Increased integration of the social studies into language arts instructional time in elementary schools, has led to a common practice of covering social studies content through use of children’s literature. Though the two content areas are covered in tandem, the primary foci are the language arts objectives. The authors suggest teaching with themed text sets, developed using carefully selected social studies topics and inquiries, not only addresses English Language Arts standards but also allows for authentic and meaningful social studies instruction. A four-step process for developing themed text sets is presented. These are: 1) identify the big idea to be explored, 2) recognize the multiple perspectives needed for a more complete story, 3) locate qualifying texts, and 4) select texts to be included. Each step is demonstrated with three controversial topics in the elementary social studies curriculum: family (Kindergarten-1), civil rights (grades 2-3), and slavery (grades 4-5) and resources are provided for locating texts. The authors illustrate the importance of developing text sets that include multiple perspectives, particularly those lesser-known stories of historical events or themes, to serve as windows or mirrors for children in developing historical content knowledge.

Key words: elementary social studies, text sets, controversial topics, children’s literature, interdisciplinary, families, civil rights, slavery

“Read a book worth talking about.”
Jerome Harste (2006)

Children’s literature is widely used among elementary teachers and teacher educators when planning social studies instruction. Both the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (2013) and the International Reading Association (Williams & Bauer, 2006) have endorsed this approach to teaching. As the widely adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) include a number of English Language Arts (ELA) standards for thematic texts, elementary teachers are increasingly accountable for developing and using related texts to teach content (Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). To this end, elementary teachers frequently include literature with social studies themes in their literacy instruction as a viable way to meet ELA and social studies standards within their already constrained schedule (Heafner et al. 2007; Martin, 2012). Simply reading about a topic, however, does not constitute meaningful social studies instruction. We posit that elementary teachers can develop thematic text sets for social studies instruction that go beyond mere exposure to a topic. Text sets are selected literature drawn from different reading levels, genres, and media that illustrate a common concept; used together, the titles can add voices or
perspectives to the study of a complex and controversial topic (Annenberg Learner, 2014). In this article, we describe how elementary teachers can re-tool a traditional ELA strategy and use the inquiry arc of the C3 Framework for Social Studies (NCSS, 2013) to maximize social studies instruction for three controversial topics.

In order to outline this approach as a best practice for social studies, we first report on the current climate surrounding elementary social studies. Social studies educators have identified a pronounced decline in instructional time allotted to social studies in the elementary grades, though ELA and mathematics instructional time continually increase. Testing mandates and national reform trends have been cited as primary contributing factors (e.g., Anderson, 2014; Bolick, Adams, & Willox, 2010; Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008; Heafner et al. 2007; Rock et al. 2006). This marked instructional decline paired with the recent widespread implementation of Common Core State Standards in ELA and math require elementary teachers to make decisions on how to merge their social studies and ELA instruction in creative, meaningful ways that result in high quality social studies instruction.

Given such limitations, many elementary teachers have attempted to integrate ELA and social studies in an effort to preserve social studies instruction while meeting the increasing exterior demands. Integration, however, may be more difficult in practice than theory. Many teachers use picture books or novels containing social studies topics, time periods, or historical events to teach specific ELA standards. Still, reading about social studies themed topics while learning or working on ELA skills often results in only a surface level understanding of the social studies content (Herff Jones-Nystrom, 2013). Here, we demonstrate how to develop themed text sets to meet both social studies and ELA standards in ways that exceed mere exposure to historical knowledge or cultural issues. We specifically promote the use of text sets to facilitate young learners’ historical thinking about controversial topics (NCSS, 2010).

Literature Review

Building and using themed text sets have been widely discussed among literacy educators and documented in literacy publications. Though this approach is not a new concept in ELA instruction, the growing selection of social studies themed picture books and novels paired with the increasing expectation for text set-based instruction has redefined the utility of children’s literature in elementary social studies.

Themed Text Sets and Literacy Instruction

Literacy research suggests children are more engaged when presented with multiple related texts rather than disjointed texts and scripted reading programs (Serafini, 2011; Williams & Bauer, 2006). A more authentic approach to literacy instruction in the elementary grades has been proposed, which highlights the use of rich literature and increases specific content area knowledge (Moss, 2005; Serafini, 2011). Developing thematic texts sets for content area instruction is one such approach. While frequently used during literacy instruction, the flexible nature of texts sets provides an additional instructional approach for planning social studies instruction. The development and use of themed text sets allows students to develop and practice ELA skills important for success as a reader (e.g., identifying author’s point of view or comparing character perspectives). Such instruction also provides opportunities to develop meaningful social studies skills (e.g., explaining the relationships or interactions between two or more events or concepts in a historical text, or comparing and contrasting multiple texts). Selecting from a plethora of books can be daunting, yet the availability of books is promising.
Thematic books from multiple genres help students generate meaning using written text and visual images related to content area information (Young & Serafini, 2011).

**Significance for Elementary Social Studies**

Though themed text sets can expand recent literacy initiatives, we believe this approach is even more meaningful for social studies, where many textbooks heavily influence what and how social studies is taught (Fan & Kaeley, 2000; McKean, 2002). This is problematic since social studies textbooks frequently contain historical inaccuracies and misrepresentations, possess superficial coverage, and are written often above grade level, leaving students unable to develop historical understanding (Bickford & Rich, 2014a; Loewen, 2007; Wineburg, 2001). Thinking of these limitations, some teachers elect to use history-themed trade books because of their engaging narratives, rich detail, and readability (Bickford & Rich, 2014a). Like textbooks, children’s literature often contains historical inaccuracies, and therefore should be read and analyzed in the social studies classroom through a historical thinking approach (Bickford, 2013; Bickford & Rich, 2014a, 2014b; James & McVay, 2009). The narratives in trade books may omit important story components in an effort to simplify the complex realities of controversial social studies topics. This does not mean children’s literature should not be used; rather, the development of text sets becomes a very important part of teachers’ work, as they can be used to meet interdisciplinary standards and cultivate critical skills in students. Fostering students’ capacities for historical investigations involving: gathering and evaluating sources, identifying multiple, competing perspectives, question posing, and presenting evidence-based claims, for example, is a central focus of Dimension 3 of the Inquiry Arc in the C3 Framework for Social Studies (NCSS, 2013). Such investigations with thoughtfully chosen text sets can promote historical thinking among the youngest learners (Bickford & Rich, 2014a, 2014b). A short review of historical thinking and controversial issues literature illustrates the growing work of both in elementary social studies.

Historical thinking is an inquiry-based approach for analyzing the past that fosters learners’ thinking about their own historical context and applications of the past for contemporary issues (Loewen, 2007; Martin, 2012; VanSledright, 2004; Wineburg, 2001). In the elementary grades, historical thinking has focused on source analysis and perspective recognition (Barton & Levstik, 2004; VanSledright, 2002), identifying historical counter-narratives (James, 2009; James & McVay, 2009), historical perspective recognition and care (Barton & Levstik) and historical empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Scholars suggest that an interdisciplinary approach to historical thinking is most effective when texts are purposefully selected for specific content themes (Bickford, 2013; Robinson, 2013; Soares & Wood, 2010). Young learners who conduct inquiries with a defined purpose (e.g., locate competing accounts, identify counter-narratives) may improve their historical thinking skills and expand historical content knowledge while examining text sources (VanSledright, 2002). Historical thinking can be used to examine controversial historical figures or themes presented in literature when the inquiries are framed within an investigative, critical approach with deliberate considerations of historical context and perspectives (Barton & Levstik; Bickford & Rich, 2014a, 2014b; Leland et al., 2003; VanSledright, 2002). The disputed history of Christopher Columbus and the impact on Native Americans, including the varying perspectives, for example, can be examined using a thematic children’s literature text set. In summary, historical investigations with children’s literature are improved when the textual content is examined using explicit historical content instruction (Bickford).
Controversial issues are those that create conflicting points of view and longstanding social debates related to a theme, event, or experience (Hess, 2009). History textbook accounts of controversial topics typically perpetuate a dominant view or story of the issue, failing to include perspectives from a variety of individuals or groups (Loewen, 2007). As controversial topics are embedded in the elementary social studies curriculum (Beck, 2003, 2005; Buchanan, 2014; Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000; James, 2009; Leland et al. 2003; VanSledright, 2002) teachers can position them in ways that allow students to recognize multiple perspectives of an issue and grapple with the complexity of understanding history. Creating experiences with historical thinking couched in controversial topics can provide the opportunity to transfer controversial historical themes to students’ own lives by bridging investigations of the past to present trends (Soares & Wood, 2010; VanSledright, 2002). While some educators have discussed methods for unpacking controversial issues with younger students (Barton & James, 2010; Buchanan, 2014; James & McVay, 2009), few elementary educators have outlined specific instructional approaches for teaching such topics with younger children using children’s literature. This article presents a four-step process for developing a text set for three topics, which are frequently considered controversial or even taboo in elementary grades. Sample text sets for each topic also are provided.

Putting it into Practice: Developing a Themed Text Set

Considering tens of thousands of children’s books are published yearly (Bowker, 2013), developing text sets for the purpose of teaching a social studies concept requires a deliberate approach to the plethora of titles. Here, we describe a concrete process for developing text sets to teach three controversial topics embedded in elementary social studies curriculum in ways that simultaneously expand instructional opportunities for ELA standards, for example, identifying point of view or analyzing multiple accounts of the same event or topic. These controversies can be particularly problematic for elementary teachers to teach, and as a result, are sometimes avoided altogether; however, each is essential for providing a comprehensive approach to elementary social studies. Next, we present the four-step process and demonstrate each step with three controversial topics drawn from the elementary social studies curriculum: family, civil rights, and slavery. This concrete process outlines how teachers can develop quality texts sets to teach social studies content, foster student engagement aligned with the four dimensions of the new C3 Framework for Social Studies (NCSS, 2013), and promote an interdisciplinary approach for extending literacy skills elaborated in Common Core.

Step 1: Identify the Big Idea to be Explored

In Step 1, teachers should know their grade level curriculum for all content areas and be able to make connections where specific literacy skills are needed in order to explore and understand a chosen social studies concept. Successful integration of ELA and social studies requires teachers to know when to foreground social studies content and rely on already developed reading skills or vice versa. Research has identified problems in teaching new skills and unfamiliar content knowledge concurrently, and recommended teachers “use familiar content when teaching a new skill [or] develop new content using already fluent skills, to avoid confusion that develops when there are competing goals” (Alleman & Brophy, 2010, p. 51). Next, teachers should use the curriculum to identify what Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005) call big ideas or those ideas at the core of a subject needing to be uncovered. Dimension 1 in the C3 Framework for social studies standards, developing questions and planning inquiries, correlates directly with this step. When considering how to teach specific standards, for
example, teachers should ask: *What are the questions that will intrigue students? What are the big ideas that students will uncover during their inquiry?* These are the questions around which themed text sets can be developed for meaningful engagement in social studies instruction. To examine what this step looks like in practice, we offer the following three examples.

**Family.** In grades Kindergarten-1 students often learn about individuality and community as they examine themselves, their families, and the groups to which they belong. A sample state curriculum standard might read: *students will recognize how individuals are similar and different, students will explain how families are alike and different, or students will identify the diversity of people in the local community.* In relation to the 10 themes of social studies identified by NCSS (2010), this broad topic relates to four themes: culture; individual development and identity; individuals, groups, and institutions; and global connections. Before developing a text set for teaching these standards, teachers should identify the student learning outcomes for the topic of families. Sample questions may include, *“Is it enough to examine how students’ families are similar and different, or can an exploration through a text set on families lead to deeper understandings of what it means to be a family both here and around the world?”* Further, can prolonged work with multiple, different books about family expand student thinking about what constitutes a family?” Guiding or overarching questions might be: *Who are the different people in our families? How are other families like or different from my own?*

**Civil rights.** An example for grades 2-3 involves content standards aimed at identifying the contributions of historical figures, key historical events shaping communities, and multiple perspectives. A sample state standard might read: *students will explain how multiple perspectives are portrayed through historical narratives, or students will analyze the impact of contributions of diverse historical figures on local communities or regions.* Such standards might encompass the national themes of time, continuity, and change; individuals, groups, and institutions; power, authority, and governance; and civic ideals and practices. We posit that an investigation of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement could encompass all four themes. The first step is selecting the big ideas related to these standards and the guiding questions for students’ inquiry. Guiding questions in this example might include: *How were members of different racial groups treated before and during the Civil Rights Movement? Who held power and how was it displayed in everyday life?*

**Slavery.** Our final example comes from grades 4-5, where students typically explore historical events that shaped their state or country. A sample curriculum standard may ask students to: *analyze key historical events in state history or examine the changing roles of marginalized groups in American society.* Such standards could potentially address four NCSS themes: time, continuity, and change; individuals, groups, and institutions; power, authority, and governance; and civic ideals and practices. Before developing a text set teachers again should determine the big idea(s) and guiding questions they intend to explore with students. In this example, we select the topic of slavery, perhaps the most contentious and uncomfortable of the three topics modeled here. Some guiding questions for examining the topic of slavery might be: *What were the conditions within which enslaved people had to live? In what ways did they respond, cope, or resist?* Having well-defined questions for inquiry allows the teacher to begin considering the different perspectives needed to provide answers, which is the second step in developing themed text sets.

**Step 2: Recognize the Multiple Perspectives Needed for a More Complete Story**
The social studies curriculum is filled with stories. From the stories of exploration and settlement to the stories of revolution and democracy, the dominant narrative of United States history often unfolds in ways that privilege the stories or perspectives of majority groups (e.g., majority group in race, class, and religion) and disregard or omit the experiences of certain marginalized groups. Following Emily Daniels (2011), we suggest social studies is the ideal classroom location to examine lesser-known perspectives. In order to foster a community where differing perspectives are considered and honored, moreover, teachers should engage students in exercises of perspective recognition (Barton & Levstik, 2004). This requires engaged work with historical themes like slavery that have multiple perspectives, which by nature, are often considered taboo (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 1999) for elementary children (i.e., challenges claim the concept is too abstract or the content is too mature). We recognize, however, that classroom investigations, which present marginalized voices, actually create a more complete narrative and deeper understanding. For teachers, it can be difficult to know where to start in planning such instruction; furthermore, it can be challenging to recognize the silences to which we have become accustomed. Conceptual tools, such as those described by Christina Tschida, Caitlin Ryan, and Anne Ticknor (2014), can guide teachers’ thinking through this step. Combining Rudine Sims Bishop’s theory of books as windows and mirrors (1990) and Chimamanda Adichie’s danger of the single story (2009), they help guide teachers to consider what perspectives are presented in the texts they use and what parts of the larger story might be missing.

In our example on family diversity, students whose lived experience of family does not fit the traditional portrayal of family found in the vast majority of children’s literature may not feel validated, leading to confusion or frustration with the concept of family. This step asks teachers to move from only introducing texts where traditional nuclear families, from different racial, ethnic, or geographical locations, are represented and instead utilize texts that represent children who live with other types of guardians (e.g. aunts, adopted parents, same-sex parents, or step-parents. We should consider also the following when developing a thematic text set for family: how can teachers use literature to include students whose families are in transitional housing, are refugees, or are incarcerated? How are these and other family structures represented in the study of families? Recognizing not all families look the same or have the same experiences will help teachers identify the texts needed to amplify the variety of experiences across families and ultimately present a more complete story of family. A well-selected text set can foster a deeper understanding of the meaning of family while identifying the diversity and mutuality among families in our society.

In our second example, teachers may already teach with books about historical figures such as Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Ruby Bridges. Step 2 asks teachers to not only consider what may be problematic with these dominant narratives of Black History (see for example, Bickford & Rich, 2014b; Kohl, 1991), but whose voices are missing from our traditional presentation of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and the implications for today. By including books written about the Movement that offer different lenses or perspectives, students are able to learn about the lives of everyday citizens who supported the Movement. Such stories, as they counter the dominant narrative focused on individual heroes, can challenge students to think about the prejudice of individuals and institutions, the functions of competing social contexts in history, the difficult circumstances involved in engineering social change, and how collectively, individuals can unite to overcome adversity. Adding non-fictional texts with photos
and primary source documents encourages students to compare dominant and counter-narratives to make their own inferences and meaning out of this historical time period. Such skills are essential for historical thinking, address the C3 Framework for social studies, and allow for Common Core Standards (e.g., multiple texts on same topic, point of view) to be addressed in more meaningful and relevant ways.

Our final example is perhaps the most difficult for Step 2 because many elementary teachers are uncomfortable engaging students in authentic inquiry into slavery. Teachers should first identify whose voices need to be included in a text set for students to develop a more complete historical understanding of the institution of slavery in America. This involves going back to the questions identified in Step 1 and asking which perspectives or voices students need to hear for this inquiry. Sometimes this process may require narrowing the focus. Rather than looking at the broad topic of slavery, for instance, teachers may create a text set around the quilts narrative or the myths of the Underground Railroad and answer the inquiry: What were the experiences of slaves who escaped? Given the goal of Step 2, a text set may include slave accounts, abolitionist narratives, and lesser-known routes of escape (e.g., *Henry’s Freedom Box; My Name is Sally Little Song*). Incorporating informational texts that challenge the dominant stories of the quilt narrative and Underground Railroad can elicit student engagement with historical thinking and document analysis (e.g., Brackman, 2006; Scholastic, 2014; Tobin, Dobard, & Wahlman, 2000).

**Step 3: Locate Qualifying Texts**

In Step 3, teachers should pursue texts that qualify for use based on the questions asked in Steps 1 and 2: What are the questions that will intrigue students? What are the big ideas that students will uncover during their inquiry? Which voices are needed to tell a more complete story? Although an Internet search will quickly provide many titles of popular books, there is no guarantee the texts can be used for meaningful social studies instruction. As teachers locate texts that qualify for use in addressing these questions, it may be helpful to consider these four essential features.

**Reading level.** Teachers should consider if texts are appropriate for their students. Teachers may think about grade levels, students’ independent and instructional reading levels, and how the texts will be used. Books, at or slightly higher than students’ independent or instructional reading levels, should be included in the list of qualifying texts.

**Quality of the story.** When assessing the quality of the story within a text, teachers should consider whether a text would sustain students’ interest while addressing the inquiry. Award winning books have already been evaluated for this feature and are easily located on websites like those in Table 1 (e.g., The American Library Association).

**Accuracy of social studies content.** Teachers must analyze the accuracy of the content, especially within historical fiction books. Does the text explicitly present accurate historical content, or is it simply a well-written story within a historical setting that references historical events? A source such as the annual Notable Trade Books for Young People list from NCSS presents texts that have been evaluated and selected by a review committee with a specific eye toward social studies content. We caution that teachers should examine trade books specifically for accurate historical content when considering books for a thematic set.

**Multiple perspectives.** A final feature to consider in locating texts is perspective. While it can be easy to find the dominant narrative in children’s literature, that is not always the case in locating texts with other voices or perspectives. Multiple perspectives allow students to develop
skills in historical thinking and opportunities to compare and contrast texts (CCSS focus). Teachers may ask: Whose story is this? Who benefits from this story? What voices are not being heard? Bringing in multiple perspectives invites children to interrogate not only the text but also society. Because the dominant narrative is often more popular, finding multiple perspectives can take time and effort. Table 1 offers some websites that provide a good starting point for this work. Teachers should consciously include books from a child’s perspective, which can draw students in and possibly resonate with them. One last consideration is the importance of including both books (fiction and informational text) and artifacts to a text set. Primary and secondary source documents, photographs, artifacts, and digital recordings can be powerful tools in challenging students’ thinking and broadening perspectives, and as such should be considered for inclusion in a text set.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notable Trade Books for Young People</td>
<td>Books are evaluated and selected annually by a NCSS committee and in cooperation with the Children's Book Council. Themes are identified for each annotated summary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Library Association</td>
<td>Current and archived award winning book lists can be accessed via the ALA site including Newbery, Caldecott, and Coretta Scott King titles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Children’s Book Center</td>
<td>The CCBC has created book lists for titles that present multiple perspectives of various social studies topics like multicultural families and civic engagement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee &amp; Low Books: About Everyone, For Everyone</td>
<td>This website is dedicated to diversity in children’s literature, and provides titles and information about books that all children can identify with and enjoy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Defamation League: Evaluating and Selecting Books</td>
<td>This article contains thought provoking insights into evaluating children’s books using an anti-bias lens as well as a checklist for assessing books.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because there are literally tens of thousands of children’s books available, it is helpful to rely on reviewed texts recommended by organizations or trusted sources. Table 1 presents a starting point for identifying texts that are well written and evaluated by other educators and historians. Many have also received highly esteemed children’s literature awards. While the Internet can offer a plethora of texts and related websites on social studies topics with one click, teachers should filter these materials in order to compile a book list that qualifies for the focus of inquiry and presents lesser-known perspectives. Then, from the list, teachers can narrow and select texts to include in the set for instruction.

**Step 4: Select Texts to be Included**
There will be more texts identified in Step 3 than could ever be used in one text set. This final step involves narrowing the titles. To begin making decisions about which texts to include teachers must look at their original question(s) of inquiry from Step 1. What are the questions that will intrigue students? What are the big ideas that students will uncover during their inquiry? Making knowledgeable selections requires teachers read the texts carefully and examine what is being said both directly and implicitly. Before including a text in the set, a teacher should decide: Does the perspective of this text give new information or insight, or does it simply reify the dominant narratives in society?

The purpose of the text set is very important in this final step, as there are multiple ways they can be used within a classroom to teach social studies. A teacher, for example, may read a different picture book each day during a unit. The texts selected could be above students’ independent reading level because the teacher is reading aloud and leading the discussion. If a teacher uses the text set within centers or student-led literature circles, the reading levels would need to be differentiated by individual or small groups of students. Guided reading groups may be another place to guide student comprehension of the texts and concepts. Students may work in jigsaw groups to process in-depth the social studies concepts or narratives across the texts in the set. Chapter books might be used for deeper understanding of historical time periods, events, or perspectives through extended time with a text. Having a clear plan on how texts will be used with students helps narrow the list of qualifying texts and identify the most important texts to include.

When making final decisions about which books to include in a text set on family for K-1 students, the teacher may select texts that disrupt and broaden the dominant narrative of family while providing windows and mirrors for the students in their classrooms (Bishop, 1990; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Table 2 shows one possible text set that could be used to help K-1 students see beyond their personal experience of family.

Table 2
Example Text Set for Kindergarten-1: Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Rational for Inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asha’s Mums</td>
<td>Rosamund Elwin &amp; Michele Paulse</td>
<td>This book raises issues of families that are not acknowledged or accepted in classrooms. It highlights the difficulty children from gay or lesbian families may encounter in schools and can offer opportunities for students to explore ways to recognize and validate peers from alternative families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Family Book</td>
<td>Todd Parr</td>
<td>This book is a celebration of the variety of families and contains presents the dominant narrative of family as merely another possibility in the wide array of diversity. Ultimately, Parr defines family as the people we love.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fly Away Home</td>
<td>Eve Bunting</td>
<td>Told from the perspective of a young boy, this book shares the life of a father and son who are homeless and live in an airport. The text and pictures create a unique understanding of a life in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the shadows and gives students a glimpse into a family situation, most likely very different from their own.

**In My Mothers’ House**  Patricia Polacco

This story is told from the perspective of the oldest of three adopted children from different racial backgrounds. Further disrupting the single story of family, her parents are two women. A demonstration of inclusivity, this book helps both children who have same-sex parents and those who have questions about a family that does not look like their own.

**Mirror**  Jeannie Baker

This mostly wordless picture book follows the daily lives of two boys on opposite sides of the world, highlighting the differences and universalities in their lives. The text brings in the traditional approach to discussing families (comparing families around the world), however its unique design presents two distinct parallel stories in separate mini-books that are bound into one.

**My Two Grannies**  Floella Benjamin

An excellent text to broaden the narrative of family to include the experience of bi-racial children who often struggle with racial or ethnic identification and misunderstanding from peers.

**Our Gracie Aunt**  Jacqueline Woodson

Told from the perspective of a young boy, this book offers a sensitive portrayal of children entering family foster care. It gives students a glimpse into life occurrences most of them will not experience and holds potential to develop empathy for others.

**Visiting Day**  Jacqueline Woodson

This story is told from the perspective of a young girl preparing to visit her father in prison. With an emphasis on the importance of love and family, this book is more about the experience of being separated from a loved one than about incarceration. The text offers validation to students who may find themselves in a similar life situation.

In narrowing books about the Civil Rights Movement, a teacher may use books containing the dominant narrative about specific historical figures and pair them with texts presenting a counter-narrative, allowing for source analysis and further inquiry. Given the abundance of texts available, a teacher may select texts all written from the perspective of a child as a way to demonstrate the everyday experience and acts of heroism among citizens during this time. The text set presented in Table 3 specifically includes historical fiction and informational texts that when paired with primary source documents (e.g., Bredhoff, Schamel, & Potter, 1999;
Library of Congress, 2014; National Archives, 2014) will allow students to conduct source analysis, identify historical counter-narratives, and practice perspective recognition.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example Text Set for 2-3: Civil Rights Movement (CRM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book Title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child of the Civil Rights Movement,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom’s Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa’s Bus: The Ride to Civil Rights,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
382-day boycott. This text can lead to great conversations, especially when paired with primary source documents of the event.

*Ruth and the Green Book,* Calvin Alexander Ramsey

This book illustrates how the “green book” was used from 1936-1964 in making decisions on travel and business in the South. It prompts readers to consider the daily implications of Jim Crow and draws on a little known narrative of this historic time.

To select texts for our third example, not only is it important to remember the inquiry from Step 1 and perspectives identified in Step 2, but teachers must ensure texts selected do not perpetuate misconceptions or sugar-coat the realities of slavery. These texts should present a more complete narrative of slavery and the experiences of enslaved people. The text set in Table 4 is one example for examining the experiences of slaves who chose to escape.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Elijah of Buxton</em></td>
<td>Christopher Paul Curtis</td>
<td>This multiple award-winning chapter book shares the story of Elijah, who was the first African American born in the Buxton Settlement in Ontario, a haven for former slaves. Through his many adventures, readers learn first-hand the realities of slavery and fears of former slaves for a child’s perspective. This text can prompt discussion of fugitive slave laws and “slave catchers” when paired with the text January’s Sparrow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>From Slave Ship to Freedom Road</em></td>
<td>Julius Lester</td>
<td>Definitely a text for older students, this book takes students on a personal journey from slave-ship and auction block to plantation life and escape. Lester prompts readers with questions that draw students in and develop historical empathy. The paintings may be unsettling for younger students but provide a powerful narrative of the realities of slavery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Henry’s Freedom Box</em></td>
<td>Ellen Levine</td>
<td>While the accuracy of some facts in this account of Henry Brown (a Southern slave who mailed himself to freedom in Philadelphia) have been questioned, the story is well written and delivers the drama and emotions involved. Paired with other informational texts or artifacts this text provides opportunities to examine how historians construct narratives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| *January’s Sparrow*            | Patricia             | This text retraces the journey of the Crosswhite...
This fourth step involves selecting texts that include the voices students need to hear in order to present a more complete picture of cultural narratives and historical events or figures. There are multiple texts to select from and different combinations of texts to include in a text set depending on the purpose and needs of students.

**Conclusion**

If “learning to read is integral in learning to think about the complex world in which [we live]” (Altoff & Golston, 2012, p.12), then reading the big ideas of social studies, particularly the most contentious among our curriculum, should be an integral part of elementary social studies instruction. In this article, we presented the systematic use of a time-honored literacy tool, themed text sets, as one interdisciplinary approach to teaching three controversial topics in elementary social studies: family (Kindergarten-1), civil rights (grades 2-3), and slavery (grades 4-5). Among the three, we illustrated the inclusion of multiple perspectives, particularly those lesser-known stories of historical events or themes, to serve as windows or mirrors for children in developing historical content knowledge. The titles illustrated in the three themed text sets are neither a comprehensive list nor exclusively the right texts; rather, they serve as a guide. Each
was selected based on the four-step process outlined here and meets the specific standards and understandings we want students to reach about the topics. Given the individual design of classrooms and ever-increasing marginalization of social studies instructional time, the extent to which teachers use selected texts (and the number used) should be an outcome of the standards, inquiry of big ideas, and multiple perspectives they intend to engage with young learners. The opportunities for developing themed text sets for social studies instruction will only continue to expand as the availability of children’s literature that explicitly presents social studies content continues to grow.

References


**Web-Based References**


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