



Empowering ESOL social studies students with historically based children's literature

By Aubrey Brammar Southall

Georgia State University (Ph.D. Candidate)

Atlanta, Georgia

aubrey.southall@gmail.com

In this self-reflective essay, an experienced secondary social studies educator advocates for the use of historically based children's literature in the high school ESOL social studies classroom. The teacher, who is certified to teach social studies and ESOL, explains the activities and lists the books she uses with her high school United States History students to make her classroom more culturally and linguistically relevant to her students.

Keywords: social studies, ESOL, children's literature, historical text, culturally relevant

Introduction to ESOL United States History

The English language learner (ELL) population in the United States is increasingly growing in diversity and in numbers (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). As an English to Speakers of Other Languages teacher (ESOL) social studies teacher, I am constantly looking for ways to help students understand new concepts, especially ones that relate to United States

History. Each year there is a new set of students, new languages, and new stories to pair with the state standards and the state United States History exam. Difficult concepts such as the half-way covenant and the Federalist Papers are introduced early in the curriculum. While ideas like social mobility and individualism are also taught in United States history courses, they are often paired with figures like Benjamin Franklin as the example (Georgia Standards, 2012). My job is to find an empowering way to teach students United States History and English simultaneously.

The ESOL United States History classroom reveals many triumphs and challenges. ELLs come with a variety of valuable experiences and content to share with their peers. Students have the opportunity to share their perspectives and rich culture with their classmates even when confronted with an unfamiliar curriculum that often devalues their background (Fernández-Armesto, 2014). Students' language, culture, and experiences should be included in the curriculum (Cummins, 2001). From my own experience, many of my ELLs have never studied United States history prior to entering my high school classroom. Often times before entering eleventh grade United States History, American born students have studied United States history up to seven different times (Georgia Standards, 2012). Students in Georgia study United States history concepts in each year of elementary

school and the content is also embedded in their state history course in eighth grade (Georgia Standards, 2012). The United States history lessons start in kindergarten with national holidays, American symbols, and good citizenship. Presidents, wars, laws, and founding documents are recurring themes throughout social studies courses. Newly arrived high school ELL students enrolling in United States History can become overwhelmed due to the unfamiliarity of the content.

Additionally, ELLs are quickly trying to grasp concepts familiar to American born students in the classroom. Students who have been through American schools can often recall founding fathers, presidential names, national holidays and major wars. However, United States History is regarded as one of the hardest courses for recent immigrants to achieve success (Dunne & Martell, 2013). The high number of intangible key terms such as mercantilism, sectionalism, infrastructure, and referendum paired with over 200 people and places make United States History difficult for all students. The course is especially challenging for students exposed to United States History curriculum for the first time.

My Classroom Experience

As a high school ESOL social studies teacher, I encourage my students to think critically on their own background and reflect on the culture of American society (Cummins, 2001), in order to build a solid foundation for the high school United States history content. I have found that when my students understand the historical underpinnings of the United States and can compare those to their home countries, they are able to better understand content knowledge. Additionally, in my own classroom my students are much more engaged whenever they are sharing information about their home country. Furthermore, my students have been able to participate more actively in class discussions whenever they are able to relate United States history topics back to their home countries. The reflection on their background has also increased student-reported parent involvement project research. In Table one, I have provided an outline of a children's book project I created for my eleventh grade push-in and sheltered United States History classes.

Table 1		
<i>Home Country Comparisons Children's Book Outline</i>		
Topic	Home Country History	United States History
1.Colonial Era <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was your home country ever a colony? 		
2. Slavery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did your home country ever use slavery? 		
3.Constitution (Law document) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What set of laws does your home country have? 		
4.Creation of Public Schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does your home country have public schools? If so, when were they created? 		
5.Industrial Revolution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did your home country have an Industrial Revolution? Or was your home country impacted by an Industrial Revolution? 		
6.Women's voting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do women get to vote in your home country? If so, when did they get the opportunity to do so? 		
7. Temperance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has your home country ever had laws banning alcohol? 		

As a monolingual ESOL teacher, my first instinct to help teach my students social studies content is to care for them. The classroom environment can benefit by adding themes of care into the fast paced high school curriculum (Noddings, 2005). I have never been in their shoes, and I cannot imagine what it is like to move to a new country in high school without knowing the language. "Caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's" (Noddings, 2013, p. 23). Through caring, I began to search for a way to make my students' transition to American high school more enjoyable and impactful. I helped start ELL bingo night at the high school where I teach. The rationale for the event was to bring the families of the ELL students together to meet other families, teachers, and administrators in a fun atmosphere. Additionally, bingo can be played with limited English proficiency. The ELL students are also translators for their parents and siblings. ELL bingo night has helped the parents of my students know that our school is a safe place for them and their child. Additionally, I believe it has increased parent attendance at conferences and school events.

Historically Based Children's Books

I have incorporated historically based children's books into my curriculum to give students the ability to take ownership of their learning. The way my students enjoyed using visual text and stories during classroom time

made children's books a natural progression. Many of these stories are written on a lower Lexile level and are accompanied with visuals. "Teachers must learn how to recognize, honor, and incorporate the personal abilities of students into their teaching strategies" (Gay, 2010, p. 1). The pictures allow students to make meaning of what is taking place. Additionally, stories help to break down barriers and create understanding and feelings of "kindredness" (Gay, 2010, p. 3). Furthermore, the use of children's literature allows me to bring the students' home culture into my classroom. "Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 20). Once I began instructing with culturally relevant children's books, I could see an excitement in my students. My students asked more questions, participated more in class discussions, and worked more independently.

The use of historically based children's books has helped to make my classroom more culturally and linguistically relevant. "Culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 19). Children's books allow me to bring in a variety of perspectives into my curriculum and stray from the white view of United States history. "There was

never a time when most Americans, or most people in what is now the United States, were white English Protestants” (Fernández-Armesto, 2014, p. 5).

Neito (1999) states students will feel more empowered in classrooms when they are able to see themselves in the content of the course.

Furthermore, historically based children’s books can be used for students at a variety of reading levels by differentiating activities based on the students’ L2, second language, level. According to one student’s experience, “I think it is really helpful for us because we learn new words and we learn about those people who fought for their freedom and rights” (personal communication, October 1, 2014). The use of historically based children’s books has helped my students take ownership and autonomy in the classroom. My students have become more independent learners and are able to lead group activities without constant prompting from me. While the idea of incorporating children’s books may seem elementary, the use of high content and low reading level books has allowed my students to develop a stronger sense of the curriculum and gain necessary reading skills.

Furthermore, reading is an essential skill needed for all students to gain high school social studies concepts. Reading and writing skills acquired initially through the native language provide a foundation upon which the English language development can be built (Cummins, 2006). The reading text

must be of the appropriate Lexile level in order to engage the student in new concept matters. Often times, ESOL students are overwhelmed by the information in the textbook, as they learn to write and read in English. Intimidation in the classroom plays a key role in the ESOL dropout rate. “Among eighth graders who reported in the 2000 U.S. Census that they spoke English with difficulty, only 49 percent went on to earn a diploma four years later” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012). ELLs need a curriculum that allows them to share their valuable experiences and study culturally relevant content.

I use historically based children’s books in a variety of ways in my classroom. I use the books throughout units and themes on United States history. Some students prefer for me to read to the entire class as they sit in their seats and examine the pictures, while most of my students enjoy reading the book themselves or in a small group. The use of historical children’s books has created powerful learning experiences in my classroom. Although children’s books have not been created for every time period and perspective of history, we use this lack of resources to our advantage. We create our own books to fill the missing gaps. This activity allows for students to draw on higher-level research skills. In the following pages, I will show some examples of student-created books.

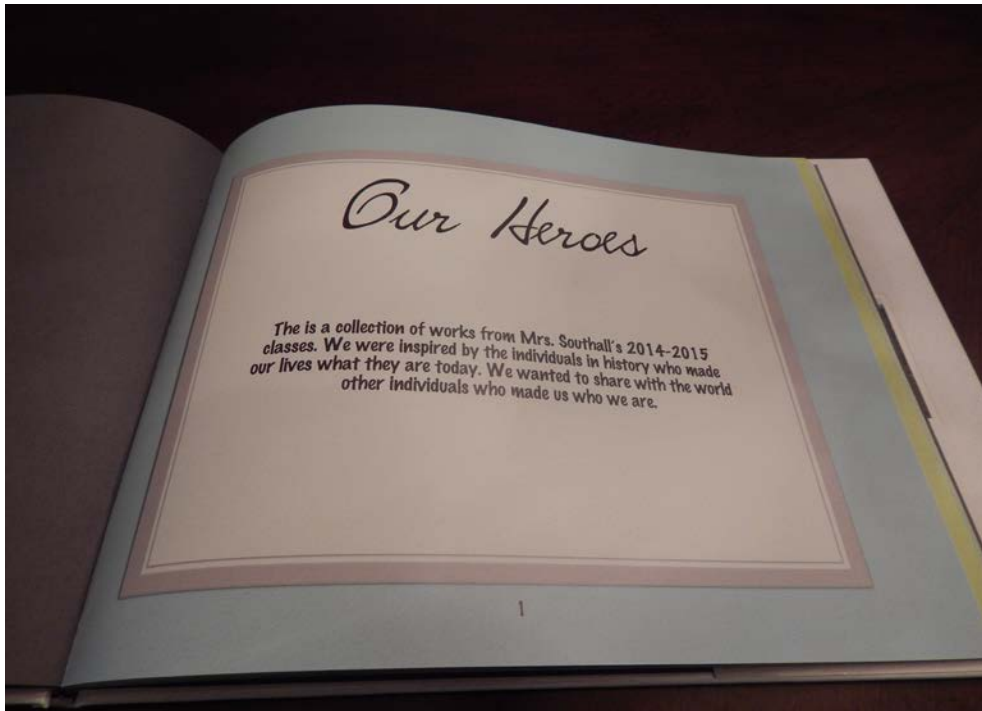


Figure 1. Students created a book focusing on their own heroes. Students wrote entries about friends and family members who had impacted their lives after studying English language learner advocates.



Figure 2. Students analyzed films and books made about major American historical events and made more historically accurate books.



Figure 3. Students made books on hard to find children's literature topics. This student chose the Incas to study.

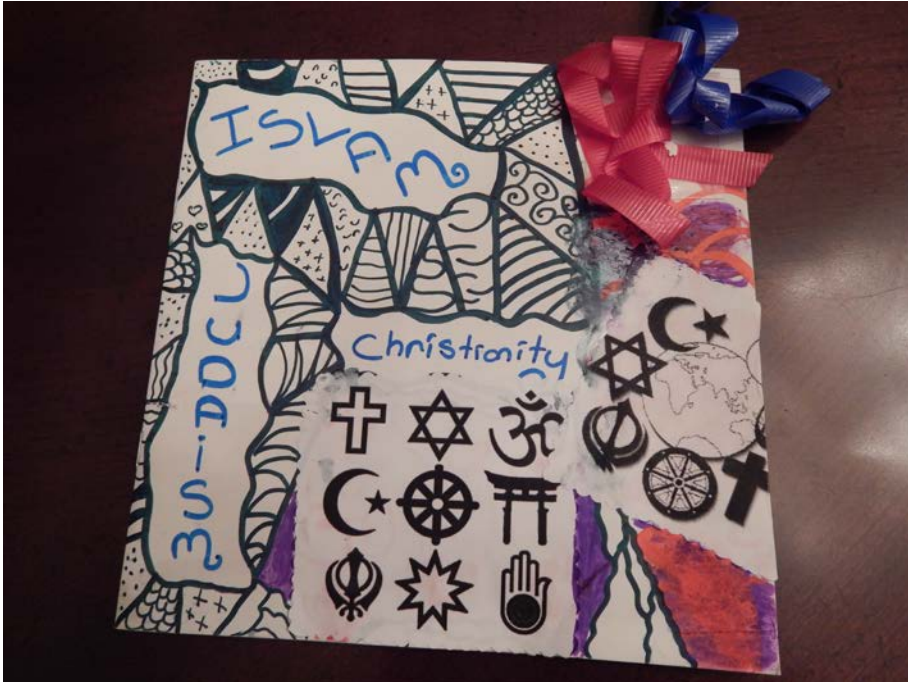


Figure 4. Students were asked to make children's books after learning about major world religions. This student compared and contrasted major world religions after learning the similarities and differences.

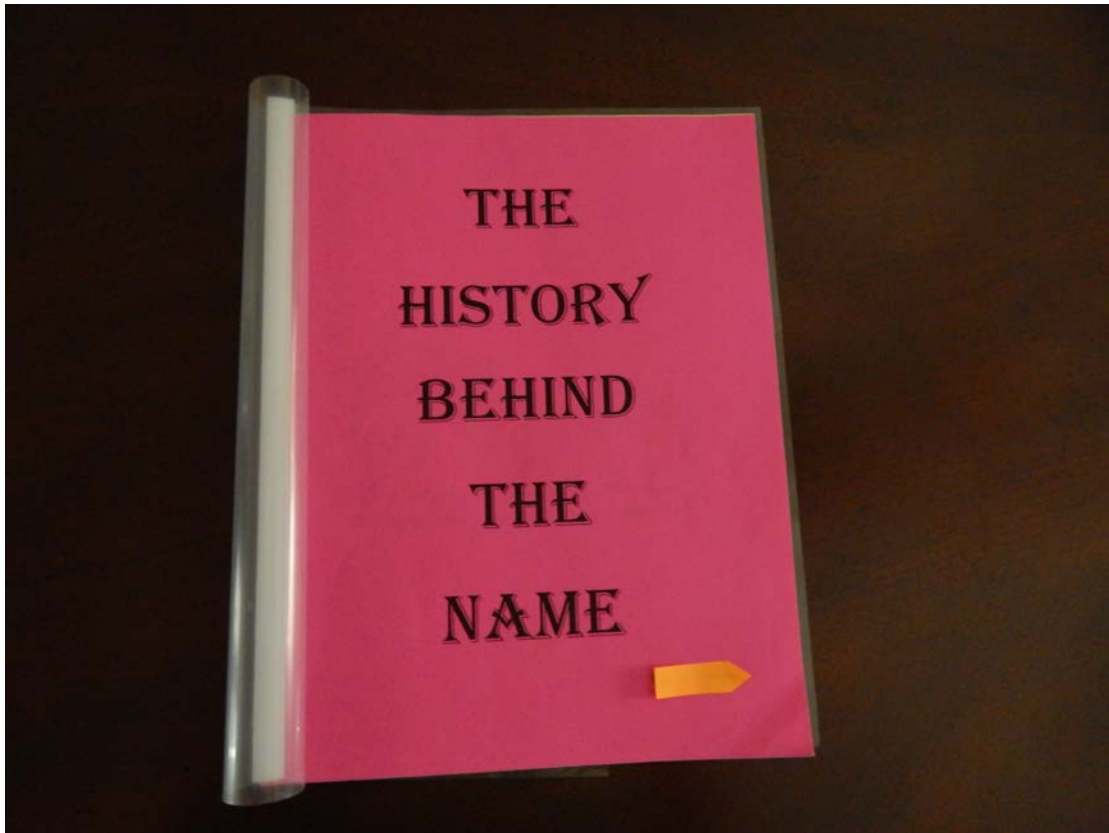


Figure 5. Students were given the opportunity to learn about the historical meaning of many American sports team names. This student created a children's book to teach the history behind major professional sports team names.

I have compiled a list of my students' favorite children's books activities. The activities listed in the next section help to build English proficiency by incorporating reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Historically Based Children's Book Lesson Ideas:

1. Read a book to start a unit.
2. Compare and contrast books on the same time period.
3. Compare and contrast books on the same person.

4. Compare and contrast your experiences with the main character of the story.
5. Critique the book and determine its accuracy.
6. Create a more historically accurate version of a book.
7. Analyze and discuss the illustrator's choice of drawings for the story.
8. Create a timeline of happenings in the book.
9. Incorporate bilingual books to allow students to share their language with the class.
10. Write a book to share a different perspective of a historical event.

In my classroom, over two-thirds of my students identify themselves as Latino or Hispanic. It is important for me to bring in historical figures of Latino and Hispanic descent into my classroom. "Hispanics belong in the entire story of the country— as part of its origins and part of every important episode in its unfolding" (Fernández-Armesto, 2014, loc. 240). Additionally, I try and bring in books that represent all of my students. My goal is that each student will see himself or herself in my classroom. My favorite books with Latino and Hispanic voices are listed below.

Books with Latino and Hispanic Voices:

- Dolores Huerta, A Hero to Migrant Workers (Sarah Warren)
- Harvesting Hope: The story of Cesar Chavez (Kathleen Krull)
- Portraits of Hispanic American Heroes (Juan Felipe Herrera)
- Roberto Clemente: Pride of the Pittsburgh Pirates (Jonah Winter)
- Separate is Never Equal, Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation (Duncan Tonatiuh)
- Si, Se Puede! Yes, We Can!: Janitor Strike in L.A. (Diana Cohn)
- Sonia Sotomayor: A Judge Grows in the Bronx (Jonah Winter)
- That's Not Fair! : Emma Tenayuca's Struggle for Justice (Carmen Tafolla)

Additionally, many of my students are new comers to the United States.

Books about immigration allow my students to have crucial conversations about their experiences with their classmates. Furthermore, it allows for discussion on the theme of immigration throughout United States history.

Books about Immigration:

- I Hate English (Ellen Levine)
- Grandfather's Journey (Allen Say)
- One Green Apple (Eve Bunting)
- Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote (Duncan Tonatiuh)

- Paper Son: Lee's Journey to America (Helen Foster James & Virginia Shin- Mui Loh)
- When Jesse Came Across the Sea (Amy Heist)
- The Name Jar (Yangsook Choi)

The perspective of minoritized people is often hard to find in the traditional United States history textbook. Often minoritized people are offered on a few glossy pages sporadically throughout the pages of the textbook and this is mirrored in many state standards as well. Culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to show the multiple perspectives of United States history (Ladson-Billings, 2009). I believe ESOL social studies teachers should push for a more inclusive curriculum or create one themselves. Successful teachers will take many different routes to ensure student success in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

United States History Books about the Perspectives of Minoritized

People:

- A Voice of Her Own: The Story of Phillis Wheatley, Slave Poet (Kathryn Lasky)
- Henry's Freedom Box (Kadir Nelson)

- Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans (Kadir Nelson)
- Mei Ling in China City (Icy Smith)
- Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom (Carole Boston Weatherford)
- Phillis Sings Out Freedom: The Story of George Washington and Phillis Wheatley (Ann Malaspina)
- Show Way (Jacqueline Woodson)
- Sojourner Truth's Step-Stomp Stride (Andrea Davis Pinkney)
- The Great Migration, Journey to the North (Eloise Greenfield)
- This is the Rope: A Story From the Great Migration (Jacqueline Woodson)
- Three Years and Eight Months (Icy Smith)
- Vision of Beauty: The Story of Sarah Breedlove Walker (Kathryn Lasky)

Each year the Civil Rights unit is my students' favorite. Teaching the idea of progress in the United States has been empowering for my students, who sometimes comment that they feel like they are second-class citizens. We spend multiple weeks examining the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement and its ongoing strides.

Books about Civil Rights:

- Back of the Bus (Aaron Reynolds)
- Heroes for Civil Rights (David A. Adler)
- I Have A Dream (Martin Luther King Jr.)
- If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks (Faith Ringold)
- I've Seen the Promise Land: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
(Walter Dean Myers)
- Freedom Summer (Deborah Wiles)
- My Brother Martin: A Sister Remember (Christine King Farris)
- Nobody Gonna Turn Me 'Round: Stories and Songs of the Civil Rights
Movement (Doreen Rappaport)
- Our Children Can Soar: A Celebration of Rosa, Barack, and the Pioneers
of Change (Michelle Cook)
- Rosa (Nikki Giovanni)
- Testing the Ice: A True Story About Jackie Robinson (Sharon Robinson)
- Through my Eyes (Ruby Bridges)
- When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson (Pam Munoz
Ryan)

- We March (Shane W. Evans)
- We Shall Overcome: The Story of a Song (Debbie Levy)

The use of historically based children's literature has created an empowering learning environment for my students. "It (United States History) is arguably the single most important course ELL students take as it can serve as an introduction to American culture" (Cruz & Thornton, 2013, p. 95). I believe culturally relevant teaching, high expectations, relationships and support are vital for successful ELL students and programs. When teachers use their craft to provide a transformative classroom instead of a transmissional classroom, students are prepared to be effective citizens in a changing society. As the number of English language learners grows in the American public school system, it is important to remember that all children have the right to a quality education. Education should not be hindered or withheld based on race, linguistic ability or socioeconomic status.

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