Making Quality Children's Literature an Essential Ingredient: How Middle and High School Teachers Can Spice Up Their Lessons

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.20429/sspeach.2023.010102
Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/sspeach/vol1/iss1/2

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Making Quality Children’s Literature an Essential Ingredient:
How Middle and High School Teachers Can Spice Up Their Lessons

Do your recipes for dynamic inquiry lessons in social studies have all the zest and punch they need? Adding that special ingredient—quality children’s/Young Adult (YA) literature—can make an everyday, ordinary lesson something extraordinary. The skillful use of excellent literature can help you meet more of your teaching and learning goals and spark the kind of deep thinking that helps your students fall in love with social studies.

We will be blending several titles as important ingredients in this dish that help us show the versatility of good literature in social studies instruction. *Countdown* by Deborah Wiles and *Dazzle Ships* created by Chris Barton and Victo Ngai, are books we draw on again and again to model different strategies. *Countdown* is the first volume in a documentary novel trilogy that embeds “scrapbooks” of primary source material to provide context for the story of twelve-year-old Franny and her family, set in the turbulent 1960s. *Dazzle Ships* is a picture book of informational text that tells the story of ship camouflage in World War I by integrating vibrant text and visuals. These two books help to illustrate the variety of flavors to be found in great children’s literature that spark students’ appetite for learning.

**Step 1: Sourcing prime literary ingredients**

Children’s literature often seems like a more natural fit with the elementary level, but we want to open the minds and hearts of middle and high school teachers to the power of this ingredient for your own lessons. Because children’s literature includes a wide variety of titles connected to the content, they can be used in a multitude of ways to support your inquiry-based lesson recipe. Full titles or excerpts can be used as source material for analysis of a good essential question, as context to ground a lesson, to provide a new perspective or focus on
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disciplinary thinking, and as activities that encourage students to share their thoughts through speaking, writing, illustrating, reading, and listening (SWIRL). Let’s see how.

Good literature can include historical fiction and longer informational texts. Even if they are not used in their entirety, sharing specific excerpts for students to analyze and digest can complement the use of more traditional elements of good lessons. Consider this quote illustrated with a photograph of John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev near the start of *Countdown* by Deborah Wiles, “We have enough missiles to blow you up thirty times over,” said JFK, and Khrushchev replied, “We have enough to blow you up only once, but that will be enough for us.” With that quote and photograph and some additional excerpts from this novel, we have all we need to create an understanding of the tension and drama of the Cold War arms race and just how near the precipice the world came. Imagine how much more motivating students will find the Cuban Missile Crisis after that dramatic introduction.

A picture book example is *Dazzle Ships* by Chris Barton, which features a little-known story that includes historical, geographic, and economic content in a compelling artistic style. The backmatter includes helpful author and illustrator notes, a thorough timeline and photographs, along with a list of resources for further exploration. Using analysis/discussion protocols like See-Think-Wonder or Observe-Reflect-Question can promote visual literacy and elicit inquiry rich dialogue using open-ended questions. This picture book of World War I provides the leavening to help your lessons rise.

**Step 2: Plating your lessons with visual sources**

Consider the hidden power of picture books, whose topics and graphics have expanded considerably in recent years. Why picture books? They can quickly help you level the playing field of background information when you are launching a new topic by providing images,
symbols, color, and visuals that support the text of a story, giving students a common grounding. For middle and high school teachers, with very limited time to teach each topic, picture books can be particularly useful.

Both picture books and longer works contain illustrations, graphics, back matter, and primary sources that can be used with the book to amplify the topic. *Countdown*, the documentary novel by Deborah Wiles mentioned earlier, is jam-packed with primary sources in what Wiles calls scrapbooks at the start of each section of the book. These provide context in a hurry for students for whom the 1960s is the distant past, marinading students in cultural memorabilia, music, artifacts, and documents from the period and providing many opportunities for inquiry and analysis. *Dazzle Ships* does the same, with rich layered illustrations that cry out for analysis and back matter that provides photographs and context material to ground the story.

Graphic novels and informational texts also provide in-depth illustrations for analysis that stretches students’ abilities across genres. *Boxers and Saints* by Gene Luen Yang gives us companion graphic novels that provide differing points of view of a single historical event in world history. Pairing books that present a topic in different formats also enhances your menu of sources; titles such as Linda Sue Park’s *A Long Walk to Water*, William Kamkwamba’s *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, and Claire A. Nivola’s *Planting the Trees of Kenya: the Story of Wangari Maathai* offer students the chance to compare concepts across different texts. Balance your diet by including resources like these.

**Step 3: Selecting the best titles as ingredients**

When choosing effective titles, we recommend the following checklist for quality ingredients. Try to pick titles that meet most if not all of these criteria:

- Align to the content and/or skill standard(s)
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- Enhance instruction by providing additional points of view/perspectives
- Add an engaging/new story for student connection
- Provide an opportunity to build additional skills
- Avoid stereotypes, bias, and inaccuracies
- Make social studies come alive for students with vivid language and/or illustrations
- Build historical empathy beyond what is possible with primary sources alone

How can you stay current with good titles to use with your students? Use online resources like:

- National Council for Social Studies Notable Tradebooks Lists
- Carter Woodson Award Winning Titles
- Septima Clark Award Winning Titles
- Newbery and Caldecott Award Winning Titles
- GCSS Children’s Literature Lists From Teachers.

Talk with teacher and media specialist colleagues to stock your pantry for new titles. When you find good authors whose work really contributes to your teaching, follow them on social media or investigate their websites to see if you and/or your district might bring them for class or district visits. Many great authors make school visits a part of their schedule and enjoy the chance to talk with students or teachers. The best of them engage in the art of social studies inquiry every day and love to “talk shop” and to identify with teachers. Their work also gives students great models of good writing and research to emulate.

An excellent article in the May/June 2023 issue of Social Education provides a helpful way to start using picture books in middle/high classrooms. The article contains a well-developed rationale for using these as resources, reiterating many of the points we have made here, and proposes a framework for using these books effectively. The framework contains five steps...
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which help scaffold their use and support inquiry. This article also links to lesson plans using specific titles; among them are Kwame Alexander and Kadir Nelson’s *The Undefeated* as well as Kevin Noble Maillard and Juana Martinez-Neal’s delectable *Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story*, two of our favorite “go to” books. This article is available via open access at [https://www.socialstudies.org/social-education/87/3/framework-using-notable-social-studies-picture-books-high-school](https://www.socialstudies.org/social-education/87/3/framework-using-notable-social-studies-picture-books-high-school).

In our practice as teachers and as social studies leaders we have discovered for ourselves the value of children’s/YA literature and would never teach without them. Having had a taste of the flavor of them we will never go back to the bland days of “blah” lessons. One of our storytelling heroes is Georgia author Carmen Deedy, whom we are fortunate enough to claim as a friend and mentor. The author of *14 Cows for America* and many other wonderful works, she argues for the magic of story in our classrooms. As she says, “What is history but story and how dare we make it lesser.” Let us harness the power of story and spice up learning.

**Children’s Literature titles referenced in this article:**