

Building brave communities: how people work together for change

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this is to share “Building Brave Communities,” a turnkey inquiry lesson for grades 3–4. This lesson leverages three recent NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Books to help students examine civic rights, responsibilities, and collective action while simultaneously strengthening disciplinary literacy skills.

Design/methodology/approach – The lesson follows an inquiry-design framework and includes a poetry provocation hook, book-station investigation, expert-huddle/jigsaw debrief, and advocacy-postcard synthesis. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning supports, and cooperative-learning structures ensure access for diverse learners. Materials include a four-row “Community Change” organizer and vocabulary scaffolds. Alignment spans Ohio Social Studies standards, the C3 Framework, and Common Core ELA.

Originality/value – The lesson uniquely combines current trade books centering marginalized voices with replicable inquiry routines that can be completed in a day. It offers teacher educators and practitioners a concrete model for integrating literacy and social studies, advancing calls for civic education that prepares democratic actors rather than passive knowledge-holders.

Keywords Inquiry-based learning, Culturally sustaining pedagogy, Civic agency, Disciplinary literacy integration

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In an era marked by mounting challenges to democratic norms, social studies classrooms have never been more critical as incubators of civic courage and collective responsibility. *Building brave communities: How people work together for change* is an inquiry lesson for grades 3–4 that uses three NCSS Notable Trade books, *Barrio Rising* (Águila, 2024), *Rainbow Allies* (Churnin, 2024), and *The Great Banned-Books Bake Sale* (Khalil, 2023) as catalysts for examining civic rights, responsibilities, and collective action. Brave communities are spaces where diverse voices are welcomed, contentious issues are explored with empathy, and civic action is both practiced and valued. Teaching students how to build them equips young people with the skills they need to navigate and improve an increasingly complex world.

A poetry provocation built on Kelly Starling Lyons’s (2018) *Drumbeat for Change*, activates background knowledge and emotion, which are two precursors to sustained reading motivation (Guthrie and Klauda, 2015). The lesson in this poem highlights the importance of creating change, and the challenges that accompany it. Students then spend time at one of three book stations, each one centering on the three NCSS Notable Trade Books. They will investigate the problems the community members confronted, the rights they asserted, and the actions they took. A jigsaw debrief follows, requiring each learner to teach peers the civic lessons embedded in one of the three focal texts. Decades of evidence show that such positive interdependence and individual accountability increase academic achievement and interpersonal regard (Hattie, 2009; Johnson and Johnson, 2009).

The lesson wraps up by having students synthesize their insights in an advocacy-postcard task that links textual themes to concrete improvements in their own school or neighborhood, echoing Parker’s (1996) argument that effective civic education must prepare students to participate as democratic actors rather than passive recipients of information. This emphasis on active, participatory learning echoes Hess and McAvoy’s (2015) finding that classrooms where students deliberate authentic public issues are more likely to cultivate political knowledge, efficacy, and a disposition to act. Responding to text in writing has been shown to support comprehension, for both students in general and students who are weaker readers or



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writers in particular. This applies across expository and narrative texts, as well as in content areas such as science and social studies (Graham and Hebert, 2011).

The lesson is grounded in inquiry design frameworks and culturally sustaining pedagogy. We intentionally sequence it in a way that blends disciplinary literacy with cooperative learning to nurture students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Grant and Gradwell, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Parker, 1996). Pedagogically, the lesson weaves together culturally relevant and sustaining practices (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and critical literacy principles first articulated by Freire (1970). The chosen trade books foreground historically marginalized voices and illuminate how children exercise agency against systemic inequities—qualities that research identifies as essential to democratic education in diverse settings (Grant and VanSledright, 2020). Moreover, the multimodal hook, vocabulary support (Appendix 2), graphic organizer (Appendix 1), and scaffolded sentence frames attend to universal design guidelines, ensuring access for emergent bilinguals and varied reading levels (Meyer et al., 2014). Because the plan relies on inexpensive picture books, clipboards, and chart paper, it is readily adaptable to resource-constrained classrooms, virtual breakout rooms, or museum-based field experiences.

Standards alignment is explicit and multifaceted. The lesson targets the Ohio Learning Standards for Social Studies related to rules, rights, and civic participation in third and fourth grade. We also build on the NCSS theme of Civic Ideals and Practices and the C3 Framework's Dimensions of Developing Questions, Applying Disciplinary Tools, Evaluating Sources, and Taking Informed Action (NCSS, 2013). Finally, we integrate the Common Core ELA standards for informational reading, collaborative discussion, and argumentative writing. This deliberate cross-disciplinary integration echoes evidence that pairing rich social-studies texts with literacy instruction strengthens both content knowledge and reading outcomes (Duke et al., 2021; Wexler, 2020).

For teacher educators and professional developers, *Building Brave Communities* offers turnkey materials for teachers. We include step-by-step directions, a graphic organizer, differentiation options, and formative assessments, all of which model the gradual-release approach known to improve novice educators' instructional self-efficacy (Fisher and Frey, 2013). We also include detailed teacher setup instructions (see Table 1). Implemented as written, the lesson sequence can stand alone during a Citizenship Week. Alternatively, individual book stations may serve as mini-lessons nested within longer service-learning projects or methods-course demonstrations of civic inquiry. In each configuration, students move beyond passive content coverage to enact the civic skills of analyzing multiple perspectives, collaborating across differences, and advocating for change.

The following lesson plan illustrates how recently honored trade books, paired with cooperative inquiry routines, can build elementary students' civic agency while satisfying rigorous content and literacy standards. By empowering younger students to recognize and exercise their rights and responsibilities, the lesson advances the democratic aims at the heart of social studies education.

Book descriptions:

(1) *Barrio Rising* (Águila, 2024)

- The story takes place in the Logan Heights neighborhood of San Diego, a historically Mexican American community that had been marginalized and divided by urban development, particularly the construction of Interstate 5 and the Coronado Bridge. The community was promised a park beneath the bridge as compensation for the disruption and land taken from their neighborhood. But in 1970, residents discovered that the government had started building a California Highway Patrol station on the promised land instead. On April 22, 1970, local activists, artists, students, and families occupied the land in a peaceful protest that lasted twelve days; demanding the park that was promised. They took action and

Table 1. Materials and teacher setup

Item	Materials and teacher setup
Poetry hook text	Lyons, K. S. (2018). <i>Drumbeat for Change</i> . In W. Hudson and C. W. Hudson (Eds.), <i>We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices</i> (pp. 18–19). Crown Project both pages; highlight refrains “You matter” and “drumbeat of hope.” Provide hand drum or surface for steady beat
Community change organizer (Appendix 1)	Table with four “Civic Lenses” rows for each book: Community Challenge, Action Steps, Rights/Freedoms Used, Results/Impact
Vocabulary support (Appendix 2)	Spanish to English translations for the words included in <i>Barrio Rising</i>
Book stations	We recommend three, six, or nine stations, depending on how large you want your groups to be. Photo copy the books if you do not have multiple copies of them. Readings of all books are also available on Youtube and could be used in a technology/multimedia station <i>Barrio Rising</i> by Maria Dolores Aguila <i>Rainbow Allies</i> by Nancy Churnin Great Banned-Books Bake Sale by Aya Khalil
Timing support	Slide deck with automatic six-minute countdowns and chime
Synthesis supplies	Half-sheet cardstock or digital template for advocacy postcards Markers or devices Exit-ticket sticky notes
Day-before checklist	Copy organizers and exit tickets Prepare tubs Label anchor charts “Our Drumbeat of Hope” and “Ways Characters Took Action” Pre-assign mixed-ability triads for the jigsaw

raised their voices, leading to the creation of Chicano Park. This book is a powerful symbol of cultural pride and resistance.

(2) *Rainbow Allies* (Churnin, 2024)

- This book tells the real life story of a Massachusetts neighborhood that teamed up to show love and support to their LGBTQ neighbors that had been victims of a hate crime. The children worked for days, delivering Pride flags to anyone in their neighborhood that would display them, transforming hate and hurt into community empathy and affirmation.

(3) *The Great Banned-Books Bake Sale* (Khalil, 2023)

- This is a powerful and engaging picture book about standing up for the right to read, community action, and celebrating diverse voices in literature. Amina is excited about her class’s book fair, but she’s shocked to find that some of her favorite books featuring characters of color, Muslim protagonists, or challenging themes have been banned from the school. Upset but determined, Amina and her classmates organize a bake sale to raise awareness and money to buy the banned books and share them with others. Through the bake sale, the kids celebrate the power of diverse books and take a stand against censorship.

Standards

(1) NCSS Themes

- Civic Ideals and Practices
- Power, Authority and Governance

- Culture and Cultural Diversity
- (2) C3 Framework (Grades 3–5)
 - Dimension 1 – Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries: D1.1.3–5, D1.3.3–5
 - Dimension 2 – Civics: D2.Civ.2.3–5, D2.Civ.6.3–5, D2.Civ.12.3–5
 - Dimension 3 – Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence: D3.1.3–5, D3.3.3–5
 - Dimension 4 – Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action: D4.2.3–5, D4.3.3–5, D4.6.3–5
- (3) Ohio Learning Standards – Social Studies (Grade 3)
 - 3.9: Rules protect freedoms
 - 3.10: Rights and responsibilities
 - 3.16: Civic participation in solving local problems (Use 4.14 for Grade 4)
- (4) CCSS-ELA (Grade 3)
 - Reading Informational Text (RI)
 - RI.3.1 — Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
 - RI.3.3 — Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.
 - RI.3.7 — Use information gained from illustrations (e.g., maps, photographs) and the words in a text to demonstrate understanding of the text (e.g., where, when, why, and how key events occur).
 - Writing (W)
 - W.3.1 — Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons.
 - Speaking and Listening (SL)
 - SL.3.1 — Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade-level topics and texts, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.
 - SL.3.4 — Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.
 - Language (L)
 - L.3.4 — Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 3 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

Use Grade 4 corollaries as needed

Learning Targets

- (1) I can describe the challenges faced by each community in each of the three books.
- (2) I can explain how people, especially kids, took action, and which rights they used.
- (3) I can compare those actions to rights and responsibilities in my own community.

- (4) I can propose a concrete step I can take to improve my classroom, school, or town.

Assessment

- (1) Community-Change Organizer
 - Accurate challenge, actions, rights, and results for all three books.
- (2) Advocacy Postcard
 - Local issue named; realistic action; explicit right/responsibility link; clear visuals and intended audience.
- (3) Exit ticket
 - Reflects grasp of civic action and names feasible personal step.

Day-Before Prep Checklist

- (1) Copy graphic organizers ([Appendix 1](#)) and exit tickets.
- (2) Mark poem excerpt with sticky note for quick access.
- (3) Gather post-it notes and cardstock for the postcard activity
- (4) Label chart paper “Our Drumbeat of Hope” and “Ways Kids Took Action.”
- (5) Pre-assign students to mixed-ability triads for the jigsaw (write names on small cards).

Exploration

- (1) Hook with poetry (10 min)
 - Gather class in the meeting area. Hold a hand drum or tap a steady beat on your thigh or desk to establish rhythm.
 - First read-through
 - Read the entire poem aloud, maintaining the beat.
 - Discuss unknown vocabulary in poem and provide student friendly definitions and examples (pummeled, picket signs, petitions)
 - Second read-through with call-and-response (3 min).
 - Tell students that whenever they hear “You matter” they will echo “I matter.”
 - Tell them that when they hear “drumbeat of hope,” they will echo “drumbeat of hope.” (Model each once.)
 - Read again, pausing for echoes; keep the beat steady so responses stay in rhythm.
 - Quick reflection
 - Display two prompts:

Which words or images made you feel powerful?

The poet says march to the drumbeat of hope—what change might that inspire at our school?

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- Invite partners to whisper-share, then chart several phrases on “Our Drumbeat of Hope” anchor chart.
- Reveal the compelling question on a slide or chart:
 - How can people of all ages work together to make their communities fairer and more welcoming?
 - Connect the poem’s message to the upcoming book-station inquiry.

Development

- (1) Explore with book stations (20 min)
- Set-Up
 - Display organizer on doc cam or on the board; model filling all four cells using a familiar story (such as *The Lorax*, [Table 2](#) - could fill out together, or model filling out and thinking aloud.)
 - Model crafting a Golden sentence

The people in The Lorax used their right to speech by sharing the importance of taking care of nature/planting trees, which led to more truffula trees being planted, animals getting their homes back, less pollution.
 - Put students into pre-assigned small groups of 2 or 3 students (depending on class size) so that you have at least one separate group for each book. If you have a class size of 27, you would have 9 groups, with 3 groups each reading or listening to the same book.
 - Students work for 20 min on the following tasks within their groups:
 - Task A – read or listen to the book
 - Task B – Complete the organizer rows for your book
 - Task C – Add any clarifying facts

“Look at your organizer. Check each of the four cells for this book—Challenge, Actions, Rights/Freedoms, Result.

If anyone’s organizer in your group is missing or incorrect, discuss quickly and fix it now.”

Table 2. The Lorax as an example

The Lorax	
<i>Community Challenge</i> (What was the problem or injustice?)	The truffula trees were disappearing, pollution was taking over the city. Animals were losing their homes
<i>Action Steps</i> (What did the people do?)	The once-ler shares his story and reason why the trees and nature need to be protected. He gives the last truffula seed to the boy to plant and start over
<i>Rights/Freedoms Used</i> (Speech, assembly, press, etc.)	Speech
<i>Result/Impact</i> (Immediate and longer-term outcomes)	Long term impact that requires immediate action

- Task D – Craft a golden sentence
 “Together, compose one powerful summary on your sticky using this frame:
The people in ____ used their right to ____ by ____, which led to ____.
 Recorder writes the sentence on a post it and sticks it on the “Ways kids took action” poster
- Circulate with prompts:
 “Where do you see a right to free speech?”
 “Where do you see a right to assemble?”
 “Which sentence-stem helps here?”
- With two minutes remaining, announce “60-s wrap-up—finish the *Result* cell.”
- Timer ends and groups clean up and bet ready to transition to jigsaw groups.

Expansion

- (1) Explain with a Jigsaw (10 min)
 - Forming Jigsaw Triads.
 - Put students in groups of three, ensuring there is one person per book in each group.
 - Expert share in small groups
 - *Barrio* expert summarizes the book and shares information from their organizer
 - Peers listen and then complete their organizer
 - Share their Golden Sentence
 - Repeat for *Rainbow* and *Bake Sale* experts.
- (2) Apply – Synthesis and Action Postcard (20 min)
 - Come back together as a whole class.
 - What are the main takeaways from all the Golden Sentences? Use these for the main idea summary in creating a Because, But, So statement ([Hochman and Wexler, 2017](#)).
 - Lead a book summary wrap up creating a *Because, But, So* statement for each book.
 - First Model creating a statement with one of the books. (The people in the barrio wanted a park **because** their views to the beach had been blocked with factories and traffic, **but** the city wanted to build a police station, **so** they worked as a team and protested.”)

As a class, generate one for a second book.

Have students work in groups to complete the final Because, But, So.

 - Circle back to the inquiry question: How can people of all ages work together to make their communities fairer and more welcoming?

- invite students to name strategies kids used (mural, solidarity march, bake-sale campaign). Record list.
- Connect each to civic rights/responsibilities using think-aloud (“Painting murals uses freedom of expression; raising funds shows responsibility to help others”).
- Transition: “Now let’s zoom in on *our* community.”
 - Brainstorm local issues (litter, playground safety, inclusive library).
 - Star the top three issues that are most important to your class
- Task directions (project slide): design a half-page postcard that
 - States the chosen issue
 - Proposes one doable action
 - Shows a right/responsibility icon or phrase
 - Uses text and a picture
- Provide paper and circulate with feedback stems
 - “What audience will receive your postcard?”

Closure

- (1) Closure and Formative Assessment (5 min)
 - Collect postcards for later gallery walk (optional extension).
 - Revisit *Drumbeat for Change*. Reread, and briefly, discuss how each books’ characters “marched to the drumbeat of hope”. Have students synthesize the poem and their learning.
 - Distribute post-its for exit tickets: “One thing I learned about civic action is ____ and one step I can take this week is ____.”

Differentiation and Supports

- (1) Language: Picture word bank; audio read-alouds; sentence stems.
- (2) Spanish to English translation key for *Barrio Rising*.
- (3) Cognitive: Color-coded organizer; teacher-modeled example; icons.
- (4) Grouping: Heterogeneous trios; peer scribe option.
- (5) Extension: Research an additional NCSS Notable book or local news story and add a new row to organizer and chart.

Day-2 Optional Extension

- (1) Gallery walk with “Glow and Grow” feedback stickers on the postcards.
- (2) Class vote on one postcard idea to pursue; plan next steps.
- (3) Draft persuasive letters to the principal or city council (W.3–4.1).
- (4) Create bar graph of postcard themes; analyze data in math block.

Table A1. Community change graphic organizer

	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3
<i>Community Challenge</i> (What was the problem or injustice?)			
<i>Action Steps</i> (What did the people do?)			
<i>Rights/Freedoms Used</i> (Speech, assembly, press, etc.)			
<i>Result/Impact</i> (Immediate and longer-term outcomes)			

Appendix 2

Table A2. Vocabulary support–Spanish to English translations for *Barrio Rising*

Spanish word	English translation
Iglesia	Church
Casita	Small house or cottage
Tiendita	Store
Masa	Dough made from ground corn
Vecino	Neighbor
Vecindarios	Neighborhoods
Buenos dias	Good morning
Valiente	Brave
Pequenitos	Little ones – often used for children
Viejitos	Old people or old friend, often used as term for elderly
Ollas	Pot used for cooking
Nopales	Prickly pear cactus pad
Los lideres	The leaders
Abrazo	Hug
Kiosko	Small pavilion

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