

Historical Fiction and its Commonplace in Classrooms

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AS EDUCATORS and teacher educators in the fields of social studies and literacy instruction, we often find ourselves in elementary classrooms where teachers are reading historical fiction with students. Some teachers read novels out loud after lunch,¹ others use carefully chosen novels to teach the historical fiction genre in English-Language Arts (ELA),² and others have rich classroom libraries full of historical fiction that students peruse on their own time.³ We found that elementary teachers use historical fiction not only to teach the genre in ELA, but also to meet standards in social studies⁴—especially in the upper elementary and middle school grades, where social studies standards around the country tend to be focused on the United States and world histories.

In our previous work, we saw many of the same novels being used in classrooms repeatedly and began to question how they got there. Decisions on what texts to include in a classroom are complex—teachers consider factors like instructional goals, readability of the text, and engagement for students, among others.⁵ If common texts are being used in classrooms, does that mean there are novels that seem to check a lot of these boxes? Is there an unspoken agreement and accepted list of books that are treasured among teachers? Of

these texts we kept encountering, many were published more than fifteen years ago,⁶ so we set out to explore why teachers were using these texts, particularly as we, as outsiders, identified them as “dated” and/or problematic.

In this paper, we describe our findings from a national survey in which we asked elementary and middle school teachers (third through eighth grades) what historical fiction texts they use in their classrooms, how they use them, and why they chose them. Specifically, we used the survey to study the following questions: (1) *What historical fiction books are teachers selecting to use in their classrooms/with their students?* (2) *Why are teachers selecting these books?* (3) *For what purpose(s) are teachers using these books?*

Theoretical Framework

Teachers make thousands of decisions every day.⁷ Maia Sheppard and Sara A. Levy wrote about the role of emotions in social studies teaching and decision making, offering that teachers “reveal a complex procedure that accounts for students’ learning, student identity, curricular demands, and, importantly, maintaining a safe classroom environment.”⁸ Certainly, teachers’ decisions are influenced by their students. Often, these decisions are based on the teacher’s beliefs and expectations about their students rather than a reality. We approach text selection as a form of curriculum development. Curriculum theorist Joseph Schwab has written about curriculum and the practical process of curriculum making in several works.⁹ He wrote that curriculum is not a series of objectives (standards), but instead:

Curriculum is what is successfully conveyed to differing degrees to different students, by committed teachers using appropriate materials and actions, of legitimated bodies of knowledge, skill, taste, and propensity to act and react, which are chosen for instruction after serious reflection and communal decision by representatives of those involved in the teaching of a specified group of students who are known to the decision makers.¹⁰

Schwab’s definition of curriculum provides guidance as we begin to understand the process by which teachers decide the historical fiction texts to use and for what purpose in their classroom. Although in this paper, we do not aim to discuss what is “successfully conveyed” by the use of these texts, we do use his definition to think about the

“appropriate materials” of historical fiction texts, the “legitimated bodies of knowledge” the teachers are drawing upon to make their text selections, and whether or not there was “serious reflection” and/or “communal decision[s]” being made when selecting texts.

In his 1973 paper, “The Practical 3: Translation into Curriculum,” Schwab described the “five bodies of experience” that must be represented in curriculum making.¹¹ Schwab envisioned curriculum making happening among a group of committed individuals that would include teachers, scholars, and community members familiar with the students who would be impacted by the curriculum. Among this group, he stressed that someone must be familiar with the process of curriculum making itself; someone must know the learners/students well; someone must be familiar with the disciplinary knowledge (“scholars,” as he writes); someone must be involved with the “milieu,” or context of learning¹²; and, of course, the teacher perspective must also be present. In this paper, we are looking at a smaller, more micro-level of curriculum making—the curriculum that is made through the decisions of individual teachers about their particular students and their own instruction.

We expand on Schwab’s framework in this paper by assuming that teachers themselves use all of the perspectives that Schwab outlined, which he called “commonplaces.”¹³ Teachers, of course, bring their own experiences, perspectives, and biases to their classroom-level decisions, but they also consider their individual learners, the milieu of their community context, their disciplinary knowledge of integration of social studies and ELA, and may or may not employ different curriculum making processes such as talking to colleagues about text selection or reading a district-mandated novel. The complexity of curriculum making that Schwab wrote extensively about is also present with teachers’ individual decisions. We use his commonplaces as a lens by which we examine the teachers’ reasoning and purposes for using historical fiction.

Literature Review

Teachers make decisions on selecting texts for classroom instruction based on a variety of factors. This decision may be based on student interest, a connection to a particular unit of study, or simply availability of the text. For this study, we are particularly

interested in the decisions teachers make as they select and utilize historical fiction. Since a particular historical fiction text may also be used to meet language arts goals and has the potential to engage students in history content, choosing the “right” text to meet all these needs is important. In the following sections, we will share current literature associated with teachers’ decision making (particularly decisions of social studies teachers) regarding text selection, as well as the genre of historical fiction more generally.

Historical Fiction

In elementary classrooms, students are required to engage with a variety of different types of texts, from fiction to non-fiction and informational texts to narrative fiction. As teachers consider the various types of text they may use as part of history instruction with young learners, it is also important to acknowledge the different genres a teacher might use with their students. As Lee Galda and Bernice E. Cullinan wrote, “Historical fiction is realistic—the events could have occurred and people portrayed could have lived—but it differs from contemporary realistic fiction in that the stories are set in the past rather than the present.”¹⁴

Further complicating this idea of historical fiction simply being set in the past, Joan W. Blos described three different types of historical fiction: fictionalized memoir, fictionalized family history, and fiction based on research.¹⁵ Among these types of historical fiction, authors present both real and fictional characters, places, and/or events.¹⁶ Thus, it is essential for teachers and students to be able to distinguish between those factual and fictional aspects of the novel in order to best understand the story being told and the history being presented.

Historical fiction is often used as a resource in elementary classrooms to integrate social studies and ELA,¹⁷ a practice that teachers often use as a time-saver when schedules are limited for social studies in an elementary classroom.¹⁸ Using historical fiction as a basis for integration can give students more opportunities to understand multiple perspectives,¹⁹ historical empathy,²⁰ and social studies content,²¹ while also meeting language arts standards and goals.²² Amanda Rider found that students expressed greater interest in historical content when reading historical fiction.²³ Deep content knowledge/context is needed to best utilize historical fiction for social

studies/history instruction. Jaran Shin proposed that teachers of English can use historical fiction as a way to help learners be more cognizant of historical and political realities that they are part of—in addition to becoming more familiar with the English language.²⁴ For this reason, we feel it is worth examining the particular historical fiction texts that teachers are using to integrate social studies, and why they are choosing these particular texts.

The Text Selection Decision

Much of the research about teachers' text selection decisions comes from the field of secondary English.²⁵ Studies from English education research rely on surveys of teachers about their selections and reasoning. Kathryn Ciechanowski found that teachers can sometimes feel tension about choosing a text that they like and that is engaging, or choosing a text that covers the most standards—a choice that requires pedagogical content knowledge to make.²⁶ As a result, teachers often seek recommendations from colleagues and other sources. Secondary English teachers reported that their colleagues influence their text selections,²⁷ perhaps even by way of required texts at the school or district level.²⁸ Janine J. Darragh and Ashley S. Boyd documented discrepancies between veteran and novice teachers related to other influences on selection, including parental, administrative, and school board influence.²⁹ They noted in their implications to practice engagement, particularly of novice teachers, in professional organizations and conferences to build confidence in decision making.

In addition, teachers consider their curriculum and their students when making text selections. In their survey, Naomi Watkins and Jonathan Ostenson found that secondary English teachers consider the quality of the writing of the text and its applicability to the curriculum.³⁰ Teachers also consider the readability of the text and whether the students will be able to engage with the text. However, the teachers in Watkins and Ostenson's study also expressed the challenge of the time-consuming task of searching for the right book for their students. The type of text that they are looking for may not exist or be easy to find. Elizabeth E. G. Friese et al. also acknowledged that teachers worked within constraints, choosing texts because they were the most widely available or because their school or district

required them to use it.³¹ When teachers do have more autonomy in text selection, they take their specific contexts and students into account, choosing texts that feature diverse perspectives.³²

Leslie S. Rush et al. addressed text selection in secondary English, writing that teachers choose texts based on what they are familiar with and comfortable teaching, which often narrows their choices.³³ They posited that teacher preparation programs may have an influence on what teachers choose for their classrooms, being that they may first be familiar with good texts in their coursework. However, they suggested giving students more of a voice in their text selection choices, and to not be too concerned with traditional measures of text complexity like vocabulary or text length.

Particular to this study is our focus on teachers' selections of the specific historical fiction genre. Using historical fiction in the elementary classroom can be beneficial for students' learning of historical content and historical thinking skills.³⁴ Texts often go into great depth about a particular historical topic or time period, with opportunities to critique the narrative(s) presented.³⁵ Historical fiction texts that feature primary sources (like Laurie Halse Anderson's *The Seeds of America* trilogy) can also give students practice with analyzing primary sources. Jacquelynn S. Popp interviewed four secondary social studies/history teachers about their text choices, during which teachers described their selection of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. Popp found these teachers rationalized their selections based on literacy practices specific to the discipline of history.³⁶

There is very little research on elementary teachers' text selections. Susan King Fullerton et al. examined interactive read aloud recommendations for second graders from children's librarians and university faculty teaching children's literature courses. They noted the characteristics of various texts (ninety-five distinct titles) and compared the choices of these two identified expert groups. Among the recommended texts, both librarian and children's literature faculty groups recommended texts based on publication dates, text quality, gender, and race/ethnicity.³⁷ Although school librarians and university faculty can influence teachers' text selection decisions, our search did not uncover recent studies that directly center elementary teachers' text selections, and nothing around historical fiction selections.

Methods

To explore our research questions, we employed a mixed methods research design,³⁸ collecting quantitative and qualitative data from a nationwide survey (see description below). We distributed our survey to teachers in grades three through eight using social media and listservs, notably connecting through professional organizations and with curriculum specialists. One hundred seventy-four teachers opened the link and consented to participate in the study. Of these 174, 124 respondents reported using historical fiction in their classroom; 113 respondents identified at least one specific historical fiction novel used in their classroom. Among these 113 teachers, there is representation from twenty-three states and the four regions of the United States (i.e., Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, West) across rural, suburban, and urban contexts.

Online Survey

Our survey included professional demographic information, including grade level taught/teaching, number of years teaching, and teaching context. In addition, we asked about the respondents' certification/preparation (e.g., traditional, alternative, or emergency certified), noting findings by Karen J. DeAngelis et al. about teacher retention/attrition and preparation.³⁹ Beyond demographics, we asked respondents to identify one to five historical fiction texts they use annually. Once they identified a text, the respondents were prompted to provide open-ended responses to why and how they use that text, in what subject area(s) it is used, and the instructional approach they use most (e.g., read aloud, whole-class or small-group study, classroom library selection). Finally, we asked participants to share how they heard about/know the identified text. This was important to better understand the decision or choices teachers are able to make about the use of these particular resources in their classrooms or with their students.

Participants

As mentioned, this survey yielded 113 responses on self-reported descriptions of the use of historical fiction books in the classroom with students. We coded these 113 responses for this study. Each

Grade Level	Participants (Total: 113)	Teaching Assignment		
		All subjects	Departmentalized	Other
3rd	11 (9.73%)	9 (81.82%)	1 (9.09%)	1 (9.09%)
4th	15 (13.27%)	9 (60.00%)	1 (6.67%)	5 (33.33%)
5th	29 (25.66%)	14 (48.28%)	5 (17.24%)	10 (34.48%)
6th	14 (12.39%)	3 (21.43%)	9 (64.29%)	2 (14.29%)
7th	19 (16.81%)	0 (0.00%)	17 (89.47%)	2 (10.53%)
8th	23 (20.35%)	0 (0.00%)	21 (91.30%)	2 (8.69%)
No grade identified	2 (1.77%)	0 (0.00%)	2 (100.00%)	0 (0.00%)

Figure 1: Participant Grade Level and Teaching Assignment

of the 113 participants identified at least one text and no more than five texts they use as part of instruction (social studies, English/language arts, or something else). We also asked participants if they were responsible for teaching all subjects (typically identified in elementary and middle school as ELA, math, social studies, and science), if they were departmentalized (only teaching one subject to multiple classes of students at a grade level), or if they were “other” (some combination of departmentalizing and teaching all subjects). For example, “other” could be that they teach ELA and math, but teach social studies to several classes of students (see **Figure 1**).

Data Sources and Analysis

To explore our first research question (*What historical fiction books are teachers selecting to use in their classrooms/with their students?*), we asked survey participants to identify one to five historical fiction texts they use, which generated 134 different titles. We also collected demographic information such as location, grade level, and teaching assignment. We used frequency counts of titles and demographics and explored the relationships among various factors like grade level and text choice through cross tabulations. It is important to note that the survey was sent to teachers in early 2020. In the months since, many states have introduced or passed

Code	Example Response
Learner	<p>“To engage my students in a manner they can use outside of my classroom.”</p> <p>“students can relate to the character”</p>
Teacher	<p>“I choose books that represent characters overcoming obstacles and represent diversity.”</p> <p>“I love this book.”</p>
Subject Matter	<p>“Great way to connect student empathy to past.”</p> <p>“To reinforce students’ knowledge of American Revolution.”</p>
Milieu	<p>“It was the mentor text suggested by the reading curriculum we use.”</p> <p>“Connects to the curriculum”</p>
Other	<p>“While it is nonfiction, it is presented with a narrative tone, and best describes the journey of the pilgrims.”</p>
Multiple Codes	<p>“The protagonists in the stories are close in age with my students [Learner] and deal with human rights conflicts [Subject Matter].”</p> <p>“High interest [Learner], vocabulary, and the ability to cross reference multiple historical data [Subject Matter].”</p>
No Code	[N/A]

Figure 2: Schwab’s Commonplace Codes and Example Participant Responses

laws “banning” teachers from using certain texts.⁴⁰ As these laws are put into practice, or as teachers self-censor in anticipation of their text choices, it’s possible that this survey would have yielded different responses if administered at a different time.

For our second and third research questions (*Why are teachers selecting these books?* and *For what purpose(s) are teachers using these books?*), we used data from the survey that asked the respondents to select their purpose for using the identified texts and how they heard about the books from a list of provided choices. There were also teachers’ open-ended responses to survey questions where teachers were asked to elaborate or provide reasons and purposes for using each text they identified. To analyze these questions, we began by reading through the teachers’ responses, noting commonalities or trends across participants (regardless of grade level, teaching context, or book title).

Title	Author	Year	Frequency
<i>Number the Stars</i>	Lois Lowry	1989	10
<i>A Long Walk to Water</i>	Linda Sue Park	2010	7
<i>Blood on the River</i>	Elisa Carbone	2006	6
<i>Esperanza Rising</i>	Pam Muñoz Ryan	2000	6
<i>Johnny Tremain</i>	Esther Forbes	1943	6
<i>Chains</i>	Laurie Halse Anderson	2008	5
<i>Fever 1793</i>	Laurie Halse Anderson	2000	5
<i>Soldier's Heart</i>	Gary Paulsen	1998	5
<i>Bud, Not Buddy</i>	Christopher Paul Curtis	1999	4
<i>My Brother Sam is Dead</i>	James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier	1974	4
<i>Refugee</i>	Alan Gratz	2017	4
<i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i>	Christopher Paul Curtis	1995	4
<i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i>	Mildred D. Taylor	1976	3
<i>The Boy in the Striped Pajamas</i>	John Boyne	2006	3
<i>A Night Divided</i>	Jennifer A. Nielsen	2015	2
<i>Dar and the Spear-Thrower</i>	Marjorie Cowley	1994	2
<i>I Survived the Destruction of Pompeii</i>	Lauren Tarshis	2014	2
<i>March: Book One</i>	John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell	2013	2
<i>Next Spring an Oriole</i>	Gloria Whelan	1987	2
<i>Nightjohn</i>	Gary Paulsen	1993	2
<i>Out of the Dust</i>	Karen Hesse	1997	2
<i>The River Between Us</i>	Richard Peck	2003	2

Figure 3: Historical Fiction Texts Identified More than Once

As a research team, we shared initial observations before identifying three larger categories of responses. We examined the qualitative responses from each participant with Schwab's four commonplaces established at a priori codes—i.e., learner, teacher, subject matter, and (sociocultural) milieu (see **Figure 2**). Independently, each researcher read through the responses and identified one or more codes to each response. For example, if a participant shared that they read a book because it was consistent with the content students were learning in social studies and because kids “loved it,” we coded the first part as “subject matter” and the second as “learner.”

Findings

What Historical Fiction Texts are Teachers Selecting?

Inspired by the historical fiction novels we kept seeing used in classrooms, our first research question helped us to explore what texts are used across the nation by elementary and middle school teachers. Many of our 113 participants identified more than one historical fiction book they use, adding up to a total of 200 book references. Many of the respondents mentioned the same books—we identified 134 distinct titles. There were 22 texts identified more than once, some up to ten times (see **Figure 3** for the full list of titles and frequency counts). These texts address a wide variety of social studies content, from ancient European history (*I Survived the Destruction of Pompeii*) to contemporary immigration (*Refugee*). In addition, those books identified by more than one participant were published between 1943 (*Johnny Tremain*) and 2017 (*Refugee*).

Among the full list of 200 identified texts, respondents noted a variety of ways in which they found out about the books they used in/with their classes (see **Figure 4**). Among the pre-identified options, respondents identified “Colleague” most often (n=59, including further information described in “Other”), followed closely by “Awards List” (n=41, including “Other”), “Required” (n=24, including “Other”), and “College Course” (n=7, including “Other”). There were 75 instances in which teachers selected “Other,” and there were several categories of participants’ “Other” responses. For example, many participants noted institutional recommendations, like the school district, “battle of the books” event, or curriculum set, or simply access

Source of Recommendation	Number of Teachers Identified
Other	75
Colleague	37
Awards List	34
Required	21
College Course	5
No Response	5

Figure 4: How Teachers Discovered the Historical Fiction Texts

to particular materials (e.g., “found in our school’s library,” “I heard of this book and found it in our resource room”). The majority of the “Other” responses were linked to the teacher’s personal interest, from “I’ve loved it since I was a child” to author connections. Interestingly, authors were mentioned ten times among our respondents (e.g., “Patricia Polacco is a Michigan author, so she gets quite a bit of press here” and “Francisco Jimenez came to our community 10 years ago to promote this book and it has become a yearly read”).

Number the Stars (1989)⁴¹ was the text used by the greatest number of our survey participants (n=10, 8.8%). *Blood on the River: James Town, 1607* (2006)⁴² and *Fever 1793* (2000)⁴³ also ranked high, with mentions by six out of the 113 participants (5.3% each). In the following section, we explore these three texts in greater detail to highlight examples of Schwab’s commonplaces at work in text selection. We provide further critique in our Discussion.

Why Teachers Selected These Books and for What Purposes They Are Used

Our survey respondents were given the opportunity to describe their reasons and purpose for using their identified books in an open-ended response. Often, their reasons for choosing the texts (their “why”) overlapped with and related to their intended purpose(s) for using the texts. In many instances, participant responses included one or more connections to Schwab’s commonplaces (see **Figure 5**). In this section, we describe our findings through our codes for Schwab’s commonplaces, using three focus texts to highlight examples.

Code	No. of Instances (Percentages of Codes)
Subject Matter	114 (49.8%)
Learner	44 (19.2%)
Milieu	45 (19.7%)
Teacher	19 (8.3%)
Other	1 (0.4%)
No Code	6 (2.6%)

Figure 5: Frequencies of Schwab’s Commonplace Codes. Note: Individual instances did result in multiple codes, n=229 coded instances of rationales aligned with Schwab.

Subject Matter

Respondents referred to the subject matter of a text as their reason or rationale for including the book as part of their social studies instruction. A plurality (48.57%) of responses indicated using historical fiction as part of social studies instruction, and 41.14% reported using historical fiction in ELA or reading (see **Figure 6**).

As teachers described the books they selected and the connection to content, the explanations they provided spanned from simple to more complex approaches to social studies content. In the most straightforward examples, teachers simply connected to an event or time period (e.g., “it’s a great story about Jamestown” regarding *Blood on the River*), while others connected to a concept or theme like migration (e.g., “We were studying movement of groups of people throughout U.S. history” in explanation of *Train to Somewhere*⁴⁴).

Still, other teachers described subject matter in terms of perspective taking and points of view. Among the 113 respondents, six teachers identified reading with or having their students read *Esperanza Rising*.⁴⁵ One third-grade teacher selected this novel, explaining:

It takes place during the times of the Mexican Revolution. Then moves into the United States during the time of a migrant worker uprising. Many students in my class have Hispanic heritage that stems from Mexico. Each chapter begins with a crop that migrant workers picked during a specific season. Great opportunities to tie this in with authentic experiences.

Grade Level	ELA (n=41)	Reading (n=28)	Social Studies (n=85)	Unstructured Time (n=6)	Other Subject (n=12)	ELA/Social Studies (n=3)
3rd	9	6	17	1	0	1
4th	6	5	21	2	2	1
5th	1	0	4	0	0	0
6th	13	10	39	1 (author) 1 (book list)	10	1
7th	11	6	4	0	0	0
8th	1 (all of the above)	1	0	1	0	0

Figure 6: School Subjects in which Historical Fiction is Used (n=175)

A fifth-grade teacher in Texas included *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano* (2012)⁴⁶ in her class because it “show[s] a young Puerto Rican girl in a very empowering position, [and] hits on counter narratives from the Civil Rights Movement.” Teachers also chose texts to share new subject matter to their students. For example, in explanation for using *Bat 6* (1998)⁴⁷ a fifth-grade teacher shared, “Students did not know about Japanese internment camps before.”

A Closer Look at *Fever 1793*. Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Fever 1793* (2000) is set during the Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia in the summer of 1793. The story features sixteen-year-old protagonist Mattie Cook, who is forced to take a greater responsibility running her family’s coffeehouse after the disease ransacks the city during that summer. The appendix has extensive notes written by Anderson, distinguishing between the facts and what was fictionalized within the book.

Fever 1793 was described by respondents as “well-written,” “captivating,” with a “good narrative arc” where the “historical period is presented well.” In addition to the literary merits of the book, two of the six responses described how the teachers used the book in a cross-curricular way (e.g., “I wanted to do an interdisciplinary project on the history of epidemiology. I was getting my National Geographic teacher certification and was trying to combine the history of science and medicine from revolutionary war time and just after.”). It is also important to note that in addition to

Fever 1793 being used to teach social studies integrated with ELA, some participants' responses for choosing this book were coded as "learner," with participants writing that *Fever 1793* is "engaging to students" and "accessible to [my] students." This text appears to be chosen by teachers for its historical merit and cross-curricular possibilities, which also engages students in the topic.

Learner

With their students in mind, teachers from grades three through eight were attentive to learner needs and interests as they selected historical fiction. For example, a seventh-grade teacher in Michigan uses *Esperanza Rising* (2006) because "It's easy to find Spanish versions." In addition to considerations like accessibility within the classroom, teachers also noted opportunities beyond the classroom.

A Closer Look at *Blood on the River*. Elisa Carbone's *Blood on the River: James Town, 1607* (2006) takes place during the founding of the Jamestown colony, and is told from the perspective of Samuel Collier, a twelve-year-old London orphan who was brought to Jamestown as Captain John Smith's page. True events and real historical figures intersect with Samuel and his fictional friends, as he learns to survive in Jamestown and from the native Powhatans and John Smith.

All the respondents identified positive attributes of the text for their students, including "It's a great story about Jamestown and the students really get into it" and "It peaks student interest and provides many historical jumping off points." Beyond the interest level, teachers noted that this text provided opportunities to dig more deeply into the colonial origins of Jamestown, to "paint a better picture of what the colonists went through in 1607" and present a "boys [sic] perspective in Jamestown."

Milieu

Schwab describes milieu as the context of learning, which includes what is explicitly taught in the curriculum (standards, materials, etc.) as well as the classroom environment, social dynamics, and student interests. Our respondents most often referenced standards or

geography in explanation for their text choices. There were several participants that included texts because the author was local to their community or state (e.g., Christopher Paul Curtis in Michigan, Grant Overstake in Kansas). In addition, teachers also connected the content of particular texts to their locations. For example, a fifth-grade teacher in Minnesota reads *Soldier's Heart* (1998)⁴⁸ because “teaching civil war & MN soldier is the main character.”

Beyond local connections, several teachers identified texts that were recommended or required as part of their curriculum, which we analyzed as part of the contextual milieu of a school district. Ten teachers identified *Number the Stars* (more information below) and all identified curricular connections, like “It’s part of the Lucy Calkins [curriculum].”

A Closer Look at *Number the Stars*. Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars* (1989) is a story that takes place in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1943. The story centers on the ten-year-old Danish protagonist, Annemarie. Annemarie’s family pretends that her friend Ellen Rosen, a Danish Jew, is her late sister to keep Ellen from being relocated to a concentration camp. *Number the Stars* weaves in the true events of the Danish resistance relocating Jews to Sweden to escape Nazi persecution. Lowry did extensive research for the book in Copenhagen. In 1990, *Number the Stars* won the Newbery Medal, the highest honor given to a children’s book in the United States. It remains one of the best-selling children’s books of all time in any genre⁴⁹ and was the text most often mentioned in our survey.

Ten survey participants listed *Number the Stars* as a historical fiction text they use, and all ten respondents use the book to teach ELA. Eight out of those ten participants said it was a book required by their district, presumably to teach ELA. The participants shared this requirement in response to how they heard about the book *and* the reason for using it, which presumes that these participants may have first heard of *Number the Stars* because it appeared on their required or recommended reading list. One of the participants identified the fact that *Number the Stars* was required as part of the Lucy Calkins curriculum, which is a collection of reading and writing workshop units for grades K-8 that are published by the Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University. The fact that the text was required means that using it was not a choice at all. The

respondents were attending to the context, or milieu of their teaching assignment, by using the curriculum and texts provided for them. This is also evidenced by the fact that perhaps many of the survey participants had not even heard of the book prior to using it.

Teacher

The teachers who responded to our survey shared their own interest in topics and books as reasons for selecting and using particular historical fiction books. These responses tended to be short and without elaboration, such as “It was introduced when I was at Colonial Williamsburg” (referencing *Blood on the River*) or “Book that hooked me to teach history.” There were several responses that gave the simple reasoning of “I like it” or “I love it” as justification for choosing the book.

Summary of Findings

Participants shared a wide variety of texts in response to our survey, with *Number the Stars* being the most frequently mentioned. Although we did have a concentration of participants from two states, it doesn’t appear that their text selections were influenced by their common state’s standards. The reasons for selecting/identifying these texts were most often associated with the fact that the books taught or highlighted specific subject matter in ELA or social studies. Teachers also considered the students’ engagement with the text as a reason for choosing a book, but also in some cases were not given a choice and were simply using texts that fit the context (milieu) of their school or district via a required curriculum or text list.

Discussion

Participants’ responses illustrate the various and complex ways in which teachers are curriculum makers through their text selections. To reiterate, Schwab defines curriculum as follows:

Curriculum is what is successfully conveyed to differing degrees to different students, by committed teachers using appropriate materials and actions, of legitimated bodies of knowledge, skill, taste, and propensity to act and react, which are chosen for instruction after

serious reflection and communal decision by representatives of those involved in the teaching of a specified group of students who are known to the decision makers.⁵⁰

Our 113 participants gave us lists of titles, many of which upon an initial analysis appeared to be books that are well-written, historically accurate, and award-winning. Determining whether teachers “successfully conveyed” their instructional objectives to students using these books is beyond the scope of the study, and we therefore cannot truly determine whether they are “appropriate materials” for that reason. However, the three titles we highlighted in our findings—*Number the Stars*, *Blood on the River*, and *Fever 1793*—have been critically acclaimed as quality literature, engaging for students, and historically accurate. Upon our reading of these books, we concur that they should be considered “appropriate materials” by which to begin planning instruction in social studies and ELA. This does not mean that they are above critique, as we will discuss here.

We use the examples of these three texts in this section to reflect on whether or not these “appropriate materials” draw on a “legitimated bod[y] of knowledge” and were “chosen for instruction after serious reflection.”⁵¹ We chose to analyze the teachers’ responses based on Schwab’s commonplaces of curriculum—the perspectives that he said could be represented by different individuals on a team and that we argue can also be embodied by teachers within themselves.

Legitimated Body of Knowledge: The Role of Subject Matter

From this survey of elementary and middle school educators, we found that when teachers select historical fiction texts, they use books that most closely match their subject matter or curriculum. As mentioned, Schwab wrote that attention to subject matter is an important commonplace of curriculum development,⁵² but the findings from our survey complicate this idea of choosing texts for subject matter. We are left with the question of which subject matter the texts are serving.

For example, six teachers selected Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Fever 1793* for their classrooms, citing reasons that it presented historical material well and that they used the book for social studies instruction and even as a cross-curricular experience with

science and language arts. The book touches on topics of historical epidemiology and is a well-written narrative. In this case, the fact that teachers are choosing *Fever 1793* for subject matter related to social studies is encouraging. Our respondents appeared to be choosing a book from awards lists that matches their curriculum.

However, the most listed text from our respondents (10%) was Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, which was not really chosen at all—it was part of a curriculum for language arts. In other words, teachers were using this particular historical fiction text because it is within the context of their teaching assignment—their milieu. It was required, so they used it—in some cases, without ever having heard of it. The curriculum that *Number the Stars* appears in (Lucy Calkins, as some noted) is using the book for subject matter connections—just not social studies ones. Rather, it's being used to teach theme, character traits, and genre. The subject matter *matters* because despite the book not being used to teach social studies, students presumably are learning historical information (in this case about the Holocaust) from this book. Knowing that the Holocaust is not explicitly mentioned in elementary social studies standards, this may be beyond the scope and sequence of typical social studies curriculum. Without social studies tying into this book, how is the Holocaust being contextualized for these students? What exactly are the students learning about this time period? Since *Number the Stars* is recommended for readers ages nine or ten, what level of contextualization about the Holocaust is appropriate for that age? This calls into question how “appropriate” the book is. It could meet ELA instructional objectives, but be more complicated to integrate into social studies instruction. This is an area for future research and beyond the scope of this survey, yet is still a complicated integration of two of Schwab's commonplaces—subject matter and milieu.

Serious Reflection or Requirement?

We considered the reasons the teachers gave for using the books, as well as their responses about how they became familiar with their books as evidence of the teachers' reflections on their decision making. Taking a closer look at the example of *Blood on the River*, all the respondents heard about this book from colleagues, professional development, or awards lists. With this text, teachers presumably

received a recommendation and then proceeded to vet the choice for themselves, finding the book a good source for teaching Jamestown as well as an engaging read for their students. This shows evidence of legitimated knowledge, serious reflection, communal decisions (in some cases), and being tailored to a “specified group of students who are known.”⁵³ It is this kind of decision making that could possibly lead to the curriculum being “successfully conveyed,” if we take this study in that line of research.

Compare this to *Number the Stars*, which was a required text for our participants. Requiring a text eliminates teacher decision making, essentially rendering the process of curriculum making to people who do not know the specific students involved. Restricting teachers’ abilities to adapt a required curriculum (by choosing a different text, for example) doesn’t live up to Schwab’s approach to curriculum. One can argue that just because *Number the Stars* is required does not mean it cannot be a “good” book to use—it is award-winning and historically accurate. But this raises more questions: What if the required texts aren’t as good? What if teachers are choosing books that don’t feature diverse voices and perspectives? Or have stereotypical or harmful content? For example, *The Sign of the Beaver* (1983)⁵⁴ was mentioned by a participant in our survey and is considered by many to be a stereotypical and harmful portrayal of Indigenous people.⁵⁵ Although not mentioned in our survey, the picture book *A Fine Dessert: Four Centuries, Four Families, One Delicious Treat* (2015)⁵⁶ was critically acclaimed for its writing and historical accuracy, but also features text and illustrations that are racially insensitive.⁵⁷

Research in social studies curriculum needs to be more closely paying attention to the “social studies” that are coming out of literacy/ELA curriculum and instruction. We need to ask the tough questions about the appropriateness of some of these common texts. Just because a text is well written, doesn’t mean it should be used in classrooms to teach social studies without a critical eye toward social studies concepts and content. The most used historical fiction texts in this survey are at least twelve years old (*A Long Walk to Water* is the newest of the top eight mentioned books and it is from 2010)—are there better, more recent texts that could be used to contextualize the social studies content while teaching ELA skills? Would more recent texts feature more diverse perspectives?

Recommendations for Making Text Selections

In order to support teachers, both pre-service and in-service, in an effort to more critically read, evaluate, and include a variety of texts, we (teacher educators, professional development providers, district leadership) should provide space and opportunity for teachers to explore texts. This may begin with a presentation by a school or district librarian who shares new books (think of a book talk) in various disciplines. In addition to or in place of a librarian's presentation, teachers may use a planning period or PLC time to read and review various lists of exemplary books in the field. For example, teachers might review the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People by the Children's Book Council and National Council for the Social Studies (at <<https://www.cbcbooks.org/readers/reader-resources/notable-social-studies-list/>> or <<https://www.socialstudies.org/notable-trade-books>>), the Carter G. Woodson Book Awards by the National Council for the Social Studies (at <<https://www.socialstudies.org/get-involved/carter-g-woodson-book-award-and-honor-winners>>), or the Septima P. Clark Book Awards (at <<https://www.socialstudies.org/awards/septima-clark-book-awards>>), also by the National Council for the Social Studies.

Beyond exploring books that are available, it is essential to model a vetting process for any recommendations teachers may get, or for new releases they might be interested in incorporating into their instruction. With this in mind, we developed the Accuracy, Representation, and Corroboration (A.R.C.) Rubric to help teachers think about and evaluate the texts—particularly fictional texts—that they may use with their students.⁵⁸ The intention of the A.R.C. Rubric is to guide teachers/readers in critically reading a text. For this reason, our rubric features criteria evaluating the text for the quality of the plot, characters, and setting, as well as the historical accuracy and stereotypes or myths that may appear within these literary elements. Following the A.R.C. Rubric, teachers/readers are encouraged to identify corroborating evidence from other sources or to prompt teachers to seek other resources to validate the history presented in these texts when none may be provided.

We also need to support teachers' access to books, so they are not stuck with texts left from previous colleagues or forced into using whatever class set can be found in a curriculum library.

Conclusion

We see our survey results as promising. There is evidence that teachers are using historical fiction to teach social studies concepts, and many of them are choosing these books based on reflection and communal decisions with colleagues. The survey results confirmed that there do seem to be texts that are used quite often from different geographic areas of the country. *Number the Stars*, *Blood on the River*, and *Fever 1793* being three of them. The frequently used books, including these three, were chosen for a variety of reasons that attend to different curriculum commonplaces as described by Schwab.⁵⁹ Teachers are considering their subject matter and students' interests most of all, which is encouraging.

The survey results still leave us with questions about the use of historical fiction to teach social studies in elementary and middle school classrooms. The most used texts are a bit dated, some of which have aged better than others. As much as historical fiction depicts a time and place in the story, it also reflects the time in which it was written. In 2022, depicting a diverse set of places, experiences, and voices is essential. How are more modern historical fiction texts able to make their way to elementary and middle school classrooms? And when teachers are given the opportunity to select more modern texts to use, how are they imagining and envisioning the content-specific or interdisciplinary possibilities for these texts?

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THE PING - PONG POETS

AH Poetry! Thy form I see
All mangled by the throng
That warbles into ecstasy
About the game Ping-Pong.

No more the noble, stately muse
Can love of Nature bring;
No more the raptured poets use
The tender themes of Spring.

The hawthorn-tree is all aglow
With blossoms pinkish red,
But the poets do not seem to know —
They write Ping-Pong instead.

The violet has bloomed in vain;
The poppy's blaze is dim;
No rhymster nowadays is sane,
Life's all Ping-Pong to him.

What charm has now the linnet's voice?
What joy the bluebird's song?
No more in these the bards rejoice;
They only sing Ping-Pong.

Page 47 from *A Little Book of Ping-Pong Verse*. Boston, MA: Dana Estes & Co., 1902. Library of Congress, Selected Digitized Books, Control No. 02019587. Image 55 of 164. <https://www.loc.gov/item/02019587/>.