Using Children's Literature as a Resource Within Middle Grades Social Studies Curriculum

BY
CHRISTINE A. DRAPER

Many of us remember sitting in a social studies class simply reading from a textbook, answering comprehension questions, reciting mere facts and dates, and taking a weekly test. Most of us remember hating this course for those very same reasons. For many middle school students, social studies are "a fragmented, hit-or-miss portion of the curriculum often lacking in roots, continuity, personal relevance, and comprehension of the multiple causes and effects of historical events" (Perez-Stable & Cordier, 2000, p. 23). As a social studies teacher, I felt that it was time that this disenchantment with history was put to an end. One method that worked favorably with my 7th grade history students was to incorporate children's literature into my social studies curriculum. Children's literature can be utilized at multiple levels in a wide variety of classroom settings (Villano, 2005) and proved to work especially well in my middle school social studies classroom.

Using children's literature and not just textbooks can help students understand, comprehend, and retain information while enjoying social studies. This article addresses why textbooks simply can't stand alone and how children's literature can serve as a beneficial resource within the social studies classroom. In addition, several response strategies that I utilized with my students are included throughout the article. This article seeks to inform teachers that learning doesn't have to be frustrating or boring; it can be exciting and engaging through utilizing children's literature within the social studies curriculum.

Why Textbooks Aren't Enough

Content area instruction has regularly depended upon the dominant use of a single textbook with the center of instruction being the teacher. This is related directly to time constraints teachers encounter when they are pressed to address more content at a faster pace, maintain control in the classroom, and enact accountability with lower level worksheets and assessments. A message is being sent to students that covering content is more important than gaining depth and understanding of a topic (Bean, 2000).

Unfortunately, research has found that textbooks are generally too difficult for the students reading them and are not written for the purpose of increasing students' comprehension of ideas (Seda, Ligouri, & Seda., 1999). In addition, textbooks don't commonly provide for the wide range of reading abilities found in the classroom (Tyree, Firore, & Cook, 1994). Generally these textbooks present historical events in the form of simple narratives with very few references to the controversies and uncertainties that surround historical concepts (Britt, Rouet, Georgi, & Perfetti, 1994). Research has also shown that the understanding students gain from the textbook presentation is rather shallow. Tyson-Bernstein (1988) pointed out textbooks generally "cover more information than can be treated respectfully" (p. 9). This is frustrating for both teachers and students who are rushed through curriculum. It is also common for textbooks to highlight and discuss the exceptional figures in history and to ignore the typical or often avoid controversial topics such as religion, women and minorities (Culclasure, 1999; Loewen, 2007). This works to silence the voices and perspectives of a large portion of society. Though these textbooks have colorful graphics, photos and headlines, they often "touch everything and explain nothing" (Fantin, 2004, p. B1). Textbooks simply cannot teach the subject alone.

Superficial coverage of content often leads to confused students unable to understand the content (Levstik & Barton, 2005). To ensure success in both personal and academic lives, students must learn to locate, understand, evaluate and use written information (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Georgia's social studies standards currently call for enhanced reading in all

curriculum areas through the building of good habits for reading, researching, and learning (Georgia's Performance Standard SS7RC1). Based on these recommendations and findings, I knew that I needed to move beyond teaching social studies with the traditional textbook. I found that incorporating children's literature related to social studies concepts worked well with the time constraints of the middle school class schedule and with my students' attention spans.

How Children's Literature Supports Learners

Children's literature is a tool that supports teaching in all content areas (Giorgis & Hartman, 2000; Giorgis & Pollak, 1998; Lindquist & Selwyn, 2000; Marshall, 1999; Vacca & Vacca, 2004). These types of books are not only amusing and entertaining to middle level students, but they can also assist them in their learning and help to develop skills in relation to the content area being studied (Villano, 2005). In addition, they help to support older students in their ongoing literacy development. Children's literature can also provide insight into human behavior, develop students' imaginations, and provide a sense of enjoyment that may not be experienced by textbooks. They employ and facilitate language development and can in turn increase students' comprehension of social studies concepts (Seda et al., 1999). Through these books, students are able to apply divergent thinking skills by elaborating on new ideas and producing alternative interpretations of the given information. This in turn allows students to increase factual knowledge and helps to create higher levels of retention when compared to traditional teacher-directed learning (Freeman & Person, 1998).

Why should we utilize children's literature within the social studies curriculum? Jean Fritz, a popular author of numerous biographies and historical books for children, argues that: "A great deal of history may have been taught from the point of view of an outsider looking back, but I believe that children can find little meaning in history unless they are helped to attain the point of view of a participant; in other words, unless they are given the chance to climb inside history and look out" (audiotape, n.d.). Children's literature helped my students enhance their understanding of a historical period by looking into a character's world and through various perspectives. They became excited and engaged in discussing topics through the books that we experienced together.

Incorporating Literature into My Classroom

Children need to have social studies concepts come alive in addition to having their curiosity piqued about the world around them. Literature was a natural way to involve children in this process. Children's literature became my hook to introduce an issue, bring to light a time period or lifestyle, or to take a topic or perspective further than the basic information presented in the textbook. Literature also helped to extend students' knowledge of the past and then relate this knowledge to present-day concepts. I chose stories that caught students' interests and curiosity or that presented a topic from a different perspective. They become eager to research predictions, confirm ideas, and expand their own understandings of the world by studying the past. An example of one of my literature study units is presented as follows:

Using Literature to Understand Lewis and Clark's Expedition

Our social studies textbook presented the expedition of Lewis and Clark in one paragraph with four short sentences. Sacajawea merited one brief mention tucked within the short paragraph. I was shocked that there was such little coverage for such an important and extraordinary historical expedition. Therefore I decided to utilize children's literature to help students understand the various perspectives of those members involved with the expedition west during our week-long unit. We first began attempting to understand Lewis and Clark's perspectives by reading the book: Lewis and Clark: Explorers of the American West by Steven Kroll (1996). This book reads almost like an adventure story and highlights the major facts and important dates throughout the journey; it also provides students with illustrations that detail the landscapes and hardships, clothing, and cultural differences with those who they met along the journey. During this time, students created an illustrated/annotated timeline that detailed the main points and dates of Lewis and Clark's expedition to understand the journey through the eyes of Lewis and Clark. This timeline was created by the whole class and was displayed and referred to throughout the remainder of the unit.

Steps for creating an illustrated/annotated timeline

1. Students organized the important dates/experiences chronologically in a timeline. The first point on the timeline represented the year the journey started.
2. Students used note cards to add in important dates and experiences (using explanations, quotes, charts, sketches, maps, etc., for entries) that Lewis and Clark experienced on the expedition. For each note card added, students also completed an illustration detailing what the card summarized.

Many students questioned that Sacajawea's voice was often not heard in the previous book we had read. It was at this point that I brought in the book *I am Sacajawea, I am York: Our Journey West with Lewis and Clark* by Claire Rudolf Murphy (2005). After reading this book, students became very aware that while Lewis and Clark had actually chosen to go on the voyage, Sacajawea and York were both *forced* to become part of the journey in their own ways: Sacajawea being considered as "property" of her husband Charbonneau, and York in being Clark's slave. Students were amazed and continually commented on the fact that both Sacajawea and York brought skills to the group that helped to make the success of this journey possible. They often commented on the illustrations which frequently portrayed Lewis and Clark in a different light from the initial book we read. This is very evident to students since Lewis and Clark are always in the background and the focus and perspectives are always portrayed through York and Sacajawea. It was at this point that students were asked to create a character dialogue journal from the perspective of either York or Sacajawea. Students had to pay attention to historical facts and dates to create journal entries that detailed what the adventure may have been like and issues or experiences that the traveler may have encountered.

Steps for creating a character dialogue journal

1. Students had a worksheet consisting of two tables divided into three columns: dates, events and feelings that we filled in together as a class while listening to a story about Sacajawea and York.
2. After listening to the story and discussing dates, events, and feelings, students assumed the identity of York or Sacajawea and created a journal entry for that character using the information we filled out in the tables. This entry detailed the events that the person experienced and included opinions or emotions that the character might be feeling about these events. They wrote this entry from the character's perspective as though it were actually happening to them. Students needed to pay particular attention to quotes that were directly stated or how that person would have felt based on that person's perspective.
3. These journals were then shared whole class and students discussed the similarities and differences of the experiences and perspectives of York and Sacajawea as compared to Lewis and Clark.
4. The class then added more annotations/illustrations to the timeline from York's or Sacajawea's perspective.

Students at this point often commented about Lewis's dog, Seaman, who had journeyed on the expedition as well. As a class, we would then read various excerpts from Laurie Myer's book *Lewis and Clark and Me: A Dog's Tale* (2002). This book details the journey through the eyes of the dog and describes funny and unusual incidents' such as the dog being mistaken for a bear as well as the interesting new people, animals, and smells he encountered along the way. Not only did this book enable students to experience the journey through a very different perspective, it also provided students direct quotes from the actual journals written by Meriwether Lewis. After hearing the story excerpts, students created their own journal entry of a portion of the expedition as experienced through the eyes of Seaman.

Steps for creating a journal entry through the perspective of an animal

1. Students were assigned one of the events posted on the annotated/illustrated timeline.
2. They needed to write a short (note card) journal entry from the perspective of Seaman the dog in relation to this event.
3. Students shared the event with the whole class and these journal entry note cards were then posted on the annotated/illustrated timeline.

Finally I wanted students to understand what this journey meant from a very different perspective, those that were native to the land that the Corps of Discovery was exploring. Students listened to the book *Bad River Boys: A Meeting of the Lakota Sioux with Lewis and Clark* by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (2005). This fictional story is based on a narrative account written by William Clark and details three young Lakota boys who witnessed the Corps of Discovery landing on their shore and the misunderstanding and crises that ensued because of this. Through this book, students learned that not everyone saw the expedition through the same eyes. To demonstrate their understanding of the various perspectives, students created open-mind portraits that portrayed the expedition through Lewis and Clark and then an additional open-mind portrait that depicted the expedition through the eyes of one of the Lakota Sioux boys. Students detailed the similarities and differences between the two perspectives of the journey westward.

Steps for creating an open-mind portrait

1. Students drew and colored a large portrait of head and neck of Lewis or Clark on one side of the paper and then on the opposite side of the paper they created another one for a member of the Lakota Sioux tribe.

2. Students then filled the open heads with thoughts, quotes, important dates, pictures and feelings as experienced through the character's eyes.
3. Students shared these portraits with the whole class and talked about words and pictures they chose to include in the minds of each of the characters.
4. As a whole class we created a Venn diagram detailing the similarities and differences of viewpoints of the journey as experienced by the numerous perspectives we learned about through this unit.

"Can We Hear That Story Again?"

Through the exploration of the children's literature, I found that students easily put themselves in the place of the characters and saw similarities and differences between the stories and the various perspectives presented. They were able to respond to, experience, and connect with the literature in ways they never would with the textbook. These connections are what helped social studies come alive in my classroom. It also combated one of the most nagging problems associated with textbook-driven instruction, in that it put an end to brief and simple explanations of complex topics and perspectives.

In my classroom, picture books, graphic novels, and personal narratives served as resources to enhance students' comprehension and understanding of historical periods or events, and worked to promote interest and awareness of various social studies concepts. This was necessary so that students were not left "with recitation of remembered facts" but instead inquired about and began to more fully understand people or perspectives that were different from themselves (Culclasure, 1999 p. 23). Ultimately, incorporating children's literature into the social studies curriculum proved to be a beneficial resource for the students and their understanding of multiple perspectives. Connections were drawn between facts learned about people and events in texts, and fictional and non-fictional characters were brought to life through the children's literature. Anytime I hear the words "Can we hear that story again?" or "Please read us another book about this time period," I know that my students are engaged and interested in social studies.

In conclusion, infusing children's literature into my middle grades social studies curriculum proved to be valuable for promoting students' comprehension and understanding of historical time periods and multiple-perspectives of participants. Textbooks alone simply do not convey all needed information to our students. Furthermore, students need to become actively involved with their textbook. I advocate that incorporating children's literature into the social studies classroom enables teachers to assist students with their learning and also helps students develop skills in relation to the content being studied. Furthermore, responding through literature can be of assistance to those teachers seeking imaginative, enjoyable, and innovative ways to motivate and inspire their students.

Additional Recommended Children's Literature Titles

American Revolution

Ammon, Richard. (2004). *Valley Forge*. Illus. Bill Farnsworth. Holiday House

Cheney, Lynne. (2004). *When Washington Crossed the Delaware*. Illus. Pater M. Fiore. Simon & Schuster.

Lewis and Clark, Sacajawea

Edwards, Judith. (2003). *The Great Expedition of Lewis and Clark By Private Reubin Field, Member of the Corps of Discovery*. Illus. Sally Wern Comport. Farrar Straus Giroux.

Civil War

Brill, Marlene Targ. (1998). *Diary of a Drummer Boy*. Illus. Michael Garland. Millbrook Press.

Morrison, Taylor. (1999). *Civil War Artist*. Houghton Mifflin.

Westward Movement

Hopkinson, Deborah. (2004). *Apples to Oregon: Being the (slightly) True Narrative of How a Brave Pioneer Brought Apples, Peaches, Pear, Plums Grapes, and Cherries (and children) Across the Plains*. Illus. Nancy Carpenter. Atheneum

Moss, Marissa. (1999). *True Heart*. Illus. C. F. Payne. Harcourt.

Stanley, Diane. (2000). *Roughing it on the Oregon Trail*. Illus. Holly Berry. Harper Collins

World War II

Dyes, Tomoko Tsuchiya. (1988). *Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People and War*. Illus. Ted Lewin. Houghton Mifflin Company.

Mochizuki, Ken. (1993). *Baseball Saved Us*. Illus. Dom Lee. Scholastic.

Holocaust

Bunting, Eve. (1993). *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust.* Illus. Stephen Gammell. Jewish Publication Society.

Hesse, Karen. (2004). *The Cats in Krasinski Square.* Illus. Wendy Watson. Scholastic.

References

Bean, T. W. (2000). Reading in the content areas: Social constructivist dimensions. In M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, & R. Barr. (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research, Volume III.* (pp. 629-644). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Britt, M. A., Rouet, J. F., Georgi, M. C., & Perfetti,C. A. (1994). Learning from history texts: From causal analysis to argument models. In G. Leinhardt, et al. (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning in History* (pp. 47-84). Hillsdale, N J: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Culclasure, S. (1999). *The past as liberation from history.* New York: Peter Lang.

Fantin, L. (2004, March 25). Dull texts can turn history into bedtime stories. *The Salt Lake Tribune*, pp. B1, B3.

Fisher, D. & Frey, N. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Content area strategies at work.* (2nd Ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Freeman, E. B., & Person, D. G. (1998). Connecting informational books with content area learning. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Fritz, J. (n.d.). American history through fiction (Audiotape). New York: Children's Book Council.

Georgia Department of Education. (2009, June 28). Georgia performance standards. Retrieved, from: https://www.georgiastandards.org

Giorgis, C., & Hartman, K. (2000). Using picture books to support middle school curricula. *Middle School Journal*, 31, 34-41.

Giorgis, C., & Pollak, J. (1998). The role of picture books in middle level classrooms. *New Advocate*, 11, 12-22.

Kroll, S. (1996). *Lewis and Clark: Explorers of the American west.* (Illus. Richard Williams). New York: Holiday House.

Levstick, L. S., & Barton, K. C. (2005). *Doing history: Investigating with children in elementary and middle schools.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Loewen, J. W. (2007). *Lies my teacher told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong.* New York: New Press.

Lindquist, T., & Selwyn, D. (2000). *Social studies at the center: Integrating kids, content and literacy.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Marshall, C. S. (1999). Highlighting commonalities, differences, and diversity with picture books. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 11, 18-21.

Murphy, C. R. (2005). *I am Sacajawea, I am York. Our journey west with Lewis and Clark.* (Illus. Higgins Bond). New York: Walker & Company.

Myer, L. (2002). *Lewis and Clark and me: A dog's tale.* (Illus. Michael Dooling). New York: Scholastic.

Perez-Stable, M. A., & Cordier, M. H. (2000). *Understanding American history through children's literature: Instructional units and activities for grades K-8.* Phoenix, AZ : Oryx.

Seda, M. M., Liguori, O. Z., & Seda, C. M., (1999). Bridging literacy and social studies: Engaging prior knowledge through children's books. *TESOL Journal*, 8, 34-38.

Sneve, V. D. H. (2005). *Bad river boys: A meeting of the Lakota Sioux with Lewis and Clark.* (Illus. Bill Farnsworth). New York: Holiday House.

Tyree, R. B., Firore, T. A., & Cook, R. A. (1994). Instructional materials for diverse learners: Features and considerations for textbook design. *Remedial and Special Education*, 15, 363-377.

Tyson-Bernstein, H. (1988). *A conspiracy of good intentions: America's text-book fiasco.* Washington, DC: Council for Basic Education.

Vacca, R. T., & Vacca, J. L. (2004). *Content area reading: Literacy and learning across the curriculum* (8th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Villano, T.L. (2005, October). Should social studies textbooks become history? A look at alternative methods to activate schema in the intermediate classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 59, 122–130.