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# Piloting Book Clubs with Preservice Teachers to Address Social Studies Concepts: A Reflection on Action Research

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## Abstract

Book clubs provide unique opportunities to authentically and actively cover content, pedagogy, and high-quality classroom resources within higher education settings. In this pilot study, book clubs were used with preservice teachers to (1) discuss available children's literature and resources; (2) encourage active engagement with instructional strategies; (3) review social studies topics and content; and (4) provide opportunities to share different backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions related to the books. Preservice teachers read a sample of children's books related to social studies concepts, completed individual literature circle assignments, and engaged in small and whole group discussion to critically analyze children's books and their use in the classroom. An action research approach strengthened the book club procedure, and student feedback was regularly elicited through open-ended surveys, then qualitatively analyzed in accordance to the four goals. Feedback for the first two goals, particularly in the areas of pedagogy and available resources, was overwhelmingly positive. Responses for the final two goals, particularly in the areas of content and multiple perspectives, provided opportunities for self-reflection and insight for future studies. This article discusses strengths and suggestions for book club goals and procedures, as well as limitations and implications for future research.

**Keywords:** book clubs, preservice teachers, children's books, elementary social studies methods

Teacher preparation programs provide pedagogical strategies and methods for effectively teaching social studies content. However, to engage diverse students with the curriculum, preservice teachers must also be equipped with culturally sensitive resources that provide opportunities for multiple perspectives (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). This pilot study provided active learning experiences in both content and pedagogy, while simultaneously introducing resources for teaching social studies topics in the elementary classroom. Book clubs allowed preservice teachers from two institutions of higher education to explore high quality children's books and discuss social studies-related topics. An action research approach and ongoing feedback informed our goals and procedures, while also providing opportunities for reflection and revision. This article describes successes from the pilot study and provides suggestions for future studies aimed at using book clubs to help prepare preservice teachers teach social studies in the elementary classroom. Incorporating Multiple Perspectives in the Social Studies Classroom

Social studies teachers face multiple challenges when teaching historical content. Time to teach social studies content in the classroom is often limited (McGuire, 2007), and learning objectives are often shaped by current politics (Blanchette, 2010). When content is taught, it is often presented as a dominant or master narrative (Takaki, 2012), which is typically Western, white, male, and of upper socioeconomic status. Available resources further perpetuate dominant perspectives, often incorrectly repainting the past as historical myth (Cowhey, 2006; Loewen, 2007), and historical figures as heroes (Kohl, 1994; Kent, 1999). Conversely, today's increasingly diverse students provide divergent perspectives that do not adhere to this master narrative, which makes connecting with the curriculum difficult (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

The C3 Framework (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013) and state-level curriculum frameworks in Texas (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2011) and Virginia (Virginia Department of Education [VDE], 2015) emphasize the importance and value of teaching students to view history from multiple perspectives. Therefore, while it can be difficult for teachers to navigate away from the predominant, master narrative (Takaki, 2012), it is imperative for preservice teachers to be exposed to multiple viewpoints, which allow them to view history from a "different mirror" (Takaki, 2012). Preservice teachers can then provide their own students with multiple "windows" to view historical experiences through the eyes of others while also reinforcing their students' own "mirror" perspectives as they contextualize their personal place in history (Tschida, et al., 2014).

### **Benefits of Reading and Discussing Children's Books**

In social studies classrooms, book clubs can be used to counteract dominant narratives by privileging the diverse perspectives of others. Reading and discussing children's books allow students to make connections that may not be fully realized through the use of traditional textbooks (Ediger, 2000). Additionally, while trade books provide more relevant content than textbooks (Swiebold, 1984; Waters, 1999), children's books provide a platform for different perspectives that are often overlooked or forgotten in the curriculum (Cowhey, 2006; Manak, 2012). These connections allow students to engage more deeply with the social studies content (Drake & Drake, 1990; Laughlin & Kardaleff, 1991; Palmer & Burroughs, 2002; VanSledright, 1995), and may help students better understand current events (Zitlow & Stover, 1998). Moreover, providing opportunities for discussion can help English Language Learners create common connections with English speaking classmates (Coonrod & Hughes, 1992; Cruz & Thornton, 2008; Salinas, Franquiz, & Guberman, 2006). Ultimately, as students discuss their own diverse experiences and interpretations of books with others, they are able to collectively and critically form their own opinions about the books and the topics they represent (Rosenblatt, 1978).

## **Book Clubs as Active Learning Experiences**

In order to counteract the dominant narrative, it is important to equip preservice teachers with methods, strategies, and resources. Many scholars highlight the importance of creating active learning experiences that are meaningful and authentic (Brookfield, 2015; Fink, 2013; Weimer, 2013). When students are engaged in active learning, they are more motivated to learn (Miller & Metz, 2014) and are generally more positive about their learning experiences (Cavanagh, 2011). Additionally, students also enjoy small group discussions (Hamann, Pollock, & Wilson, 2012) and cooperative learning (Millis & Cottell, Jr., 1998), making book clubs a particularly valuable learning strategy. By introducing preservice teachers to a wide variety of resources, they are better equipped to consider learning tools in their own classrooms and libraries. Moreover, the use of book clubs and corresponding activities provide opportunities to model active learning strategies and teaching methods while engaging multiple perspectives.

## **Pilot Study Goals and Action Research**

This pilot study was an effort to better position our preservice teachers to embrace multiple perspectives while actively teaching social studies content. An inquiry-based action research approach grounded by self-reflection (Bell & Aldridge, 2014) allowed us to iteratively explore how book clubs could be used in higher education settings. Our preservice teachers were partners in the learning experience, and we regularly solicited their feedback in order to self-reflect on the process (Bell & Aldridge, 2014). This enabled us to improve our own instruction while simultaneously meeting the learning needs and goals of our students (Bell & Aldridge, 2014). The book clubs were designed with four overarching goals: 1) introduce a variety of available resources – most specifically children’s books – appropriate for use in the elementary classroom; 2) utilize instructional strategies to use with their own students; 3) review social studies content; and 4) share diverse experiences, connections, and perspectives of the books with others.

## **Procedure**

With these four goals in mind, we piloted the book clubs across two semesters, and procedures were continually revised based on ongoing feedback from the preservice teachers.

### ***Fall Book Club Iteration***

In the fall semester, the first iteration of the book club was piloted at a Texas university with one cohort of 26 undergraduate preservice teachers enrolled in a social studies methods course. Participants were predominantly Hispanic females pursuing initial licensure in a variety of fields, including elementary education, bilingualism, and special education.

To address the first goal (introducing and discussing high quality children’s books and

resources) and third goal (reviewing social studies topics and content), book club meetings were divided into four social studies-related topics that addressed a) Japanese-American incarceration, b) refugees and immigration, c) race, and d) miscellaneous social studies topics. A university grant from one of the institutions provided funding to purchase a small sample of high-quality children's books addressing each of these topics (see Appendix A). Topics were selected based on relevant, current, and historical events which included the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Japanese- American incarceration, the current refugee crisis, and ongoing issues related to race. Children's books for the first two topics were exemplars from two separate research studies we were conducting, and books for the final two topics were selected from a combination of suggested book lists for social studies teachers and suggestions from colleagues.

In order to address the second goal (encouraging active engagement with instructional strategies) and fourth goal (providing opportunities for sharing differing perspectives, experiences, and analysis of the books), preservice teachers divided into small groups, and chose a book from the list on that week's topic. Groups then read the book prior to completing the in-class assignments. An iterative process was used to determine the most effective way for the preservice teachers to read and prepare for the book clubs. During the first session, in which students read and discussed books on Japanese-American incarceration, preservice teachers took turns reading the book to each other in their groups during class. However, this option detracted significantly from the amount of class time for discussion. Thereafter, for the remaining three book club sessions and topics, groups were given their books during the class meeting prior to book club, and were asked to read the book ahead of time. This option allowed the groups to begin the in-class assignments immediately, providing more time for whole group discussions.

During each of the four book club meetings, the cohort was first asked to complete an individual literature circle strategy assignment, which was then shared with their small groups. We adapted popular literature circle roles (Literature Circles-Roles and Activities, n.d.), and preservice teachers were given an option of three to four activities to choose from. These roles were changed during each book club session, so that they were exposed to multiple literature circle strategies (see Appendix B). After completing the individual option, preservice teachers shared their assignments with their group before they were given two to three questions to help facilitate discussion. After sharing these questions in small groups, preservice teachers then reconvened for whole group discussion. Prior to whole group discussion, each group quickly shared the title of their book and a brief synopsis with the rest of the class to provide context for their peers. At the end of the book club meeting, preservice teachers turned in a group set of notes from their small group discussion and their individual assignments.

### ***Spring Book Club Iteration***

In the spring semester, the second iteration of the book club was piloted at the Texas university with a new cohort of 28 preservice teachers in the social studies methods course. This group was also predominantly female and Hispanic, and pursuing initial licensure in a variety of areas. While the second iteration utilized the previously described book club methods and continued to focus on all four goals, additional emphasis was placed on the fourth goal.

Participants were provided a new opportunity to virtually converse about the books with a cohort of preservice teachers at another institution of higher education in Virginia. These virtual meetings were designed to provide an opportunity for preservice teachers from different backgrounds to share their experiences, perceptions, and analyses of the chosen books with others.

Zoom© provided the technological platform for conducting virtual sessions with the cohorts from the two institutions, and preservice teachers were divided into breakout rooms containing students from both institutions when possible for small group discussions. After that, preservice teachers were reconvened to the home room for the whole group discussion. However, due to last-minute course changes, the Virginia cohort was unable to attach their book club to a methods course. As a result, the Virginia cohort included two preservice teachers who met on a voluntary basis outside of class. Due to its small size, the Virginia cohort met to read all of the books selected for each topic individually, and then discussed the books using the same guiding questions as the Texas cohort to help facilitate discussion. During the virtual component, the Texas cohort shortened their individual and whole class components to allow time for discussions to occur between the preservice teachers from the two institutions while the Virginia cohort engaged in the virtual sessions immediately after reading and discussing the books.

As a result, during the virtual meetings, both cohorts of preservice teachers had already been given the opportunity to engage in conversation about the questions before meeting virtually. Since the number of preservice teachers at each institution was unevenly matched, the virtual component largely consisted of the whole group, rather than small group discussion in breakout rooms, as originally planned. Using results from this pilot study moving forward, we hope to more closely match participant numbers to allow for smaller breakout groups to meet asynchronously.

### ***Student Feedback***

Feedback is one of the hallmarks of action research. By regularly collecting feedback, preservice teachers became “stakeholders” in the learning experience and provided us with data for self-reflection and instructional decision making (Bell & Aldridge, 2014, p. 3). During both iterations of the pilot study, preservice teachers were asked to complete a brief, anonymous survey consisting of six open-ended questions after each book club meeting. These questions were designed to solicit honest feedback regarding the usefulness of the book club in relation to the aforementioned four goals. The purpose of feedback was twofold. First, it gave preservice teachers a space to reflect on the process and make informed decisions for implementing book clubs in their future classrooms. Second, it provided ongoing input on the design of the book clubs, and for strengthening our instruction at the higher education level.

Using a course management site, we uploaded a link to the survey questions after each book club meeting, and then independently read the survey responses before meeting virtually to discuss the feedback. Student responses were categorized in relation to the four goals, and we utilized the Constant Comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify recurring themes and patterns of response across the two semesters. Continually revisiting and analyzing the



student data allowed us to iteratively improve and strengthen decision-making and activities after each book club session. Similarly, comparing responses across the two semesters provided a holistic view of overall perceptions as revisions were made to the book club procedures. Twenty students provided survey responses over the course of both semesters, and overall feedback was overwhelmingly positive for both the in-class and virtual components of the book clubs.

## **Findings**

### **Feedback Regarding Goal 1**

With regard to the first goal (available resources), students appreciated the cross-curricular connections between social studies and reading the book clubs presented. One respondent said book clubs “made me realize that there are a variety of ways to extend the understanding of social studies concepts by integrating it into something they are constantly engaging in – reading and writing.” Another preservice teacher added that children’s books presented “another way we can implement an activity to the lesson plan or use during literacy circle time, literature centers, and even for independent reading.” Another reiterated that utilizing a variety of children’s books better engages students in the content and historical topics: “this helped me understand that historical events can also be covered through the usage of books. In addition, picture books greatly help young children understand historical events.” Finally, one respondent felt that “having students be exposed to literature is always the answer” and suggested that preservice teachers may not be ready to effectively use children’s books in their future classrooms without preparation: “Well, what if we are not exposed to literature? How can we expose literature if we don’t know what to expose!”

### **Feedback Regarding Goal 2**

For the second goal (instructional strategies), students generally noted that the hands-on, active learning experience provided authentic practice for their future classrooms. One respondent said book clubs were “useful in learning pedagogy/instructional strategies for future classroom use because we were able to experience the event with our group. I believe this will help us as future teachers to understand how this activity takes place in the classroom.” Another noted the book club discussions illustrated the importance of being prepared to answer difficult questions related to social studies content. Others said children’s books could be used to introduce difficult current or historical topics, and that the activities used in conjunction with the books prompted autonomy and creative and critical thinking. Finally, many students expressed appreciation for how the different book club procedures were modeled and explained, and expressed confidence in being able to now apply these strategies in their own classrooms, stating: “as future educators we are able to experience firsthand the strategies that we can

implement in the classroom. It is cool that we learned how they are applied.”

### **Feedback Regarding Goal 3**

In addressing the third goal (content), preservice teachers expressed appreciation for the selected children’s books, noting that they addressed important themes loosely related to social studies content. One respondent stated the selected books and topics made “us think about engaging ways to start topics with our students.” Another noted the books “exposed me to the portrayal of controversial topics in literature because I had no prior experience (not counting time in the university) with books that didn’t have the dominant perspective.” A similar comment stated that “most of the time we are not given different perspectives like you gave us while having to read these books. Some children are not exposed to these types of things so it gives them that perspective.” However, while preservice teachers acknowledged the book clubs presented an effective review of pedagogy, they did not always provide a thorough review of social studies content. One respondent noted books clubs didn’t offer “much of a review or learning experience; however, for an elementary classroom I think that it would be a good way for the students to learn within a meaningful context.” Other responses further suggested that a stronger connection to social studies content with more explicit discussion on how the books can be used to teach each topic would help strengthen the book clubs.

### **Feedback Regarding Goal 4**

For the fourth and final goal (different perspectives), preservice teachers indicated they appreciated the opportunity to hear multiple perspectives from peers at other institutions. One respondent noted the opportunity to “communicate with our classmates and find ways to relate the literature to our lessons is something I really liked being able to do.” Another preservice teacher stated: “I really enjoy the book club activities, especially talking to the other students in Virginia. It is different in ways that we are able to hear different perspectives and still see how they are connected.” Others noted the small group discussions provided diverse, valuable ideas and different lived experiences that would have otherwise been unheard, and “it was insightful to be able to listen to other’s thoughts on their books.” Finally, another respondent said the group discussions prompted her to “look at the strengths and weaknesses found in children’s literature” in order to critically evaluate teaching resources for quality and differing perspectives. Ultimately, responses indicated the preservice teachers enjoyed the book clubs and found them useful as preparation for their future classrooms, particularly as a vehicle for learning from others who may have different perspectives on relevant topics.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

While overall, the pilot study successfully met the four goals concerning student engagement and receptivity, there were some limitations and difficulties during implementation that will be addressed in future research studies. The first limitation regarded implementation, and whether the book club should be voluntary and interest-based, or presented as a course requirement. The Texas cohort was able to embed the book club into a social studies methods course, which provided designated class time for the activities, and communicated expectations for the meetings per the course syllabus. Conversely, the Virginia cohort was unable to make the book clubs a component of their methods class. Disseminating information about the book club in classes and with flyers helped generate student interest, and students participated on a voluntary basis outside of regular class time. Consequently, interest in the book club was high, with multiple students inquiring about the time commitment and logistics, or expressing regret at being unable to participate. However, only two students were able to meet as a group outside of class due to logistical constraints. This led to inconsistencies in attendance and participation during the virtual book club meetings. Based on these results, we suggest book clubs be attached to a specified course with regular meetings indicated in the course syllabus in order to allow for optimal results concerning participation and attendance.

A second limitation, closely related to the first, centered on finding a common, synchronized meeting time for the book club discussions to occur, as the Texas cohort met during a specified class time in the evening, and the Virginia cohort needed to ensure that they could also meet then. This meant the Virginia cohort met at 7:30pm EST, to coordinate with the Texas cohort's 6:30pm CST class meeting. The evening commitment outside of regular class time also limited the size and interest of the voluntary cohort. Though it is difficult to coordinate course schedules between the two institutions, we hope to better accommodate student schedules in future studies by including the book club meeting times within the syllabus as an assignment, and offering multiple, asynchronous meeting times for small group discussions.

Finally, because the voluntary Virginia cohort was much smaller than the Texas cohort, we were unable to fully realize our plan to use virtual breakout rooms for small group discussion. To mitigate differences in cohort sizes, it became necessary to utilize whole group discussion during the virtual sessions. While the whole group discussion was rich, the benefits of allowing preservice teachers to engage and connect more personally in the smaller, breakout groups was not fully realized. Smaller groups would have enabled members to more freely share their personal experiences, connections, and perspectives without the pressure of speaking in front of the entire group. This disparity can be remedied by outlining the responsibilities and meeting times for the book clubs in course syllabi moving forward.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Book clubs combine several components that are vital for preparing preservice teachers

for the elementary classroom. Data from this pilot study enabled us to identify successes, limitations, and areas for improvement in future studies. Book clubs provide educational contexts for preservice teachers to explore and engage with multiple types of children's books, instructional approaches, and social studies content. An action research approach provided opportunity for ongoing feedback, reflection, and growth (Bell & Aldridge, 2014). Feedback indicated the book clubs succeeded in providing first hand exposure to high quality children's books (goal one) and active engagement with a variety of instructional strategies (goal two) (Brookfield, 2015; Fink, 2013; Weimer, 2013). However, preservice teachers also noted that the book club discussion could be strengthened through more explicit connections and purposeful integration of social studies content (goal three) (Drake & Drake, 1990; Laughlin & Kardaleff, 1991; Palmer & Burroughs, 2002; VanSledright, 1995). Additionally, while discussing books with preservice teachers from other institutions provides the benefit of hearing multiple perspectives (Cowhey, 2006; Manak, 2012), we acknowledge several limitations in this approach. These shortcomings may be remedied in future studies with the following four recommendations.

First, attaching the book clubs to a specific course at both institutions would help mitigate limitations we experienced with attendance and participation. Second, conducting at least one structured "getting to know you" meeting between the institutions would provide an opportunity to become familiar with both technology and participants prior to engaging in critical analysis of the books. Third, per student feedback, there should be a heavier focus on reviewing the social studies content and exploring feasible ways to incorporate that content into the book club discussions and activities. Finally, offering multiple, asynchronous meeting times (both in and outside of classes) on varied days would allow for more flexibility in student schedules.

Book clubs engage and motivate students (Miller & Metz, 2014) while also providing them with opportunities to actively focus on their learning (Brookfield, 2015; Fink, 2013; Weimer, 2013). This pilot study enabled us to successfully use book clubs in higher education settings, and provided valuable information for continued revision and growth. Findings will be used to improve further book club iterations aimed at familiarizing preservice teachers with social studies content and elementary education methods and pedagogy.

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**Appendix A**  
Children's Books for Book Clubs

**Japanese-American Incarceration:**

*Dust of Eden* by Mariko Nagai  
*So far from the sea* by Eve Bunting  
*A place where sunflowers grow* by Amy Lee-Tai  
*The bracelet* by Yoshiko Uchida  
*Flowers from Mariko* by Rick Noguchi  
*Baseball saved us* by Ken Mochizuki  
*The no-no boys* by Teresa Funke

**Refugees and Immigration:**

*Lost and found cat: The true story of Kunkush's incredible adventure* by Doug Kuntz  
*Four feet, two sandals* by Karen Lynn Williams  
*Brothers in hope* by Mary Williams  
*My beautiful birds* by Suzanne Del Rizzo  
*The colour of home* by Mary Hoffman  
*The treasure box* by Margaret Wild  
*The island* by Armin Greder

**Race:**

*Brown girl dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson  
*Thunder boy junior* by Sherman Alexie  
*Chocolate me* by Taye Diggs  
*Grandpa, is everything black bad?* By Sandy Lynn Holman  
*Let's talk about race* by Julius Lester  
*The other side* by Jacqueline Woodson  
*The colors of us* by Karen Katz

**Miscellaneous:**

*Candy pink* by Adela Turin  
*Hairs/Pelitos* by Sandra Cisneros  
*I love my hair* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley  
*Mama Papaya's pancakes: A village tale from Kenya* by Mary and Rich Chamberlin  
*Whose lovely child can you be* by Shobba Viswanath and Christine Tappin  
*Yo soy Muslim* by Mark Gonzales  
*As good as anybody* by Richard Michels

## Appendix B

### Literature Circle Activities and Small Group Discussion Questions

Individual activity (choose one):

- **Summarizer:** Retell the story in your own words. Include at least three main events that happen in the story. Make sure the parts are important. Does your group agree with the parts you chose?
- **Artist:** Draw something about the story that you liked. It could be the setting, a problem, an exciting part, a surprise, or a prediction of what happened next.
- **Word Wizard:** Look for special words in the story. Find at least five and note why you chose them and the page number. They could be words that are new, different, strange, or difficult.

Small group discussion questions:

- How could you use this book to introduce/teach Japanese-American incarceration in elementary classrooms?
- What topics could you bring up with the text?
- What questions might you ask students during/after reading the text?
- Finally, have your own discussion about incarceration in your groups, and teaching Japanese-American incarceration in elementary school. What key points did you come up with?

Book club 2:

Individual activity (choose one)

- **Author:** Rewrite the end of the story in your own words. Be prepared to share why you wrote the new ending you did.
- **Media Connector:** Connect this story to other stories like it. It could be a book, movie, or TV show. Explain what makes the stories alike.
- **Interviewer:** Write two questions you would like to ask the main character of the story. Based on your knowledge of the story, come up with an answer you think the main character might give.

Small group discussion questions:

- How could you use this book to introduce/teach race in elementary classrooms?
- What topics could you bring up with the text?
- What questions might you ask students during/after reading the text?
- Finally, have your own discussion about race in your groups, and teaching race in elementary school. What key points did you come up with?

Book club 3:

Individual activity (choose one):

- **Current Events Connector:** Are there similar situations going on in the world today? Make notes on any current events that the book reminds you of. Jot down



your connections and be ready to share with the group.

- **Passage Guru:** Choose one passage from the book you think is the most important and share it with your group. Be ready to explain to them why you think it is important to the story and why you think it is the most important passage in the book.
- **Cartoonist:** Draw a three or six panel comic strip depicting what you think will happen next in the story.
- **Letter Writer:** Write a short letter to someone (it could be a friend, family member, etc.) as though you were the main character of the book. What would you want this person to know about you?

Small group discussion questions:

- How could you use this book to introduce/teach immigration in elementary classrooms? Would you use it, and why or why not?
- What questions might you ask students during/after reading the text?
- Critically analyze the book-did you notice any stereotypes, token characters, situations that would present refugees or immigrants in a negative light, endings that resulted in everything working out, etc.?
- Finally, have your own discussion about immigration in your groups, and teaching immigration in elementary school. What key points did you come up with?

Book club 4:

Individual activities (choose one)

- **Tweet it:** Choose a character and create a “Twitter” account for that character. Compose three tweets from the character’s perspective.
- **The Poet:** Write a poem (or haiku) summarizing your book.
- **Stan Lee:** Choose a character from the text and draw them as either a superhero or supervillain. Explain why you depicted them the way you did.
- **Timeline Guru:** Create a timeline depicting the most important events from the story. Be prepared to explain why you chose the events.

Small group discussion questions:

- What was your book about, and what are your overall thoughts on the book?
- Could you use this book in social studies? If so, how? If not, why not?
- What questions might you ask your students while reading the book? After reading the book?