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012).
9. Kristy Brugar, “Children as Civic Agents during the Civil Rights Movement,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 27, no. 4 (2015): 5–10.

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