Building Effective Citizens through 2009 National Council for the Social Studies Notable Picture Books

Kay A. Chick
Penn State Altoona

Citizens in our democracy need a skill set that enables them to take action to help others, challenge bias and prejudice, and demonstrate patriotism. This article considers these skills and the role of children’s literature in the development of citizenship education in social studies classrooms. Citizenship education must incorporate powerful learning that is meaningful, value-based, challenging, and integrated within the arts, sciences, and humanities. The 2009 National Council for the Social Studies Notable picture books that are featured here bring powerful learning opportunities and prepare students to become effective, socially responsible citizens. The instructional strategies that accompany each book encourage social action, critical thinking, and conscientious decision-making, and are easily integrated within the language arts.

Key words: children’s literature, citizenship, language arts, National Council for the Social Studies Notable Trade Books, patriotism, social action

Introduction


This passage from Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope (Grimes, 2008) brings to light the power children’s literature has in preparing children to be citizens in our democracy. In the position statement of the National Council for the Social Studies, A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Effective Citizens (2008a), the authors emphasize those qualities of teaching and learning that help teachers to teach social studies powerfully and authentically, ultimately achieving the goal of preparing students to be responsible and involved citizens. Powerful learning must be meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active. Teachers must focus on rich and profound understanding, integrated learning within the arts, sciences, and humanities, critical thinking and decision-making with an emphasis on social responsibility, and active, inquiry-based instruction (National Council for the Social Studies, 2008a).

This article considers the definition of an effective citizen and the importance of democratic citizenship education in the teaching of social studies. The role of children’s literature in preparing competent, young citizens is addressed, through the use of 2009 NCSS Notable picture books. Books are featured that encourage students to take action to help others, challenge bias and prejudice, and demonstrate patriotism. Finally, instructional strategies are shared that integrate picture books with powerful learning opportunities, bringing meaningful, value-based, and active learning experiences to social studies classrooms.
As teachers begin to prepare socially responsible students, they first must consider the question, “What is an effective citizen?” Although viewed by many as the central focus of social studies education (Shaver, 1997; Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009), educators have yet to reach consensus on the definition and conceptual basis of citizenship (Gagnon, 2003; Kennedy, 2003; Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009). Researchers do agree that democratic citizenship entails taking a stand and taking action (Kerr, Cleaver, Ireland, & Blenkinsop, 2003; Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009; Sunal, Kelley, & Sunal, 2009). In fact, some educators believe that citizenship must be taught not as a noun, but as a verb, something that one demonstrates (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009).

Personally responsible citizens, participatory citizens, and justice-oriented citizens are three images that schools can consider when designing citizenship education. Most schools teach students to be personally responsible or participatory citizens, those who volunteer, demonstrate good character, and participate in government affairs. Few pursue the goal of preparing students who are justice-oriented; individuals who strive to assess the causes of social injustice and design strategies for making systemic change. It is the preparation of justice-oriented students that is the ultimate goal of democratic citizenship education (Westheimer, 2003). Democratic citizenship involves community action, social and ethical responsibility, and political involvement (Kerr, 2003). In elementary classrooms citizenship can be taught as a decision-making model, where students become informed, reflect on choices and options, and take action to make a difference (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009).

The Role of Children’s Literature in Preparing Good Citizens

There are many roadblocks to effective citizenship education in social studies classrooms, including time constraints, traditional, textbook-based instructional approaches, and the test-driven accountability demands instituted under the No Child Left Behind Act. The integration of children’s literature allows teachers to tackle vital issues in social studies education and teach essential language arts skills, while accepting the challenge of preparing students to be responsible and involved citizens. If the well-read student is truly a better citizen (Shaver, 1997), then teaching citizenship through literature is a natural fit.

Children’s nonfiction, fiction, and biographies are all excellent resources for an integrated approach to teaching language arts skills and social studies concepts, including history, current events, and citizenship. Trade books bring many advantages to the classroom. They are better written than textbooks, focus on story elements such as plot, setting, character, theme, and point of view (Richgels & Tomlinson, 1993), add a human element to the study of history, foster student interest and engagement (Finn & Ravitch, 1988), support teachers as they incorporate lessons that assist students in meeting state and national standards in the social studies and language arts, and help learners to gain insight into their own identities and behaviors (Nawrot, 1996). Children’s literature, then, acts as a bridge between curriculum content and the lives and needs of children (Illig-Aviles, 2002). Most importantly, trade books promote critical literacy. Skillful teachers use literature to foster students’ independent thinking and decision-making skills, and to encourage them to detect bias and debate controversial issues (Wolk, 2003). Therefore, children’s literature affords opportunities for the meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active experiences that make for powerful learning.

NCSS Notable Picture Books and their Role in Citizenship Education

Since 1972 the National Council for the Social Studies, in cooperation with the Child-
ren’s Book Council, has selected Notable Trade Book winners. These books are considered to be “the best of the best” in social studies literature for children. Books are selected that emphasize human relations, represent diversity and culture, provide a novel approach to traditional subjects, and are of high literary quality (National Council for the Social Studies, 2008b). Many of the 2009 Notable picture book winners are excellent resources for citizenship education in the primary grades. When skillfully integrated into primary classrooms, these books become the bridge that young children need to become helpful, caring, and ethical critical thinkers and decision-makers who are able to make good choices as responsible, patriotic citizens. Select picture book winners are presented by themes representing qualities of effective citizenship, including taking action to help those in need, challenging bias and prejudice, and demonstrating patriotism. A brief summary of each book is provided, along with instructional strategies that bring powerful learning opportunities to social studies classrooms.

**Taking Action to Help Those in Need**

In *Give a Goat* (Schrock, 2008), Mrs. Rowell’s fifth grade class reads a story about Beatrice, a little girl in Uganda who cannot afford to go to school. When Beatrice’s family was given a goat, they grew stronger and were able to earn money to send her to school. After learning about Heifer International, the fifth graders in Mrs. Rowell’s class sold snacks to teachers to raise money to buy a goat, a flock of chickens, and some ducks to help families in need. While their desire to help others was immediate, students also learned about economics, since they discovered the principles of quality control, inventory, investment, and profit margin.

While children in primary classrooms can certainly follow the example of Mrs. Rowell’s students by earning money to support Heifer International, they might also wish to help those in need in their own homes, schools, and neighborhoods. The Yes, I Can! handout can assist young children in making decisions about how they might take action to help others, while also helping them to identify those feelings and emotions they experience as they contribute to the welfare of family, friends, and neighbors (See Table 1). Emergent writers might choose to draw, rather than write about their experiences. This real life learning experience helps even our youngest learners to understand that their actions can benefit others in meaningful ways.

**Table 1 Yes, I Can! Handout**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Jakes’ Best Thumb* (Cooper, 2008) tells the story of a five-year-old boy who loved to suck his thumb, until he started kindergarten. When school started, he was the target of bullying and teasing from his classmate, Cliff. The teasing continued until one day on the playground when a piece of “blankie” fell out of Cliff’s pocket. Jake now held the power and taunted Cliff about being a “blankie rubber.” Jake soon felt awful when he saw how sad Cliff was. The boys promised that there would be no more teasing, and Jake felt great when the “blankie” was back in Cliff’s pocket.

One of the first steps in helping young children to develop into good citizens is to
teach emotional vocabulary that assists them in describing how they and others feel. While all children need to be able to identify their feelings, researchers have found that boys, in particular, are not taught to recognize and name emotions. Instead, boys are often educated to believe that expressing emotions makes them less than masculine (Kindlon and Thompson, 2000). Unless children are able to identify and use “feeling” words, they are not likely to be able to consider how others feel, be moral and ethical when dealing with others, or demonstrate caring and helpful attitudes toward classmates, friends, and family members.

After reading Jake’s Best Thumb (Cooper, 2008), teachers can have students brainstorm “feeling” words that describe how Jake and Cliff felt at various points throughout the story. Those words can be written on a Feelings and Emotions word wall. As students are brainstorming, they can also be encouraged to explain events in the story that preceded each emotion. A discussion of ways in which Jake’s and Cliff’s behavior affected each other can then help students to consider how their own behavior affects their classmates. As events arise in the classroom, students can add “feeling” words to the word wall and use those words to explain how they are feeling about their interactions with peers. Special attention might be given to those words that describe how students feel when they are kind, considerate, and helpful to others.

Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope (Grimes, 2008) is a biography of the 44th President of the United States. This picture book describes the challenges that Obama experienced as a young man and the support he received from his family. As he grew older, the story explains what actions he took to help those in need. As President of the United States, President Obama continues to try and help the citizens of this country. Teachers can discuss with students the current needs in this nation and the ways that our President is trying to help others.

In addition to President Obama, there are many others at state and local levels who have devoted their lives to serving those in need. Young children can benefit from identifying individuals within their school, community, and state who are known for taking action to help, as these people serve as role models for young citizens. Students can use the Good Citizen Interview Form (See Table 2) to ask people in their family, neighborhood, or community about citizens known for their good works. After each student has interviewed two to three people, the class can compile the names of the good citizens that were recommended. Students can brainstorm ways to acknowledge the services of these individuals, and consideration might be given to a class reception, good citizen awards, or recognition of the citizen of the year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2 Good Citizen Interview Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good Citizen Interview Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name: ___________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who I Interviewed: ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date: ___________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. A good citizen is someone who helps people in need. Name one good citizen in our community or state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What makes this person a good citizen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__________________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Challenging Bias and Prejudice

Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote (Stone, 2008) tells the story of a woman’s quest for the right to vote. When she was little Elizabeth Cady Stanton quickly learned that a woman’s role was to marry, raise children, cook, and do laundry. But she wanted something different, and spent her time studying math, science, and languages. Elizabeth did not understand why women could not own property, keep the money they earned, or vote. In 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York, she gave a speech that helped to inspire our nation to give women the right to vote.

Even young children can understand the impact that bias and prejudice can have on their families, friends, and neighbors. In order to personalize the effects of discrimination, children can consider what they would do if they were in circumstances similar to those experienced by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (See Table 3). Teachers can then share with students some highlights from a timeline of events leading up to women winning full voting rights, including the fact that women were not able to vote until 18 years after Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s death. (See Relevant Websites.)

Table 3: What Would You Do? Handout

What Would You Do?

What would you do ….

- If you were told you couldn’t study math and foreign languages?
- If you were told you couldn’t go to college?
- If you were told you couldn’t keep the money you had earned?
- If you were told you couldn’t vote when you turned 18?

The story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott is conveyed in Boycott Blues: How Rosa Parks Inspired a Nation (Pinkney, 2008). Author Andrea Davis Pinkney uses child-friendly language and a life-like Jim Crow to tell the familiar story of Ms. Park’s experience on the bus and the ensuing boycott that lasted over 300 days. It was only after the Supreme Court intervened in 1956 and ruled segregation on buses was illegal, that the boycott ended and black people could sit anywhere they liked.

Students can begin by discussing the qualities that Rosa Parks demonstrated that made her a good citizen. Her moral and ethical behavior, her willingness to challenge and question the status quo, and her ability to make good, sound judgments, can be shared with students. Teachers can debate with students such questions as: How did bias and prejudice impact the laws in effect during Rosa Park’s time?; Did Rosa Parks make the right decision on the bus that day?; Does bias and prejudice continue to affect our world today, and if so, how?; Has the law ever been wrong and when was it wrong?; What can good citizens do when a law or a rule needs to be changed?; Is there a rule at home or at school you disagree with?; Why do you feel this rule needs to be changed? Students can be encouraged to identify examples of racial, gender, or ethnic discrimination in their neighborhoods, communities, or nation, and brainstorm ways to make positive changes.

“Children’s literature affords opportunities for meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active experiences that make for powerful learning.”
Margaret Chase Smith: A Woman for President (Plourde, 2008) is the biography of a senator who decided to run for President in 1964. This picture book tells of her early years growing up in a poor family, her lack of a college education, and her involvement in women’s organizations. Margaret Chase married a senator and took over his term in the Senate when he died suddenly. She served eight years in the House of Representatives and 24 years in the Senate, providing strong support to the military and NASA. In 1950 she stood up against Senator Joseph McCarthy who was discriminating against many Americans because of rumors they were communists. Smith described the rights of an American citizen when she said,

The right to criticize; the right to hold unpopular beliefs; the right to protest; the right of independent thought. The exercise of these rights should not cost one single American citizen his reputation or his right to a livelihood …. Otherwise none of us could call our souls our own (Plourde, 2008, p. 20).

This Declaration of Conscience speech was very popular, and many said that if a man had given the speech he would have been voted President of the United States. Smith decided to run for President anyway, but lost the nomination. This book contains a unique timeline that includes significant events in United States history, from the time of Smith’s birth until her death in 1995.

After reading Margaret Chase Smith: A Woman for President (Plourde, 2008), students can share their opinions of why we have never had a female President. The issue of gender bias can be introduced, and students can talk about times they might have experienced discrimination based on their gender. Common examples shared by children include a boy being ridiculed for checking out a girl’s book from the library and a girl being excluded from a recess football game. Teachers can then discuss the 2008 election and women such as Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, who had significant roles in that election. Students can share thoughts on whether gender had an effect on Senator Clinton’s loss of the democratic nomination for President. Students can also look back in history for other examples, such as Geraldine Ferraro, who ran for Vice President in 1984, and Victoria Woodhull, who ran for President in 1872.

Students can discuss other women who have made important contributions to our nation’s history, but who have not received the recognition they might have received had they been born male. They can create commemorative coins in honor of women in their family, community, state, or nation who have been good citizens (Beard, 2002). Teachers can begin by showing students a variety of coins and discussing the reasons why an individual might get their picture on a coin. (Only three women have ever had their picture on a coin: Helen Keller, Sacagawea, and Susan B. Anthony). After students are given a sheet of paper with a large circle on the front and back, they can select the woman they would like to commemorate. Students can draw their chosen woman on the front of their coin, and with words and pictures, convey the reasons why that woman was or is a good citizen on the back. They can be encouraged to honor family members, friends, or other women with whom they have had direct experience. When possible, coins can be awarded to those who have been honored and they can be thanked for their contributions.

“If the well-read student is truly a better citizen (Shaver, 1997), then teaching citizenship through literature is a natural fit.”
Demonstrating Patriotism

Lady Liberty: A Biography (Rappaport, 2008) is the story of how the Statue of Liberty came to be. Told from the perspective of all the individuals who played a role in her design, construction, financing, and dedication, this picture book includes important details of Lady Liberty that are not often shared. The author also provides insight into the emotions people experience as they travel to view this magnificent statue or pass by it as they are entering this country for the first time.

Students can brainstorm the meaning of patriotism and discuss ways that patriotism can be demonstrated. Symbols of patriotism can be analyzed, such as the American flag, the Bald Eagle, and the Liberty Bell. Students can also experience the Statue of Liberty by viewing the photo gallery or taking the virtual tour. (See Relevant Websites.) To help expand and challenge students’ views of patriotism, the following quote can be shared with students: “Patriotism is not about wearing buttons. It’s not about saying ‘rah-rah USA,’ it’s not about how somebody sings The Star-Spangled Banner. It’s about everyday participation in your community and in your government” (Catalfamo, 2009, p. 12).

Based on this quote, students can discuss the relationship between citizenship and patriotism. They can also suggest ways that people, young and old, can participate in their community and government. Students might choose to take on a class project to demonstrate their own citizenship and patriotism. Examples might include collecting books to supplement their school or community library, helping a local teenager who is working on an Eagle Scout or Gold Award, or creating a memorial for local soldiers who have died in service to their country.

America at War: Poems Selected by Lee Bennett Hopkins (Hopkins, 2008) is a compilation of poems written about America’s involvement in conflicts ranging from the American Revolution to the war in Iraq. Selections include poems composed by famous poets such as Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, as well as poems that were commissioned especially for this children’s book. Although many of the poems will challenge young children to think critically, the timely nature of this topic will certainly foster student interest and engagement.

Knowing that many children in America’s classrooms have parents or other family members who are currently serving in the military, teachers might choose to begin by sharing the poem, “Care Package,” by Janet settimo (2008). Students can discuss the emotions the writer must have felt when the clerk at the post office asked that most important question, “And if we can’t locate this soldier? Would you like the package returned to you, given to another soldier, or abandoned?” (Settimo, 2008, p. 70-71). Teachers can then have students consider whether entering the military or going to war are demonstrations of patriotism and good citizenship. The difficult, challenging, and value-based nature of these questions helps young children to begin to think independently and discuss controversial issues, such as war. During these types of discussions, it is imperative that teachers foster a safe classroom atmosphere that enables children to comfortably share their feelings, beliefs, and fears.

A good follow-up poem to “Care Package” is “Missing,” by Cynthia Cotton (2008). While one might think this poem to be about a soldier missing in action, it is actually about what the author’s brother is missing while he is away at war. Students will be able to identify with what it might be like to miss French fries, baseball, fishing, and snow. As a tribute to soldiers who are currently serving our country, students might choose to collect snacks, books, magazines, and photos to send to men and women serving in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other locations throughout the world. Thank you.
letters can be included, allowing students to express their gratitude to our soldiers.

Conclusions

Preparing young children to be responsible and involved citizens can be a daunting task. Teachers must provide powerful learning opportunities that are meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active. Children’s literature acts as a bridge between citizenship education and the lives and needs of children. When skillfully integrated into primary classrooms, NCSS Notable picture books become the bridge that young children need to become helpful, caring, and ethical critical thinkers and decision-makers who are able to make good choices as responsible citizens. These trade books, and the active learning strategies that accompany them, help young children grow into citizens who take action to help those in need, challenge bias and prejudice, and demonstrate patriotism. While the process of building effective citizens is indeed continuous and ongoing, “the best of the best” in social studies literature is certainly the place to begin.

“When skillfully integrated into primary classrooms, these books become the bridge that young children need to become helpful, caring, and ethical critical thinkers and decision makers who are able to make good choices as responsible, patriotic citizens.”

References


**Websites**

*Statue of Liberty*
http://www.nps.gov/stli/.

*Women and the Right to Vote*
http://www.suffragist.com/timeline.htm or http://memory.loc.gov/amem/vfwhtml/vfwtl.html

**About the Author**

Kay A. Chick, Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Penn State Altoona. Her research interests include gender issues in education, social studies methods, and children’s literature.

Email: kxc19@psu.edu.

**Citation for this Article**