

Developing a Culturally Responsive Social Studies Classroom with Trade Books

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Abstract

In this article, the authors focus on a one-week research project examining Frederick Douglass's civic actions to challenge racial discrimination African Americans faced before and after the U.S. Civil War. Our one-week research project was implemented at a free public charter school in a mid-sized Southern city. Our project connects to the disciplinary literacy skills argued for in the indicators of the C3 Framework. The following research questions drove our study: (a) in what ways, if any, do students articulate the challenges African Americans faced in the slavery system?; (b) In what ways, if any, do students articulate the civic actions taken by Frederick Douglass to challenge racial discrimination in U.S. society? First, we define the concept of public issues and describe their importance in an abbreviated literature review. Next, our focus shifts to examining how disciplinary literacy skills advocated for in the C3 Framework helped to shape our project. Then, we briefly focus on the demographic information for the students that participated in our study along with giving the demographic information about the teacher that implemented this project. Next, methods utilized in our project will be given. Then, a description of the student data and analysis procedures is provided. Next, we talk about the findings from our study and give a discussion section to unpack our findings. Finally, we close the article with

limitations from our study and recommendations for future research studies to build upon our project.

Keywords: Social studies trade books, teaching public issues, Frederick Douglass, C3 Framework, culturally responsive teaching

Teaching issues of race has been a hot button issue in contemporary U.S. society. Republican politicians in many conservative-leaning states have taken calculated steps to shut down discussions with issues of race in K-12 social studies classrooms. They accuse social studies teachers of attempting to indoctrinate students (Alfonseca, 2022; Kreiss et al., 2021). These steps by politicians are problematic for several reasons. The most obvious is that many state U.S. history standards contain a focus, not only on the slavery system, but the Jim Crow segregation laws that eventually emerged at the end of the 19th century. Additionally, state social studies standards place an emphasis on how civil rights activists challenged Jim Crow segregation laws, most notably with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. There is also the fact that since the start of the social studies education movement a little over a century ago that scholars have argued that the purpose of the field is to prepare students to be future democratic citizens (Dewey, 1916; Evans, 2004; Schul, 2023). Social studies educators are negligent in their duty if they do not equip students with the knowledge and skills to grapple with the root causes of the vestiges of America's racist past (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Kendi, 2017; King et al., 2018). All of these factors have created a minefield for K-12 teachers on how to teach issues connected to race in America's past and present and begs the question: What is the best way to navigate these challenges? We contend that one of the best ways to teach public issues connected to race is by constructing a text set comprised of primary sources and trade books.

The term trade book refers to publications that can be purchased from online retailers. They include novels, biographies, informational texts, picture books, and graphic novels (McGowan & Guzzetti, 1991). Trade books tend to be better written than most social studies textbooks. Students are usually able with trade books to explore content in more depth (Berkeley et al., 2016; Bickford & Schuette, 2016; Palmer & Stewart, 1997; Richgels et al., 1993; Tracy, 2004). The diversity of available trade books, in content, format, and readability, also allows teachers to select texts that best fit their students' reading and learning needs (Liang, 2002; Saul & Dieckman, 2005).

Trade books often focus on historical figures, issues, and events rarely covered in traditional textbooks (Chick, 2008). Historical figures' perspectives and motivations for taking certain actions are often explored in trade books. The examination of historical figures' perspectives provides social studies teachers a way to teach disciplinary literacy skills (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). When teachers require students to analyze trade books for perspective, bias, and purpose, these learning experiences enable them to develop disciplinary thinking and literacy skills employed by social scientists. These types of activities dovetail with the current emphasis on disciplinary literacy skills advocated for by the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS) in its C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013a).

Trade books also offer an opportunity to highlight the history and lived experiences of culturally diverse students. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) gives a useful metaphor for describing children's literature as either windows, sliding glass doors, or mirrors. Literature is a window when it provides the reader a glimpse into real or imagined worlds. They are sliding glass doors when that window invites readers to experience the author's created world through imagination. For some students, literature can also be a mirror that validates their reality as a valued part of the human experience. For students of color, especially African American students, historical figures who look like them are often portrayed as victims, possessing limited agency to impact U.S. history (King, 2020; King et al., 2018). This is not the mirror we want our students to see. To counter this image, social studies teachers must seek out trade books that present people of color as agents of change that addressed societal issues and made positive contributions. Our project set out to do this by exploring Frederick Douglass's civic advocacies. We wanted to provide a model for how K-12 social studies teachers and social studies education scholars can discuss public issues connected to race in U.S. history with a trade book and supporting primary sources from a time period.

In this article, we discuss a one-week project focusing on the civic actions taken by Frederick Douglass. Our one-week project was completed in a free public charter school in a mid-sized Southern city. It focuses on the disciplinary literacy skills advocated for in the indicators of the C3 Framework. The following research questions drove our project.

1. In what ways, if any, do students articulate the challenges African Americans faced in the slavery system?

2. In what ways, if any, do students articulate the civic actions taken by Frederick Douglass to challenge racial discrimination in U.S. society?

First, we define public issues and describe their importance in an abbreviated literature review. Next, our focus shifts to discussing how disciplinary literacy skills stressed in the C3 Framework helped to frame our project. Then, we briefly describe the students that participated in our study along with giving demographic information about the teacher that implemented this project. Next, methods employed in our project will be provided. Then, a description of the student data and analysis procedures is discussed. Next, we focus on the findings from our study and follow with a discussion section. Finally, we close the article with limitations from our study and recommendations for future research studies to build upon our project.

Literature Review

Teaching public issues in social studies education has been a central topic to the field over the last century (Dewey, 1916; Evans, 2004, 2021; Evans et al., 1996; Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Schul, 2023). We define public issues as those within society that impact and drive discussions during a time period. Often, people hold divergent views on solutions to these topics. These public issues have ripple effects over multiple facets of citizens' daily lives and are difficult to resolve since these topics are often debated, discussed, and argued across years, generations, and in some cases centuries (Evans et al., 1996; Evans, 2021). Some examples of such public issues like this include solutions to affordable healthcare for the average American, the role of protests in times of war, and the role of the federal government in citizens' daily lives. People's solutions to public policies are often impacted by their economic, cultural, religious, regional, and political backgrounds, which are diverse throughout the United States (Blevins et al., 2018; Levstik & Barton, 2015).

Social studies education scholars have advocated for K-12 social studies teachers to include the teaching of public issues in their classrooms in order to prepare students to be actively involved democratic citizens (Evans & Saxe, 1996; Oliver & Shaver, 1966). In order to accomplish this, students need learning opportunities that examine divergent solutions to public issues proposed by politicians, special interest groups, and corporations. Students benefit from researching the potential ripple effects of these plans on themselves, members of their local communities, individuals in the state, and nation as a whole. Such classroom activities help to prepare students with the skills and knowledge future democratic citizens must possess in order

to deconstruct public policy plans to make informed decisions. The ability to make informed decisions about policies and political candidates to support is critical since democratic citizens are the stewards that protect the vitality of U.S. democracy (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2017; NCSS, 2013b).

One key to teaching public issues is helping students to realize some of their future roles as democratic citizens. Democratic citizenship is not a passive process (Parker, 2015). However, there are many Americans skeptical about the impact that they can have on U.S. politics. They see how political hyper-partisanship over the last 30 years has impacted the U.S. political landscape causing public policies to not be addressed. Often, only partial solutions to issues are reached with little being accomplished (Dovere, 2021; Halperin & Heilemann, 2013; Kornacki, 2018). This problem is compounded by the fact that public policies over the last 40 years have overwhelmingly benefited the most affluent in U.S. society, as lower- and middle-income Americans' wages have remained for the most part stagnant (Bartels, 2016; Frank, 2004; Halperin & Heilemann, 2013; Perlstein, 2020). Due to these factors, it is critical for social studies teachers to focus on historical and contemporary figures that utilized their agency and took civic action to confront and change economic, cultural, and political institutions (Barton, 2012; Levstik & Barton, 2015). Some historical and contemporary examples that might be explored include civil rights activists that participated in protests following Breonna Taylor's death and women that marched for the right to vote during World War I. By studying examples like the ones mentioned, students grasp the power of their agency as democratic citizens to change U.S. society (Barton, 2012; Levstik & Barton, 2015; NCSS, 2013b).

Teaching Public Issues Connected to Race

Many middle school social studies teachers are hesitant to discuss controversial public issues, especially those connected to topics of race. They are concerned parents may complain to school administrators when discussing certain topics. They also fear a lack of support from school administrators. There is also the concern that some teachers feel they lack the knowledge and skills to guide the discussion of such potential controversial issues (Dunn et al., 2018; Gross & Terra, 2019; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2016; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). These fears have been heightened with many Republican lawmakers on the state level attempting to limit the discussion in the K-12 social studies classrooms with issues connected to race (Harvey, 2020; NCSS, 2020; Serwer, 2021).

Many students' daily lives are impacted by issues of race (Bolgatz, 2005a; Howard & Navarro, 2016). This reality creates difficult discussions with issues connected to race for both the students and teacher (King et al., 2018). However, these discussions are essential in preparing students to interact within a pluralistic democracy of the United States (Bolgatz, 2005b). U.S. history teachers need to design learning opportunities for students to research different groups' lived experiences. These learning opportunities allow students to grasp diverse perspectives and beliefs about public issues (Banks, 2014) and articulate how systemic racism has and still does impact numerous facets of oft-marginalized groups' daily lives (Freire, 1970). Students need learning opportunities to research how African Americans impacted and altered the trajectory of U.S. society by taking civic action to confront and challenge racial discrimination (King, 2020). We designed our project to model one way this could be done.

Theoretical Framework

Social constructivist theory directed our project. Social constructivist theory advocates that students need classroom activities to improve their understanding of topics through educational experiences and social interactions (Kohlmeier & Saye, 2019; Van Hover & Hicks, 2017). Social constructivists argue students process new content through the schematic optics of previous learning experiences. Knowledge is not a novel product of original thought but rather a construction of students' prior educational learning experiences and current analysis of topics (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). As students' schema form their analysis and interpretation of new primary and secondary sources, social constructivists believe social studies teachers need to design learning experiences to cultivate curiosity and guide student examination of a topic.

K-12 students utilizing the heuristics of social scientists apply background knowledge during their analysis of primary and secondary sources. Students' interpretations are fluid as they come into contact with new information that may potentially change their beliefs while also complicating their thinking of and understandings about historical and contemporary issues (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Benassi et al., 2014). The cognitive dissonance students experience between prior knowledge and new information results in them having to reach new conclusions to process these incongruities. All of the steps described here restructure the social studies class to move students from a passive to an active role when exploring the past (Nokes, 2019; Wineburg, 2018). Through these steps, students ask more questions and complete historical research to find answers. A social studies class that utilizes social scientists' heuristics

prepares students with the analysis skills to deconstruct arguments and employ evidence in order to make informed decisions about public policies and politicians to support. The informed action taken by democratic citizens is vital to move beyond the current impasse in contemporary U.S. politics (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; NCSS, 2013a, 2013b).

Research Methods

Project Overview

Our project was implemented in August 2022. Frederick Douglass was selected because his civil rights advocacies occurred before, during, and after the U.S. Civil War. Douglass was born into slavery, but he ran away from Maryland to New York. He sought out opportunities to learn how to read and applied that knowledge after freedom to running his own newspaper and writing his autobiography to speak out about the evils of slavery (Blight, 2018; Buccola, 2016; Douglass, 2003; Hunt, 1993; Stauffer & Gates, 2016). Frederick Douglass was also active during the U.S. Civil War by helping to recruit African American soldiers to fight for the Union and after this conflict by becoming the president for the Freedman's Savings Bank to help African Americans secure loans to rebuild their lives (Blight, 2018; Hunt, 1993; Kilmeade, 2021).

The sixth-grade teacher told us that this would be the first time to her knowledge that students had completed activities focused on developing their disciplinary thinking skills for civics, history, economics, and geography. Given this, we designed our one-week project focusing on Frederick Douglass to ease the students into the processes of applying the heuristics of social scientists. Our goal with this one-week project was to show the challenges African Americans faced before and after the U.S. Civil War as well as how Frederick Douglass's advocacies were designed to challenge racial discrimination in U.S. society.

We received administrative approval to conduct this project as well as obtained parental consent and student assent to use students' handouts for this study. Students' handouts were utilized to answer the following two research questions.

1. In what ways, if any, do students articulate the challenges African Americans faced in the slavery system?
2. In what ways, if any, do students articulate the civic actions taken by Frederick Douglass to challenge racial discrimination in U.S. society?

Participants

This project occurred in a sixth grade U.S. history classroom at a free public charter school in a mid-size Southern city. The sixth grade U.S. history teacher at the free public charter school requested that we implement the project in her school to show the diverse student body the impact of people of color had on U.S. history. It was implemented in the sixth grade U.S. history teacher's four classes. There were 103 sixth-grade students that participated in this study. Fifty-four percent (n = 56) were female, and 46% (n = 47) students were male. Ninety students identified as African American, two students identified as White, two students identified as Hispanic/Latino, one student identified as Asian, one student identified as Native American, and one student identified as two or more races.

Participants were taught social studies daily for sixty-five minutes. The teacher of record had been teaching in middle and high schools for over a decade in the Southeast with two of those years being at this charter school. The teacher is a cisgender white female. The mission of the school is focused on preparing students to become change agents to solve problems and excel in a global society, which dovetailed nicely with the focus of our project.

Steps of the Project

On day one of the project, the teacher provided some background knowledge about the U.S. slavery system. Her focus was to explore conditions African Americans endured in the slavery system. She also discussed how African Americans tried to escape the slavery system by running away to the North. Various visual primary sources and excerpts of text-based primary sources were utilized to explore these concepts. These primary sources helped students to contextualize the racial discrimination African Americans faced. The class discussion also focused on how the Underground Railroad was key to helping slaves escape. This background information was needed to set up our project on Frederick Douglass.

On day two, the teacher completed a read-aloud of *Frederick's Journey: The Life of Frederick Douglass* (Rappaport, 2018). While the teacher did the read-aloud, students jotted down ways in which Frederick Douglass took civic action. They shared their answers at the end of the read-aloud. It took the majority of day two to complete the read-aloud of this trade book. Then, students started in groups to complete the Put Yourself in the Picture Handout (See Appendix A). The purpose of this handout is to help students to deconstruct the trade book.

On day three, students continued to work in groups on the Put Yourself in the Picture Handout. It took the majority of day three to complete this handout. Students shared their responses to questions in a class discussion with this handout to end day three.

On day four, the teacher reinforced content covered in the trade book about Frederick Douglass by having the students watch clips from the following video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBdpS2WWAdk>. This video provides a short overview of Douglass's life and advocacies. Then, the teacher asked the following questions.

1. How was Frederick Douglass civically active? How did he get involved in helping others?
2. What were the risks that Frederick Douglass took by speaking out?
3. What would have happened if Frederick Douglass did not speak out against slavery?

The teacher started with this activity to make sure students had a firm grasp of Frederick Douglass's life and civic advocacies. Next, students worked on the Life of Frederick Douglass Handout in groups. The questions in the four columns of this handout were designed to help students articulate using evidence from the trade book key items about Frederick Douglass's childhood, education, escape to freedom, and fight against racial injustices. Students worked on days four and five to complete this handout. They turned in this handout to end day five.

Student Data Sets

There were two data sets collected to answer the two research questions for this project: Put Yourself in the Picture Handout and Life of Frederick Douglass Handout. The Put Yourself in the Picture Handout was designed to help students contextualize the challenges African Americans faced due to racial discrimination. The Life of Frederick Douglass Handout was set up to help students grasp the obstacles he faced as well as his civic actions to overcome such obstacles.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research practices framed our one-week project. The use of qualitative research practices was a logical choice for our project because we were interested in how the students would articulate in their writing the impact of the slavery system on African Americans as well as how Frederick Douglass's advocacies were designed to challenge racism (Dinkleman & Cuenca, 2017). We wanted to collect and code students' written artifacts to see how they potentially described these items (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Saldaña, 2013; Williams &

Moser, 2019). All of the students' writing samples were coded and moved from particularistic (singular) to generalizable (whole). We utilized both inductive and deductive methodologies to examine students' writing (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell, 2013; Williams & Moser, 2019). One of the authors did the initial coding of all of the students' handouts, and then, two of the authors reviewed the codes to ensure accuracy with student work to the themes identified.

We read all of the students' writing samples in the two handouts. Emergent patterns, or themes, were sought and identified. Once themes were identified, a matrix was created. Student work, in whole (entire document) or in parts (particular section or quote), was ascribed to its respective theme(s) (Miles, et al., 2014), allowing for ease of thematic identification and correlation. All identified themes will be discussed in the findings section. The following sections contain writing samples that underscore students' emergent understanding of civic action from both individual and societal perspectives. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used with student work.

Findings

Put Yourself in the Picture Handout

From coding students' Put Yourself in the Picture Handouts, there were three themes that emerged. These three themes were the violence and injustices of the slavery system, a desire by the students for African Americans to escape the slavery system, and Frederick Douglass's civic actions to challenge racial discrimination. We discuss each theme in the following sections with sample excerpts from students' Put Yourself in the Picture Handout.

Violence and Injustices of the Slavery System

Most of the students focused on the violence and injustices of the slavery system discussed in *Frederick's Journey* (Rappaport, 2018). For example, Finley wrote, "I think he (slave owner) was hitting her (Frederick's mom) with his belt and hitting her on the back. He also took her child." This type of answer was common for the first question in this handout. Finley also stated that the image shows "a man taking a child, a child yelling, and a mom crying." Finley's statement is referencing Frederick Douglass being taken from his mother as a child by the slave owner. River makes a similar statement as Finley but takes it a step farther by arguing the following. "The woman doesn't deserve to be being beat." Here, River argues about the injustices from the slavery system. These two students' writing samples in this handout were representative of students that focused on the injustices of the slavery system.

Escaping the Slavery System

Not surprisingly, the students that focused on images connected to the brutality of the slavery system also expressed a desire for African Americans to escape in their handouts. For example, Casey argued for wanting to see the following. “I want Frederick returned to his mom.” This student went on to argue, “I want Frederick to be free and have a good childhood.” Dakota stated for Frederick Douglass to realize his dream that he needed to relocate. “I want to see Frederick Douglass and his mom in New York City and not in slavery.” Casey and Dakota’s arguments in this handout convey that Frederick Douglass should relocate to escape the evils of slavery.

Several of the students argued that Frederick Douglass and his mom should fight the slave owner. Jamie argued for “Frederick Douglass to beat up his master” based on Douglass’s bad treatment. In a similar fashion, Drew stated that “Frederick Douglass should bite the slave owner to get away.” Jamie and Drew’s arguments in their handouts both stress that direct confrontation is needed by Frederick Douglass and his mom to confront the violence they faced. There were also a few students that argued for Frederick Douglass to run away, which can best be seen with one of Jamie’s comments. Jamie stated, “Frederick Douglass needs to run away and escape slavery.” Several students conveyed in their handouts the actions that were needed to confront the injustices of the slavery system.

Frederick Douglass’s Civic Actions

There were about a half dozen students that selected an image from the trade book that focused on Frederick Douglass’s civic advocacies to discuss in their handouts. For example, Charlie stated, “I think the man (Frederick Douglass) stood up for himself, and he fought for his rights.” Denver argued that actions taken by Frederick Douglass were needed to cause change. “It is history. We got people that stood up for the country (presumably the democratic ideas in the U.S. Constitution).” Emerson argued that Frederick Douglass took civic actions to address slavery. “Frederick Douglass is trying to convince the Senate to stop slavery.” Stevie stated that Frederick Douglass is trying to cause change through “his speeches” about the evilness of slavery, and through his actions, “he is now famous.” All of these students’ comments in the Put Yourself in the Picture Handout illustrate that Frederick Douglass took civic actions to challenge the racist slavery system in the United States.

Life of Frederick Douglass Handout

There were several notable themes that emerged from analyzing students' Life of Frederick Douglass Handout. In the next sections, we highlight themes that emerged in each column of this handout. Student quotes for each column in the Life of Frederick Douglass Handout are provided.

First Column: Frederick Douglass's Childhood

In the first column, students did a good job of describing Frederick Douglass's childhood. Most students focused their answers in this column on Douglass's life as a slave. For example, Finley wrote that, "Frederick was taken from his mom and was whipped. Douglass's old master made Frederick sleep on a clay floor in a closet." Blake stated that, "Frederick had to wear the same clothes every day." Skyler also described Douglass's relationship with his mother. "He was taken from his mom and lived with his grandparents." Skyler went on to say that, "Douglass's mom died when he was seven, and he never knew that she was ill." Such comments in the first column of this handout illustrate how students articulated details about the horror of the slavery system covered in the trade book.

Second Column: Frederick Douglass's Education

Students' comments in the second column of this handout demonstrate the lengths that Frederick Douglass went to in order to learn how to read. Spencer wrote that Douglass's motivation for reading was because "he knew words are power." In order gain this "power," Spencer wrote that, "He snuck into the library to get smarter." Alexis stated that, "Mistress Sophia taught Frederick the alphabet so he can learn to read the Bible." Max wrote, "Douglass traded food for kids to help him read." Alexis argued, "Frederick read newspapers he found in the street." All of these details were provided in the trade book explored the steps taken by Frederick Douglass to learn how to read. Students' responses to the second column of this handout demonstrate their ability to make evidence-based claims.

Third Column: Frederick Douglass's Escape to Freedom

The students articulated that Frederick Douglass's escape to freedom took different forms in the third column of this handout. First, several students mentioned that Douglass's escape to freedom also connected to literacy. Hayden argued that, "He (Douglass) learned to read and write." Skyler explained one of the steps Douglass took to become literate. "He (Douglass) traded food for reading lessons even knowing he could get whipped." Similar to Skyler's

argument, Avery mentioned that, “Douglass published a book about his life.” These students grasped for true freedom from the slavery system that Frederick Douglass would need to become literate.

Logically, the most frequent students’ comments in the third column of this handout focused on Frederick Douglass running away. Riley quoted part of the trade book to mention how Douglass’s aunt had inspired him. “Her success made me seriously think of an escape.” Harper provided some detail about steps Douglass took to escape. “Douglass escaped to New York to marry Anna.” Stevie wrote, “Frederick posed as a free seaman.” The reason for all of the steps taken by Douglass were summarized succinctly in one of Cameron’s statements, “Douglass was inspired with a determination to be a free man.”

Fourth Column: Frederick Douglass’s Fight against Injustices

Similar to the other three columns, students provided rich details in the fourth column of this handout about the numerous ways Frederick Douglass fought against injustices. First, several students mentioned Douglass’s alliances to accomplish his goals. Harper stated, “Frederick teamed up with Abraham Lincoln to end slavery.” In a similar way, Avery said, “Frederick worked with Harriet Tubman through the Underground Railroad.” These students’ comments in this handout show that to achieve Douglass’s goals that he needed allies.

Several students also focused on Frederick Douglass’s speaking tours to raise awareness of issues. Parker stated, “He (Douglass) spoke in different states about his life as a slave.” Parker went on to say Douglass’s advocacies were not confined to ending slavery. “Douglass fought for black men and women’s rights.” Similar to Parker’s arguments, Harper described Douglass’s advocacies for women’s rights. “Douglass spoke to many people to end slavery and give women and black people voting rights.” The students’ comments in the fourth column of their handouts speak to Frederick Douglass’s lifelong commitment to ensuring all groups have equal rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.

Unexpectedly, there were four students that focused on Frederick Douglass’s advocacies for civil rights issues in the North in the fourth column of their handouts. Emerson said, “He (Douglass) spoke about prejudice in the North, and people threw eggs, but he didn’t stop.” Specifically, several students focused on the pay of African Americans that served in the Union army. Cameron argued, “Black soldiers got only half the pay of white soldiers and were given inferior weapons.” Due to this, Hayden commented that Douglass “fought for Black soldiers.”

These students' comments were surprising given the focus of the project was really centered on Frederick Douglass's life as an enslaved person and his civic actions taken to oppose racial discrimination primarily with states that had slavery. However, those students' comments in the fourth column of this handout demonstrate an understanding that racial discrimination African Americans faced in the U.S. was not a sectional public issue but a national public issue.

Discussion

The findings from analyzing students' two handouts indicate three over-arching takeaways. We provide the three over-arching takeaways below.

1. Students consistently made evidence-based claims drawing on details mentioned in the trade book read and short video watched.
2. Students used the trade book and video to contextualize the time period being studied.
3. Students articulated how Frederick Douglass's civic actions both small and large challenged the slavery system and racist arguments underpinning U.S. society.

In the next sections, we discuss each takeaway.

Evidence-Based Claims

The essence of social studies education reform over the last decade has been an emphasis on developing K-12 students' civic, economic, geographic, and historical thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills (NCSS, 2013a; Nokes, 2019; Wineburg et al., 2013). The findings from our one-week project show that students' disciplinary literacy, thinking, and argumentation skills were strengthened. The most obvious evidence that we can point to support our argument is the high-quality work demonstrated by Life of Frederick Douglass Handout. Students' answers on this handout consistently demonstrated the ability to make evidence-based arguments. Students listed details from the trade book read to answer questions in the four columns of this handout. The majority of the students listed over a dozen details from the trade book to answer questions in this handout. We argue that the best example with the positive impact of this handout can be seen in Emerson's handout that we provide in Figure 1. It was clear that students were able to support their arguments by drawing on evidence, which is one of the foundational skills social scientists employ (Monte-Sano et al., 2014; Waring, 2021).

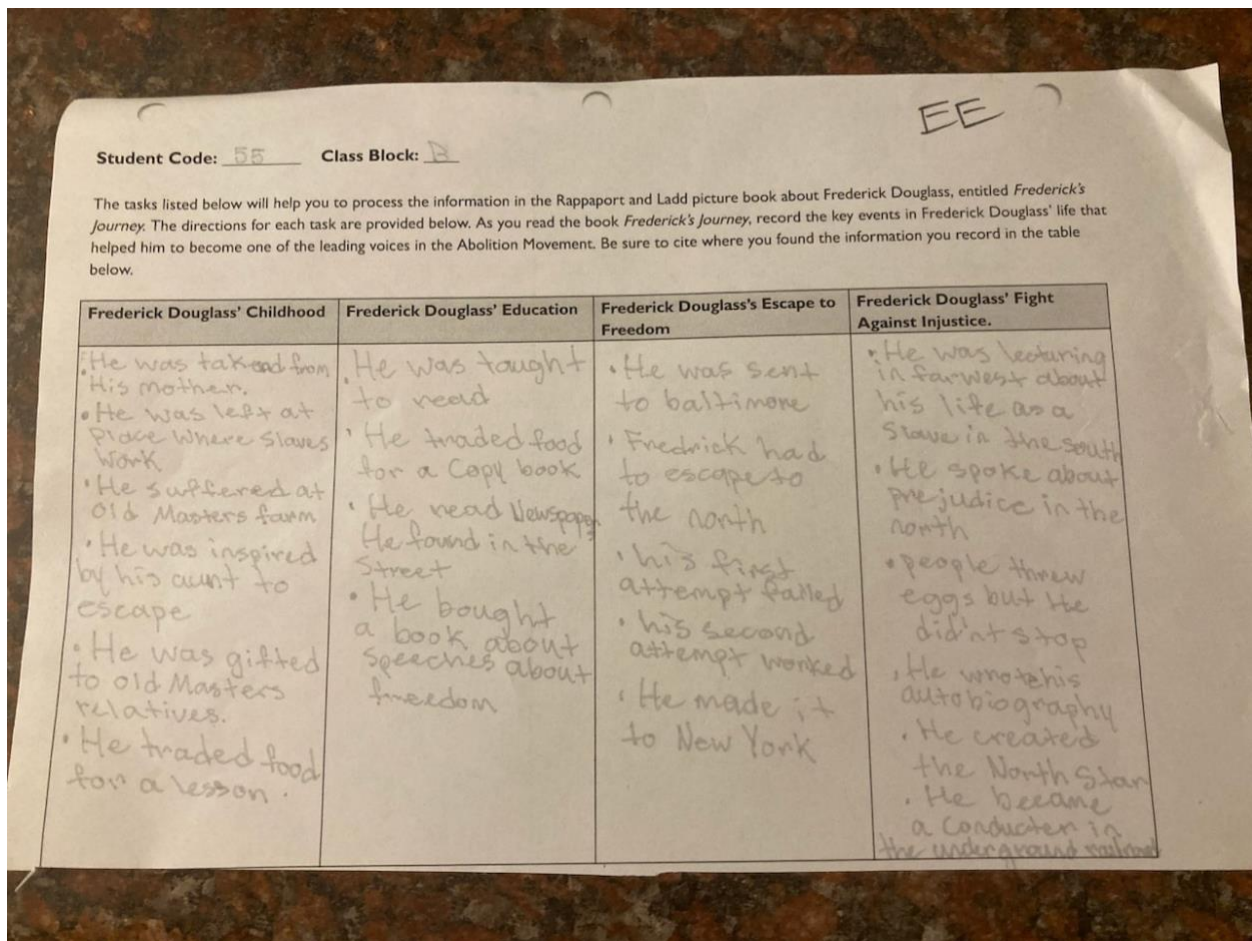
Contextualizing Frederick Douglass's Era

Students' responses to both handouts further show that their disciplinary thinking skills were strengthened by contextualizing U.S. society before, during, and after the U.S. Civil War.

Students were able to identify unique features and mindsets particular to specific time periods. For example, four students identified the pay gap between Black and White Union soldiers during the U.S. Civil War in their Life of Frederick Douglass Handout. Another example of contextualizing the time period was several students in the Life of Frederick Douglass Handout discussed the need for Frederick to run away to the North to avoid slavery and explain how the Underground Railroad helped slaves accomplish this goal. The need for the Underground Railroad was specific to the 19th century and eras where the institution of slavery existed. The fact that a large number of students could articulate the need for the Underground Railroad shows that they could distinguish unique features of American life in the time periods covered in the trade book about Frederick Douglass (Nokes, 2013; Seixas & Morton, 2012).

Figure 1.

Emerson's Life of Frederick Douglass Handout



The Impact of Frederick Douglass's Civic Actions

Almost all students directly spoke to Frederick Douglass's civic actions in the Life of Frederick Douglass Handout. They captured the diverse ways that Frederick Douglass took civic actions to confront and challenge racial discrimination. These include learning how to read, escaping slavery, writing books to share his experiences, and arguing that African Americans and women should have the right to vote in the United States to name a few. Students argued that all of these actions demonstrated Frederick Douglass's impact on U.S. society and how he attempted to challenge racial discrimination.

What the students left unsaid was that all of these actions demonstrate the scope that slavery and racial discrimination had on impacting African Americans' daily lives in the 19th century. For example, students did not consider the full scope of racism that an African American male learning to read was a major challenge to the social, cultural, and political order of the U.S. slavery system in the 19th century. They also did not unpack the fact that African Americans had to break the law by running away to flee the unjust slavery system. Again, this fact shows that the students were not digging below the surface to completely unpack the full scope of racism in U.S. society during Frederick Douglass's lifetime.

Limitations and Suggestions

There are several limitations with this one-week project. Our one-week project is a qualitative study. This means that the findings are not generalizable and must be considered within their context. However, the findings from our project do offer some guidance for the potential impact of K-12 social studies teachers that hope to strengthen their students' disciplinary literacy, thinking, and argumentation skills with trade books.

If we were to replicate and implement this one-week project again, there are some changes that would be made. First, we missed an important learning opportunity to help students completely unpack the scope of the slavery system in the United States as previously mentioned. Students would mention details such as Frederick Douglass learning to read and escaping to North as acts of defiance. However, they did not speak to how pervasive the slavery system truly was that would make such small actions as an African American male learning to read a challenge to the existing social order.

We would encourage K-12 social studies teachers and social studies education scholars looking to replicate our project build in more class discussions after completing the two handouts

used in our project. During these class discussions, the teacher can ask supporting questions to explore the full scope of racial discrimination in U.S. society. For example, the teacher might ask the following supporting question after completing the Put Yourself in the Picture Handout on days two and three: Why would slave owners rely on violence so heavily as discussed in the trade book we read about Frederick Douglass? This question helps students to explore the role violence played in maintaining the existing social, cultural, and political order with the slavery system. The teacher might also ask the following question: Why would slave owners punish slaves for learning how to read as discussed in the trade book we read about Frederick Douglass? This question helps students grasp the impact that literacy played in threatening the slavery system and actions that were taken by slave owners to protect the existing social order of the 19th century. While this seems like a basic step, it is important to remember that employing the disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills of social scientists are “unnatural acts” for K-12 students (Wineburg, 2001). Therefore, the social studies teacher will need to build in numerous opportunities for students to practice how to engage in the disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills employed by social scientists.

Finally, we would have added a short writing assignment to our project. We would recommend that K-12 social studies teachers and social studies education scholars wanting to replicate our project add a simple summary writing activity as an additional day six. There are many writing activities that could be utilized here. One writing activity that we would recommend is for students to write a 50-word summary about the importance of one civic action taken by Frederick Douglass to accompany an historical monument to commemorate his accomplishment; students could also draw their historical monument as well. Some topics that could be covered in this short summary include actions taken to read, his escape from slavery, and doing speak tours about the evils of slavery. This short summary writing activity eases students into the writing process and helps them summarize some of the main ideas about Frederick Douglass’s civil rights advocacies (Monte-Sano, 2012; Monte-Sano et al., 2014).

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings from this study point to certain next steps for future research. The overwhelming majority of the students were able to analyze primary sources about Frederick Douglass’s time period and arguments in the trade book that conveyed his perspective about civil rights issues. This can be seen with excerpts from students’ Put Yourself in the Picture Handout

and Life of Frederick Douglass Handout. Students were also able to successfully articulate Frederick Douglass's advocacies for civil rights issues. These findings suggest that students would benefit from replicating similar types of projects with other historical figures that advocated for civil rights issues.

We would encourage K-12 social studies teachers and social studies education scholars to select other historical figures in U.S. history from different eras that advocated for civil rights issues. Some possible examples include Ida B. Wells, Thurgood Marshall, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, and Fannie Lou Hamer to name a few. The teacher designs similar projects to the one discussed in this article by selecting a trade book about the historical figure and pairing the selected book with some primary and secondary sources that contextualized a time period. These projects help students to grasp that civil rights activists have taken civic actions throughout U.S. history to address issues of racial discrimination.

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed a project in a sixth grade U.S. history classroom focusing on Frederick Douglass. The students made numerous evidence-based claims when completing the two handouts from our project. They drew on evidence from the trade book read and video watched. Their claims articulated the cruelty and evilness of the slavery system as well as the various ways that Frederick Douglass took civic actions to challenge racism. The strength and quantity of arguments made in students' handouts demonstrate that their disciplinary literacy, thinking, and argumentation skills in social studies disciplines were strengthened. The findings from our project also speak to the potential of trade books in the social studies classroom.

Developing students' disciplinary thinking skills in social studies disciplines is not an easy process. Social studies teachers must carefully design classroom activities and assessments to help students utilize social scientists' heuristics. High-quality trade books can help in this process. As our project illustrates, trade books focusing on racial discrimination can assist students in analyzing the slavery system and how civil rights activists took civic actions to challenge racial discrimination. Social studies trade books provide historically accurate resources that social studies teachers can utilize to facilitate difficult discussions about issues of race throughout U.S. history and thus create a culturally responsive curriculum that honors and values all groups' voices and lived experiences.

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Appendix A

Put Yourself in the Picture Handout

PUT YOURSELF IN THE PICTURE: Life as a Slave

I want you to explore our first book of the year by examining the pictures. Flip through the book and pick any two pages you think are the most interesting. Imagine you are Frederick Douglass in the page that you pick. List three to five phrases describing what you see, hear, taste, touch, and smell.

Without reading the words on the page, what do you think is happening in your pictures:

Now read the pages that you have chosen, use that and the picture to imagine you are Frederick Douglass in the pages that you pick. List three to five phrases describing what you see, hear, taste, touch, and smell.

Sight: What do you see? What do you WANT to see?

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

Sound: What do you hear? Sounds can indicate something good, bad, or sad.

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)