

Reading for Justice: A Critical Literacy Examination of Children's Books on Black Civic Engagement

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Abstract

During a political climate when racism and systemic injustices are overt, the sanctions and punishments imposed on supporters are nothing short of absurd. While civic engagement is not a new phenomenon, navigating it through times that feel eerily reminiscent of the 1950s echoes the old cliché “history repeats itself.” This era of the Civil Rights Movement was marked by the violent suppression of African Americans who sought to exercise their constitutional rights. Civil Rights leaders such as Claudette Colvin, Medgar Evers, Stokely Carmichael, Ralph Abernathy, Fannie Lou Hamer, Andrew Young, and John Lewis are just a few who were beaten, jailed, and even killed for attempting to vote, protest peacefully, or demand equal treatment under the law. Civic engagement plays a crucial role in shaping the direction of society. It empowers individuals to understand their rights, participate in decision-making, and contribute to their communities. Teaching civic engagement in elementary classrooms can help instill a sense of responsibility toward others and the community. Early exposure to concepts like fairness, justice, and equality can help children develop empathy and an understanding of others' needs and rights. Using grade-appropriate books to introduce concepts of racial justice and equality helps students not only understand these topics but also relate them to their own lives. This empirical study will focus on how children's books use a critical literacy lens for Black American Civic Engagement and provide deep insights into how these texts shape young readers' understanding of race, history, and social action.

Keywords: *Civic engagement, Black American, children's books, critical literacy*

Introduction

Civic engagement is crucial as it promotes democratic participatory inclusion, equity, and social justice (Matto & Whitman, 2024). Civic engagement plays a crucial role in establishing a shared vision for one's way of life, healthcare, the economy, and education. There are numerous ways to be civically engaged, including supporting small businesses and advocating for social justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Advocacy constitutes a fundamental element of civic engagement, as it empowers individuals to articulate their concerns, influence public discourse, and create meaningful societal change (Crawford et al., 2025; Levinson, 2010). Black Americans such as

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James Farmer, Septima Clark, Roy Wilkins, and Constance Baker Motley, among many others, persistently advocated for the rights of Black Americans, each lending their voice and influence to the broader movement for justice and equality (Hale, 2016; Morse, 2022; Payne, 2007). For example, James Farmer was the co-founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) (Meier & Rudwick, 1973). He championed nonviolent protest and served as the initiator and organizer of the first Freedom Ride in 1961 (Beil, 1998). His leadership in this movement ultimately contributed to the desegregation of interstate transportation. As an educator and advocate, Septima Clark developed literacy and citizenship workshops designed to equip Black Americans with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand their rights, including how to read, write, and participate in the voting process, thereby empowering them to challenge systemic injustices (Alston et al., 2025; Charron, 2009; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Lazar, 2011; Spires, 2019). She became widely known as the “Mother of the Civil Rights Movement.” These individuals devoted their time and energy to the cause (King & Swartz, 2014), frequently volunteering their time (Franklin, 2009). This underscores the contemporary need for individuals to recognize the critical importance of civic engagement to make informed decisions, address complex societal challenges, and safeguard fundamental civil liberties (Charest, 2025; Shor, 1999).

Method

Research Design

I employed a qualitative research design that combined content analysis of children’s books to identify instances of Black Civic Engagement. Within this analysis, civic engagement included actions such as voting, marching, sit-ins, protests, and other forms of advocacy undertaken by Black individuals and their allies. The texts examined spanned from the Civil Rights Movement era to the present day. Content analysis is defined as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts, or other meaningful matter, to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2018). Using this methodological approach, I aimed to investigate how children’s literature reflects civic participation and activism throughout time. Two research questions were developed to guide this analysis of Black Civic Engagement:

1. To what extent do children’s books depict specific acts of Black Civic Engagement, such as voting, protesting, and other forms of advocacy?

2. Which people, events, and groups are represented as influencing or shaping acts of Black Civic Engagement in children's literature?

Data Collection Tools

For this study, a systematic content analysis was conducted on 25 children's books that center on themes of Black Civic Engagement. To determine the appropriate grade-level suitability, the Lexile measure of each book was consulted. This step ensured that all texts included in the study were appropriate for kindergarten through fifth-grade students in terms of language complexity and content. The use of Lexile levels provided a standardized metric for verifying readability and grade alignment. The content in the selected texts spanned from the 1950s to 2025, providing both historical and contemporary perspectives on civic participation.

An open and axial coding process was employed to categorize the data into thematic groups. Codes were developed to capture the various forms of civic engagement represented in the texts (e.g., voting, protesting, marching, organizing, leadership) and to identify broader themes related to justice, equity, and social change. This systematic coding process allowed for the emergence of patterns across texts, supporting a more comprehensive analysis of how children's literature represents Black Civic Engagement across time and educational levels. A coding system similar to that used by Heilig et al. (2012) was employed to analyze the textual content of each book. The coding process was conducted in two major stages.

The first stage utilized In Vivo coding, which allowed key terms to emerge directly from the language of the texts themselves (Miles et al., 2020). During this stage, as I read each book line by line, I recorded all words and phrases related to civic engagement in a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet included the title of each book, and beneath each title, I documented occurrences of words associated with civic engagement, such as *vote* and *protest*. For example, in *V Is for Voting*, the word *voting* appeared four times in the written text, while signs and posters illustrating the word appeared an additional five times. Although the total number of occurrences was nine, the primary code for this book was *voting*, as the central theme and supporting alphabet's content consistently emphasized this concept. This approach ensured that both textual and visual elements were captured in the coding process, allowing for a more comprehensive representation of civic engagement references.

Once In Vivo coding was completed, I moved to the second stage, which involved pattern coding. In this phase, the initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and conceptual relationships across multiple texts. Pattern coding supported the development of higher-level analytical themes, such as forms of civic action (e.g., voting, marching, protesting) and broader constructs of civic engagement (e.g., justice, equality, activism). I highlighted and clustered frequently occurring keywords from the database to develop thematic categories. One prominent example emerged from repeated references to specific geographic locations. Many of the books mentioned states and cities throughout the narrative, particularly those in the U.S. South. Frequently cited places included Alabama, Mississippi, and New Orleans. These geographical references appeared in different forms across the texts. Some books referenced states only, others cities, and some both. The prevalence of these references during In Vivo coding led to the development of the theme “Geographies of Struggle: States as Stages for Civil Rights Action”. For example, *I Am Martin Luther King Jr.* made direct reference to the state of Alabama, which reinforced the salience of geography as a thematic category.

The final stage of analysis employed Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) constant comparative method. This phase involved comparing newly identified data with previously coded data to identify both similarities and differences across the corpus of texts. This iterative process allowed for the refinement and validation of emerging themes, as well as the identification of any new thematic categories. Maintaining analytic flexibility throughout this stage was essential to ensure that the analysis fully captured the complexity and nuance of how civic engagement was represented in each book.

In summary, the use of In Vivo coding, pattern coding, and the constant comparative method provided a systematic and layered approach to textual analysis, ensuring that key concepts, themes, and representations of Black Civic Engagement were identified, examined, and meaningfully interpreted within K–5 children’s literature.

Findings

During my textual analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), key terms, people, events, and places consistently emerged as recurring elements. For example, the repeated mention of prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer, referenced 17 times collectively,

highlights their enduring significance as key leaders and activists in the struggle for racial justice and political participation. Similarly, the root word *vote*, including its inflected forms such as *voting*, *voted*, and *votes* appeared 45 times throughout the analyzed texts. This lexical frequency suggests that voting rights have historically functioned as a central organizing theme within narratives of Black civic engagement, particularly during and after the Civil Rights Movement.

Voting As a Catalyst for Black Civic Engagement

Voting and Black civic engagement are historically and conceptually intertwined (Shah & Smith, 2021). Across the 25 children's books analyzed, the root word *vote* including its various forms such as *voting*, *votes*, *voted*, and *voting rights*, appeared 45 times. This frequency emphasizes the central role that voting has played in narratives of Black political participation (Aldridge, 2006; Woodson, 2016). During the onset of the Civil Rights Movement, securing the right to vote emerged as one of the earliest and most urgent agenda items for Black Americans. They recognized that achieving equal rights required political representation, and political representation could only be secured through access to the ballot. Voting, therefore, became both a symbolic and practical tool for claiming citizenship and advancing racial justice.

Three books in particular centered on voting as their primary theme: *V Is for Voting*, *Lillian's Right to Vote*, and *Stacey Abrams and the Fight to Vote*. Each text presents voting in developmentally appropriate ways for young readers, offering both narrative and visual scaffolding to support comprehension. For example, *V Is for Voting* uses an alphabetic structure to introduce key concepts related to voting, accompanied by age-appropriate language and illustrations that depict the voting process. While not every page explicitly uses the word "vote," the thematic focus consistently builds toward understanding what voting is, why it matters, and how it connects to democratic participation. The book is especially well-suited for early elementary learners (kindergarten through first grade) because it introduces foundational civic concepts in an accessible and engaging format. Additionally, the inclusion of a timeline of pivotal individuals and events at the end of the book reinforces the historical significance of voting-rights struggles.

Voices of Change: Civil Rights Leaders and Activists

The individuals whose names appeared most frequently across the 25 children's books analyzed were Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Ella Baker.

Collectively, their names were found in 13 of the 25 texts, underscoring their centrality to both the historical narrative of Black civic engagement (Journell, 2008) and its pedagogical representation in children's literature. These figures are consistently portrayed as leaders, organizers, and catalysts for change, individuals whose activism shaped the trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement and continues to inform how civic ideals are introduced to young learners today.

Fannie Lou Hamer is featured prominently across several texts, reflecting her enduring legacy as a symbol of courage, resistance, and civic participation. Multiple children's books center on her life and work, including *The Story of Fannie Lou Hamer: An Inspiring Biography for Young Readers*, and *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*. These texts offer a rich historical context for her early years on a Mississippi plantation, highlighting the physical and emotional toll of laboring in cotton fields. By depicting these lived experiences, the books allow young readers to understand the conditions that shaped Hamer's activism and her determination to fight for justice (Crenshaw, 1989). Her journey to register to vote is narrated with clarity and emotional depth, presenting her belief in voting as both a fundamental right and a tool for empowerment. Such narratives are particularly effective for students in grades 3–5, as they combine accessible language, historical detail, and moral clarity to introduce concepts of civic responsibility and social justice.

Ella Baker's story is presented through *Lift As You Climb: The Story of Ella Baker*, which foregrounds her leadership and commitment to grassroots organizing. Unlike Hamer, Baker's early life is framed through her grandparents' land ownership after emancipation, offering students a different but equally powerful model of Black agency and resilience. The book highlights her leadership within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and her insistence that women should play central roles in leadership and movement building (Crenshaw, 1989). By portraying Baker as someone who challenged hierarchical structures, including those led by Martin Luther King Jr., the book models democratic participation and collective empowerment for young readers. The pedagogical value of these narratives lies in their ability to personalize history through the stories of individuals. By centering figures such as Hamer, Baker, Wells-Barnett, and King, children's literature makes abstract civic concepts, including political participation, voting rights, and resistance, more tangible and relatable to students. These stories enable young learners to witness how ordinary individuals demonstrated extraordinary courage, inspiring collective action and challenging systemic injustice (King et al., 2010; King, 2014). Moreover, they serve as entry

points for critical conversations about leadership, power, the ongoing struggle for equity, and how geographical factors played a significant role in shaping their efforts.

Geographies of Struggle: States as Stages for Civil Rights Action

A key finding that emerged from this analysis was the prominent and deliberate centering of Southern states and cities across the children's books examined. Most of the cities referenced in the 25 texts were in the American South, highlighting the region's central role in Black Civic Engagement during the Civil Rights Movement. This pattern reflects how children's literature constructs a geography of resistance, framing the South as both the site of systemic oppression and the birthplace of organized activism. In *I Am Ruby Bridges*, New Orleans is depicted as the place where a young Black girl made history by integrating an all-white school. Through Ruby's first-person narration, the book introduces civic engagement not as an abstract concept, but as an action embedded in a specific place and time. By using accessible language and child-centered illustrations for early elementary learners (K–2), the narrative frames civic action as personal, local, and transformative. Ruby's story also implicitly teaches readers that significant acts of resistance often occur in familiar, everyday spaces. Similarly, *If You Were a Kid During the Civil Rights Movement*, references multiple Southern locations, including Oklahoma, Little Rock, and New Orleans, while other books highlight Selma and Montgomery, Alabama. These repeated geographical references suggest an intentional pedagogical strategy that authors and illustrators use to anchor the narrative, helping children situate major historical struggles. Selma and Montgomery, for example, are presented as iconic sites of voting rights activism, reinforcing their symbolic weight in the collective memory of the movement. This narrative anchoring in Southern geographies serves several functions. On one hand, it makes complex historical events more concrete and accessible to young readers, connecting civic engagement to recognizable locations. On the other hand, it may also flatten the complexity of the movement, emphasizing select places as “epicenters” while overlooking other regions and forms of resistance. This framing risks suggesting that Black Civic Engagement was exclusively or primarily Southern, even though national and global dimensions also shaped the struggle for justice (Bush, 2003).

Another recurring pattern is that the key figures featured in these books were themselves born in Southern states. This reinforces the tight link between place, identity, and political agency, a theme that children's literature uses to model how ordinary people in specific communities can drive

change. By foregrounding Southern spaces, the texts construct a powerful narrative that aligns civic participation with collective memory, community identity, and geographic belonging (Zingher & Moore, 2019). Ultimately, the representation of place in these children's books reveals how literature functions as a civic literacy tool. By situating activism in Southern states, the texts not only convey historical facts but also shape how young readers envision where and how resistance occurs.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications

The findings from this study emphasize the critical role of children's literature in introducing Black Civic Engagement to young learners. The analysis of the selected texts revealed that themes such as voting, protest, and local civic action are developmentally appropriate topics in elementary classrooms. Introducing these themes at an early age allows children to build foundational understandings of equity, justice, and the democratic process. One of the most significant implications of this research is the need for elementary educators to intentionally incorporate children's books that address Black Civic Engagement into their instructional practices (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Tyson, 2003). This is essential because civic engagement is not an abstract concept, it is deeply tied to the lived experiences of historically marginalized communities. Teaching these narratives empowers young learners to develop a sense of agency, enabling them to recognize that their voices matter and that they, too, can contribute to civic life. For young Black students, such representation can foster cultural pride, affirm identity, and highlight the power of collective action (Muhammad, 2020). For non-Black students, these books can provide windows into experiences different from their own, promoting empathy, respect, and critical awareness. This work is particularly relevant during the current era of heightened political polarization, racial discrimination, and inequality, which in many ways mirrors the social climate of the mid-20th century. Books such as *V Is for Voting*, *Lillian's Right to Vote*, and *Stacey Abrams and the Fight to Vote* exemplify how texts can illustrate the power of civic participation through language and imagery accessible to children. These narratives demonstrate that activism can take many forms, ranging from marching and organizing to voting and advocating for fair treatment, and that children can play a significant role in shaping their communities. Integrating these books into instruction allows teachers to connect social studies content with real-world applications.

When teaching about voting or civic responsibility, for example, teachers can pair these stories with activities that encourage students to share their thoughts, journal about fairness and kindness, or discuss age-appropriate current events. Such strategies foster active citizenship by demonstrating that civic engagement begins with awareness, empathy, and action, even at a young age. Additionally, this research exposes an important gap in how Black history and civic engagement are typically presented in elementary classrooms. Social studies often receive limited instructional time (Heafner et al., 2012), and Black American history is too frequently confined to Black History Month. By embedding Black Civic Engagement narratives throughout the school year, teachers can provide more comprehensive, sustained, and transformative instruction that centers on the voices and experiences of Black Americans (Gay, 2000), rather than relying on isolated celebrations or commemorations (Busey & Walker, 2017).

Implications for Future Research

The findings from this study open several avenues for future scholarly inquiry. One promising direction involves longitudinal research examining how early exposure to children's books on Black Civic Engagement influences students' civic behaviors and attitudes in later years. For example, a multi-year ethnographic study could examine how elementary-level civic learning influences civic identity, engagement, and participation as students progress through middle and high school. Another research direction could explore how specific themes in children's literature align with or diverge from historical realities, such as voter suppression, segregation, and the role of Southern states in shaping Black political participation. Scholars might analyze whether children's books adequately reflect structural challenges while remaining developmentally appropriate. Furthermore, examining teacher practices and beliefs regarding the inclusion of Black Civic Engagement narratives in the curriculum could provide valuable insight into barriers and opportunities for implementation. Understanding how educators navigate these conversations in politically charged climates could inform teacher education and professional development initiatives.

Conclusion

This study affirms the importance of early civic education that is inclusive, accurate, and empowering (Savage & Ikoma, 2025). Teaching Black Civic Engagement through children's

literature is not simply about diversifying book collections, it is about equipping students with the knowledge, language, and frameworks needed to understand democracy and their place within it (McClure & Brunn, 2022). It provides a foundation for young learners to become active participants in civic life, contributing to a more equitable and just society (Johnson, 2022). Teaching these narratives enables children to understand the struggles and triumphs of Black Americans, broadening their perspectives and deepening their commitment to justice. In doing so, educators can help cultivate a generation of informed, engaged citizens who are capable of carrying forward the legacies of those who fought for equality before them.

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