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Elementary students socially construct their own historically-grounded wordless picture books

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Illinois Council of Social Studies

Through the C3 Framework, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has stressed that elementary social studies teachers need to strengthen their students' content-area literacy skills (NCSS, 2013). Elementary students should have meaningful classroom activities that allow them to analyze and deconstruct arguments in primary and secondary sources. These learning opportunities allow students to actively engage with historical figures' values, biases, and beliefs (VanSledright, 2002). Therefore, elementary social studies teachers should create text sets for their classrooms. Creating multi-leveled thematic text sets helps students cultivate critical thinking skills by giving them different perspectives on the same topic through diverse types of primary and secondary sources (Bersh, 2013). One secondary source that can be paired with primary sources is wordless picture books.

In this article, we discuss a project where fourth graders closely examined wordless picture books and primary sources connected to the Fugitive Slave Act of the 19th century. There are five lessons in our project. In groups of two or three, students applied content knowledge about slavery and more specifically fugitive slave laws to create their own historically-grounded wordless picture book. We describe the steps of our project and provide resources needed for elementary teachers to replicate it in their classrooms.

Brief Overview on Wordless Picture Books

Wordless picture books, or *visually-rendered narratives*, are far from simple because they showcase the art of visual storytelling (Serafini, 2014; Louie & Serschynski, 2015; Sallsbury & Styles, 2012). They are a literary genre that connects concepts, renders themes or sequences of ideas, provides information, and allows readers to interact with a story through a series of illustrations without written text. Without written words, readers can serve as co-authors to construct meaning and narrative from the images (Dowhower, 1997; Serafini, 2014).

In today's world, being able to make sense of visual images is an essential skill both in and out of school. This presents an opportunity to prepare students for the challenges in our heavily-visual world of the 21st century. In fact, "wordless picture books may be the best platform for introducing many narrative conventions, reading processes, and visual strategies to readers of all ages" (Serafini, 2014, p. 26). The cognitive reading load when working with wordless picture books is lifted due to the absence of words. This allows students more accessibility for exploring important social studies topics through illustrations in wordless picture books. It has been reported that there is a dearth of studies examining the impact of wordless picture books on content areas (Arizpe, 2014). In the next sections, we discuss one way that wordless picture books can be used in concert with primary sources to explore social studies topics.

Day One: Building Students' Background Knowledge about the Causes of the U.S. Civil War

This one week project occurred in a fourth grade teacher's social studies class in the Southeast. The class started on the first day by reading Abraham Lincoln's *House Divided Speech* (<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/house.htm>). The teacher focused the class discussion on how the division in the country led to the U.S. Civil War. One area emphasized during this discussion was the issue of slavery through political, economic, and cultural lenses. Additionally, students examined a map to see the split between the Union and Confederacy (<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3701s.cw0004000/>). The teacher utilized these two sources to help students grasp that social studies content can be conveyed through a variety visual and text-based primary sources. This set students up to examine *Zoom* (Banyai, 1995). *Zoom* (Banyai, 1995) is a wordless picture book with a series of images that builds on one another to transport the reader from a scene in a farmyard all the way into outer space. Since students examine and compare each image's distance and depth, they sharpen their perspective-

making skills. Therefore, one of the benefits of this wordless picture book is that students creatively and systematically analyze each image in order to co-construct the narrative in the story.

Day Two: Analyzing *Unspoken*

The teacher built upon students' background knowledge about the causes of the U.S. Civil War and their ability to work with wordless picture books on day two. Students started by looking at a runaway slave poster (<https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.0220120b/?sp=1>). First, they analyzed the content in the runaway slave poster to summarize the main ideas within this source. Then, the teacher focused on how the language in the source portrays the African American male, Henry May, as property of the author with this poster, William Burke. This allowed students to discuss the immorality of slavery with the concept that one person could be owned by another person and helped contextualize the values of a segment of the U.S. population in the first half of the 1800s. In the first half of the 19th century, there were laws in the United States that people had to help in the return of runaway slaves. This frontloads students' thinking to examine the issue of slavery more through the wordless picture book *Unspoken: A Story from the Underground Railroad* (Cole, 2012).

The teacher interactively shared *Unspoken* (Cole, 2012) with her students. This wordless picture book depicts a young girl who finds a runaway slave hiding in a shed on the farm where she is living. She bravely keeps his hiding place a secret, even when men arrive hunting for him. Although the young girl is in danger for breaking the law to turn in runaway slaves, she knows inherently at a young age it is worth the risk because it is the right thing to do (Cole, 2012). This reinforces previous content material covered on day two about the Fugitive Slave Act in the 1800s. The teacher stopped at numerous points to help her students unpack the meaning of

images with the pages of this wordless picture book. This scaffolding by the teacher helped build students' understanding of how authors of wordless picture books use images to convey content material, main ideas, and emotions through characters' facial expressions.

After viewing and discussing *Unspoken* (Cole, 2012), students completed a three circle graphic organizer. The purpose of the three circle graphic organizer was for students to articulate the author's purpose with this wordless picture book. The students provided evidence to support their arguments for the author's purpose with *Unspoken* (Cole, 2012). For example, one student argued that the purpose of this wordless picture book was to inform the reader about how people supported runaway slaves, which was disobeying the Fugitive Slave Act (this can be seen the example of a student's three circle graphic organizer). The teacher and one of the authors floated around the classroom to help students as they completed their three circle graphic organizer. Students shared their three circle graphic organizer at the end of the class period. This allowed the teacher to measure students' understanding of *Unspoken* (Cole, 2012) as well as the literary devices employed in this wordless picture book.

Insert Example Three Circle Graphic Organizer

Day Three: Groups Storyboarding the Content of Their Wordless Picture Book

The teacher started the third day by explaining the purpose of the project that students would be working on for the next couple of days. In groups of two to three, students would create their own wordless picture book. Their wordless picture book needed to be 10 pages in length and be based on the following prompt.

Choose a theme or purpose and create a wordless picture book that tells the story of the experiences of a runaway slave. Think carefully about your characters' actions and emotions.

Students outlined their ideas before starting their wordless book. To help the groups accomplish this goal, they completed a ten-panel storyboard for what each page of their wordless book

would contain. Each storyboard panel represented the contents of an individual page of the group's wordless picture book that would be created over the next two days. For each panel, group members also included a brief explanation of why they are using a specific image and what message this image conveyed. The teacher and one of the researchers moved around the classroom to help groups as they outlined their ideas in a storyboard. The step was inserted into the storyboard assignment to enable students to unpack their thinking and make revisions to the images of their wordless picture books. This enabled students to explain how they applied and processed information studied on days one and two of our project. In other words, students engaged in metacognition by thinking about their own thinking to allow them to better convey their ideas.

Days Four and Five: Groups Created Their Own Wordless Picture Books

On day four, groups created their own wordless picture books based on the prompt given on day three. They also used their storyboard created on day three to layout their wordless picture book. The teacher floated around on day four to help the groups as needed. Each group finished and made minor revisions to their wordless picture book on day five and then shared their project with the entire class. Each group consistently did a nice job of accurately conveying content material connected to the U.S. Civil War in their wordless picture book, but the benefits of this project went much deeper.

First, several groups captured slaves' reasons for running away in their wordless picture books. Students emphasized through the images in their books that African Americans' lack of freedom and rights were the driving forces for attempting to flee to the North. This was demonstrated through the saddened facial expressions as slaves toiled on a plantation system in fields early on in several groups' books. However, the general emotions changed as slaves escaped from the South to the North at the end of their books. These images show that students

were able to capture the reasons, motivations, and perspectives for African Americans to break the unjust laws in the 19th century that were designed to protect the institution of slavery.

Elementary social studies teachers need to create activities that allow their students to connect to the motivations and reasons that spur historical figures to action. This makes the content material real and potentially relevant to students' lives (NCSS, 2017). While this project focused on slaves' reasons for leaving the South, it prepared students for a follow-up unit on runaway slaves' experiences in the North and for many in Canada as well. Elementary teachers may use *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* (Weatherford, 2006), *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad* (Levine, 2007) along with Anthony Burns' fugitive slave experiences (described on Famous Trials, <https://www.famous-trials.com/anthonyburns>) to explore topics connected to the Underground Railroad in more depth as well.

Second, similar to *Unspoken* (Cole, 2012), groups consistently drew images of people helping their runaway slave. Their images had people hiding or feeding the runaway slave, despite monetary opportunities for helping in the capture and return of the slave to the plantation owner. During the class discussion of the runaway slave poster, the teacher emphasized that it was the law to turn in fleeing slaves in the 1800s but mentioned that some people broke these unjust laws nonetheless. This issue was revisited in the class debriefing after viewing *Unspoken* (Cole, 2012). Students voiced the idea that helping turn in a runaway slave was a bad law, getting at the idea that democratic citizens are morally justified to disobey unjust laws. The images in their wordless picture book demonstrated how people can take civic action in a time period by disobeying an unjust law like helping turn in a runaway slave. These civic actions by

democratic citizens help address public issues and improve local communities and the country as a whole (Levstik & Barton, 2015).

Finally, images in groups' wordless picture books contextualized the time period by conveying that African Americans' lives would be much better by escaping from the South to the North (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Again, this concept was captured by the joyful facial expressions of their runaway slaves reaching the North at the end of several groups' wordless picture books. One group even drew a map of the U.S. with a compass rose showing their slave in the North with a smile on his face (see example of student work). The analysis of primary and secondary sources in this project along with students' prior knowledge of slavery enabled them to capture the potential and possibility of a better quality of life for African Americans if they could escape the Southern plantation system. This set up the teacher in follow-up units to explore racial discrimination that African Americans faced in other parts of the country before, during, and after the U.S. Civil War (Clabough & Bickford, 2018). In this way, the teacher was able to frame the fight for African Americans' equality and civil rights as being part of the broader American story as opposed to some students' misconceptions of the Civil Rights Movement being confined to the work of activists in the 1950s and 1960s.

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed a one-week project completed in a fourth grade social studies class. Students were able to socially construct meaning through discussion with the teacher about *Unspoken* (Cole, 2012) and *Zoom* (Banyai, 1995) and through creating in groups their own historically-grounded wordless picture book. This social construction was primarily due to the absence of author-driven text which can truncate students' meaning-making processes. Instead, students can more freely utilize the imagery in the wordless picture books to create themes and

convey concepts, ideas, and content material. This is especially important given many of our elementary students struggle with processes of reading a text (Allington, 2011). The activities highlighted in this project reflect the best teaching practices for elementary social studies education advocated for in the C3 Framework. This one-week project focused on the immorality of slavery and how some African Americans escaped an institution that robbed them of their dignity, freedoms, civil rights, and humanity. Students were actively involved analyzing both primary and secondary sources and constructing meaning from both. Groups' wordless picture books allowed them to depict how historical actors in the 19th century U.S. settings took civic action by protesting the unjust and immoral Fugitive Slave Act. The examination of the ways in which historical figures take civic action prepares students with the knowledge and skills to take civic action in their communities, state, and country to make change and address unjust laws (Brugar, 2015).

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