

# Committed to Teaching Black History: Children's Books that Champion Black Historical Consciousness

Brianne Pitts and Dawnavyn James

*Our [children] deserve to see themselves as the heroes and heroes of their books.*

—Derrick Barnes<sup>1</sup>

We met over a love of Black history children's books. Both elementary teachers in K–5 schools, we traded stories about the power of children's literature as a vehicle for teaching critical, socially-conscious Black history. While we differ in location, age, race, and grade-level experience, we contend that, with practice and preparation, all educators can commit to preparing Black history read-alouds that enlighten, extend, and support *all* elements of Black Historical Consciousness.<sup>2</sup> This article offers examples of classroom texts as vehicles for teaching each BHC principle as encouragement for teaching Black histories long beyond Black History Month. For summaries of the texts suggested in this article, see the Pullout in this issue, which pairs each BHC principle with children's books and ideas for further investigation.

## Why Picture Books?

Rudine Sims-Bishop's metaphor of children's texts as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors has long supported educators' use of texts as teaching tools in classroom settings.<sup>3</sup> However, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas cautions that simply having diverse books is not enough.<sup>4</sup> Systemic antiblackness and limited perspectives in both publishing and text selection have led to the misrepresentation of Black children in books as stereotypical characters, often only (1) experiencing enslavement, (2) battling "Jim Crow," (3) marching for civil rights, (4) surviving the ghettos, or (5) positioned as the "Black

best-friend."<sup>5</sup> These limited representations mirror worn-out narratives of Black history focused primarily on pain and subjugation, enslavement, and civil rights, or on whitewashed versions of heroes and heroines, common issues in K–12 schools.<sup>6</sup> In 2022, educational gag orders reinforced barriers already limiting K–12 educators' Black History instruction, further shortchanging excellence for all students and undercutting the rigor and "a love for Blackness."<sup>7</sup>

These systemic challenges are compounded by K–5 educators' lack of confidence in their ability to teach Black history effectively. Of all K–12 educators teaching Black history, K–5 educators reported feeling most unprepared. Teachers cited fears of "teaching it wrong," of being censored, or of having limited access to teaching materials. In contrast to these fears, educators felt most successful teaching Black history when using support systems to build their knowledge and skills.<sup>8</sup>

LaGarrett J. King introduced a framework for Black Historical Consciousness (BHC), which outlines eight principles that provide support for teaching *through* Black lives and livelihoods (rather than *about* them), in even the earliest grades.<sup>9</sup> The principles include (1) Power and Oppression, (2) Black Agency, Resistance, and Perseverance, (3) Africa and the African Diaspora, (4) Black Joy and Emotionality, (5) Black Identities, (6) Black Historical Contention, (7) Black Community, Local, and Social Histories, and (8) Black Futurism.<sup>10</sup> BHC provides teachers with focused commitments to move beyond stereotypes and miseducation,<sup>11</sup> situating Black history in contextualized, accessible, and nuanced ways.



**Figure 1.** Artwork from kindergartners representing what Greenwood looked like with all of its businesses and homes prior to the Tulsa Race Massacre.



**Figure 2.** Display of artwork of the Young Historians from The Black History Club at the Boone County History & Culture Center in Columbia, Missouri.

## Texts to Support Principles of Black Historical Consciousness

In the following section, we include classroom examples that use selected children's texts to teach elements of the BHC principles. Summaries of the suggested texts are included in this issue's Pullout. To offer actionable steps for educators, we also include each principle's *Commitment for Teaching*, which offers further ideas for investigation.

### BHC Principle 1: Power & Oppression

*Addresses the lack of justice, freedom, equality, and equity experienced by Black people throughout history*

Dawnvyn's Black History Club (a multiage, multiracial group of students) read *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre*<sup>\*12</sup> to examine the history of Tulsa, Black Wall Street, and the power of Black families and communities as inspiration for a public art exhibit. After reading the text, K–5 students documented the journeys of people living in Greenwood before and after the massacre and created artwork about Black excellence for display at the Boone County History and Culture Center (see Figures 1 and 2).

In fourth grade, prompts from *Stamped for Kids: Racism, AntiRacism, and You*,<sup>\*13</sup> helped Brienne's students raise concerns about their Black male classmates' exclusion from group seating arrangements in another room. By asking "was the seating arrangement racist?" students named what racism looked and felt like to them. Students defined racism as "people judging other people because of their race" and "making other people feel like they don't belong or excluding." After naming the oppression, students advocated for change, inspiring revised seating and adults' examination of seating throughout the building.

### Commitment for Teaching: Power and Oppression

*I will name racism and the impact it has on power and oppression.*

Learn about Barbara Johns, Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, and Ernest Everett Just. Pair discussion with texts like *Nelson Mandela* by Kadir Nelson, *Pies from Nowhere: How Georgia Gilmore Sustained the Montgomery Bus Boycott* by Dee Romito, and *Viola Desmond Won't Be Budged!* by Jody Nyahsa Warner.

## LANGUAGE MATTERS

Using HUMAN-first language to talk about American Slavery.

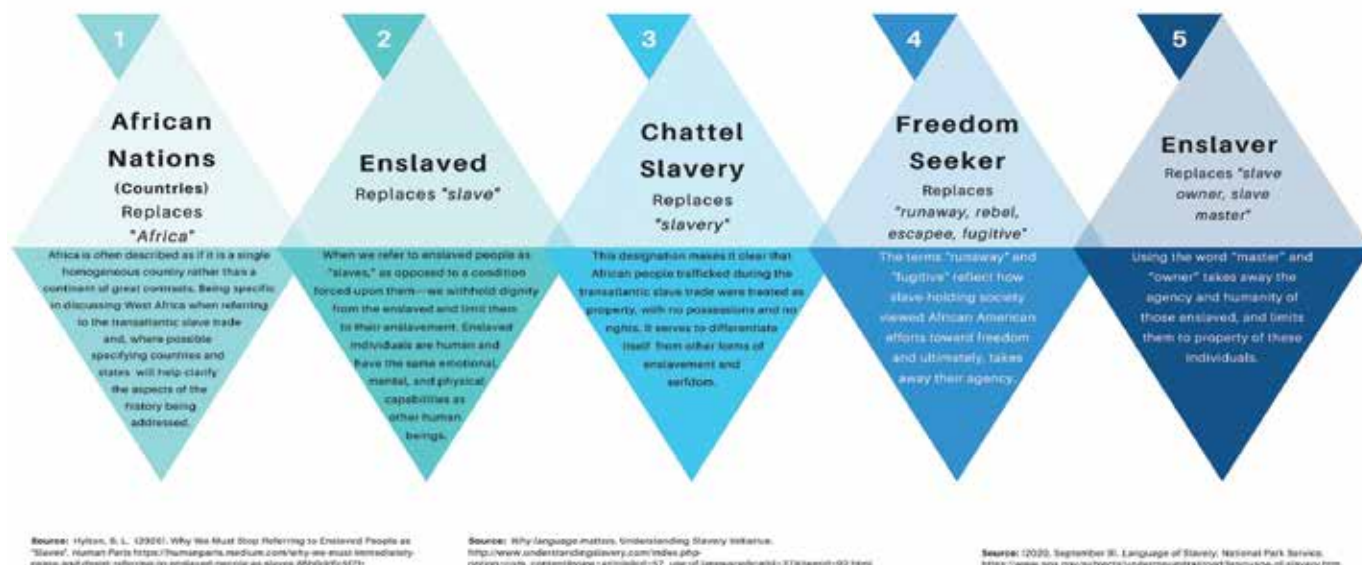


Figure 3. "Language Matters" (Shared with permission of author Shannon Griffin, @literally\_cultured on Instagram)

### BHC Principle 2: Black Agency, Resistance, and Perseverance

*Acknowledges that although victimized, Black people were not helpless*

Elementary educator and children's author Shannon Griffin led her fourth-grade students through an inquiry about what they knew about enslavement, and in discussion, helped them to unlearn and reframe their language about American enslavement. In this discussion, Griffin focused on the diversity of the people, refusing to relegate them to the condition that was forced on them (see Figure 3).<sup>14</sup> Honoring formerly enslaved freedom-seekers' journeys, students read about their agency, resistance, and perseverance. Griffin's prompts pair well with texts like *Your Legacy*,<sup>15</sup> supplementing multiple principles of BHC.

#### Commitment for Teaching: Black Agency, Resistance, and Perseverance

*I will share the history of Black people's resistance.*

Read about Aretha Franklin, Marian Anderson, George Washington Carver, Henry "Box" Brown, Malcolm X, Georgia Gilmore, Misty Copeland, William and Ellen Craft, Frederick Douglass, Robert Smalls, and Henry Boyd. Pair with texts such as *The Book Itch* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, *A Sweet Smell of Roses* by Angela Johnson, *Undefeated* by Kadir Nelson, and *Sing a Song: How "Lift Every Voice and Sing" Inspired Generations* by Kelly Starling Lyons.

Dawnvyn used *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*<sup>16</sup> as a basis for inquiry and visual thinking strategies, providing a reference for young learners before launching additional research in Black History. Similarly, Brianné's fourth-grade students used the same text to create a timeline of significant moments in Black agency, resistance, and perseverance leading up to the present. After posting their timeline in the hall, students invited other classes and community members to add histories and examples from their stories to a "living timeline" during Black History Month.

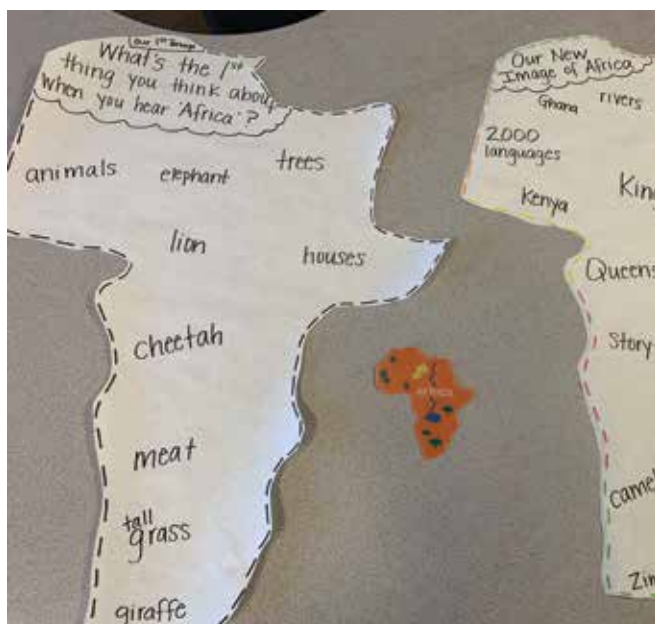
### BHC Principle 3: Africa and the African Diaspora

*Contextualizes histories within the African Diaspora, including global Black histories*

Dawnvyn's kindergarteners read *Africa, Amazing Africa*<sup>17</sup> many times throughout the year, exploring what they knew of the African nations before reading and after investigation. Later, they extended their studies to include investigations of butterfly nesting places, seeing Africa as a continent of many nations, animals, peoples, and histories. Figure 4 shows how students' thinking about Africa developed after their research.

*Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library*<sup>18</sup> supported third-grade students' classroom "culture" projects. After reading the text aloud, students reflected on their intersecting identities (like Schomburg's own) and found evidence of their histories in both homes and classrooms, collecting cultural artifacts to share. The project helped students find connections between their Wisconsin classroom, the African Diaspora, and one another.





**Figure 4.** After research, kindergarteners added to their knowledge about Africa.

### Commitment for Teaching: Africa & the African Diaspora

*I will expand the narratives of Black history beyond where I live (and beyond the U.S.).*

Discuss the histories of Africa and the African Diaspora, including Yaa Asantewaa, King Nzinga Mbande, Nefertiti, Hatshepsut, and King Dom Afonso and descendants of the Diaspora like Marcus Garvey, and DJ Kool Herc. Text pairings include *Freedom Soup* by Tami Charles, *Africa is not a Country* by Margy Burns Knight and Mark Melnicove, *Islandborn* by Junot Diaz, and *¡Mambo Mucho Mambo! The Dance That Crossed Color Lines* by Dean Robbins.

### BHC Principle 4: Black Joy and Emotionality

*Focuses on Black people and communities' resolve, joy, and emotionality in the past and present*

*The ABCs of Black History* “spans continents and centuries, triumph and heartbreak, creativity, and joy.”<sup>19</sup> It presents Black history as expansive, beautiful, and joyful, just like our students’ lives. Dawnavyn uses this book with K–5 students to launch research and invite the discovery of Black histories worldwide.

Dawnavyn’s first graders also read *Crown: An Ode to a Fresh Cut*<sup>20</sup> and discussed the experience of a Black boy getting a haircut. Afterward, they created paper crowns to document how they feel after a fresh cut (see Figure 5). Both texts support students’ connection to and enjoyment of Black histories in and out of the classroom.



**Figure 5.** A crown created by the Black History Club after reading *Crown: An Ode to a Fresh Cut*

### Commitment for Teaching: Black Joy and Emotionality

*I will honor the full range of Black people’s emotions.*

Text recommendations include *I Am Every Good Thing*, *The King of Kindergarten*, and *The Queen of Kindergarten* all by Derrick Barnes, *Thank you Omu* by Oge Mora, *I am Enough* by Grace Byers, *Black is a Rainbow Color* by Angela Joy, *Have you thanked an Inventor Today?*, by Patrice McLaurin, and *The People Remember* by Ibi Zoboi.

### BHC Principle 5: Black Identities

*Promotes the inclusion of Black identities beyond Black, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian men*

*What Do You Do with a Voice like That: The Story of Extraordinary Congresswoman Barbara Jordan*,<sup>\*21</sup> and *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil*

*continued on page 17*

## COMMITTED TO TEACHING BLACK HISTORY

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*Rights Movement*<sup>\*22</sup> are powerful texts honoring the impacts of brilliant Black women who changed our world. In Brianne's fourth-grade classroom, students were inspired by the texts to ask "How do Black women shape our world?" This inquiry led students to research stories of Black leaders who lifted society up and fought for improved rights and lives for all. Students' research compared Black women's voices and experiences across the long Black freedom struggle.

*Woke Kindergarten*'s<sup>23</sup> sixty-second texts—such as "Black Joy" and "Play, Black Child!"—inspired Dawnavyn's students to create their own books about joy and play. After watching the video texts, students drew and wrote about how they play and what brings them joy, penning texts for their classroom library. Figure 6 shows two of these student-penned texts and their inspiration from the website.

### Commitment for Teaching: Black identities

*I will include the intersectional identities of Black people.*

Learn more about James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin, William Dorsey Swan, Lorraine Hansberry, Claudette Colvin, Ida B. Wells, Molly Williams, and Marsha P. Johnson. Pair texts such as *Let 'Er Buck!: George Fletcher, the People's Champion* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat* by Javanka Steptoe, *Saving American Beach* by Heidi Tyline King, *My Rainbow* by Trinity and Dashawnna Neal, and *Sulwe* by Lupita Nyong'o.

### BHC Principle 6: Black Historical Contention

*Recognizes that Black histories are complex and should not be ignored, even if they are not all positive*

*Born on the Water*<sup>\*24</sup> provides a guide for educators discussing Black historical contention in the elementary classroom.<sup>25</sup> Dawnavyn used this text in a kindergarten classroom and in The Black History Club, a multi-age group. In kindergarten, the book helped answer students' questions, including "What was happening before this?" and "Why was Martin Luther King Jr. fighting?" Then, during National Poetry Month, K–5 students in The Black History Club used the educator's guide to answer questions about the people in each poem.

*The ABCs of the Black Panther Party*<sup>26</sup> helped classroom teachers examine their assumptions about the Black Panther Party and narratives of violence and fear in common retellings of the Movement before sharing the text

with their students. Students of all ages used the text to examine commonly held biases, discuss the Black Panther Party's impact, and launch research into leaders and communities in the party.



Figure 6. Student-penned texts inspired by *Woke Kindergarten*

### Commitment for Teaching: Black Historical Contention

*I will teach the complexity of Black history, teaching through Black people's diverse experiences.*

Additional text recommendations are found in *Born on the Water's* Study Guide, available at [https://images.randomhouse.com/teachers\\_guides/9780593307359.pdf](https://images.randomhouse.com/teachers_guides/9780593307359.pdf), which focuses on: "Incredible Africa," "The History of Black Americans in the United States of America" (p. 25), "Black Excellence in America," and ways to "Become an Antiracist" (p. 26). Also consult *A Song for the Unsung* by Carole Boston Weatherford and Rob Sanders.



## BHC Principle 7: Black Community, Local, and Social Histories

*Includes histories of “regular” people (especially children) who have made (and are making) a difference in their communities.*

Answering the research question “What Black History lives in my city or state?” The Young Historians from The Black History Club spent three weeks researching the Black histories in their city or state. From Scott Joplin, Juneteenth, Annie Fisher, the Kansas City Monarchs, Harriet Tubman, to Sharps End, students presented their in-depth research from their communities to friends and families. Educators can use *H is for Harlem*<sup>27</sup> as a model for celebrating their community, local, and social histories. Students choose a letter of the alphabet to illustrate with images, people, places, and traditions that make up their own community, bringing experiences together to write their own story.

Stories of community histories and futures can be written by the students in your room. Read *The People Remember*<sup>28</sup> and ask how *students’* families celebrate and connect. Students can use this book as both a Black historical timeline and as resource for learning about Kwanzaa and its principles through analyzing illustrations and poems.

### Commitment for Teaching: Community, Local, & Social Histories

*I will research local Black histories within my communities.*

Learn about local Black community members, businesses, and histories. Visit the Black Chamber of Commerce, businesses, churches, and community celebrations. Talk to community members about vibrant Blackness in your midst.

## BHC Principle 8: Black Futurism

*(Re)imagines, (re)invents, and recognizes the possibilities of Black people in the future*

In the final text selection, we offer a provocation inviting teachers to take action. *The Me I Choose to Be*<sup>29</sup> asks readers to see the futures that Black children hold in their dreams and imaginations. Educators can focus on the lived experiences of their students. In the classroom, this means including books where Black children are the lead characters. Essential questions for discussion could include “How can each of us (re)write and (re)imagine Black history in the present? In our future(s)? In our community?” Honor the commitment to imagine, dream, and support Black futures in your schools and spaces.

### Commitment for Teaching: Black Futurism

*I will imagine, dream, and support the futures of Black people and children.*

Commit to reading more. Share texts like *Hold Them Close: A Love Letter to Black Children* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow and *Dear Black Child* by Rahma Rodaah, two authors who cherish, honor, and see the futures of Black children. For inspiration, see Toliver’s Read Black Futures book list available at [www.readingblackfutures.com](http://www.readingblackfutures.com).

The principles of BHC overlap and extend, working together to provide a frame for teaching multiple historical perspectives in elementary classrooms. While the principles are teacher-facing, the knowledge gained is not. It is okay not to be an expert in teaching Black history, but you can’t stop there. The need for teaching and learning authentic Black histories through the lives, experiences, worlds, and dreams of Black people, movements, and identities, is essential. By using children’s books and elements of BHC, a more positive and expansive understanding of Black history is *accessible* in any K–6 classroom. ■

### Notes

1. Derrick Barnes, Instagram Live interview by @QueendomTeaching, Dawnavyn M. James, August 16, 2022.
2. LaGarrett J. King, “Black History Is Not American History: Toward a Framework of Black Historical Consciousness,” *Social Education* 84, no. 6 (2020): 335–341; King, “Interpreting Black History: Toward a Black History Framework for Teacher Education,” *Urban Education* 54, no. 3 (2018): 1–29.
3. Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding-Glass Doors,” *Perspectives* 6, no. 3 (1990).
4. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, “Black in Kidlit Thursday,” *Ebony Elizabeth Thomas*, June 4, 2019, [www.ebonyelizabeththomas.com/blog/black-in-kidlit-thursday-d4k9a](http://www.ebonyelizabeththomas.com/blog/black-in-kidlit-thursday-d4k9a); Thomas, “Stories Still Matter: Rethinking the Role of Diverse Children’s Literature Today,” *Language Arts* 94, no. 2 (2016): 116–123.
5. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, “Slavery through Children’s Literature” (keynote, Teaching Black History Conference: 400 Years and Counting; Teaching Slavery and its Afterlife, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, July 26, 2019).
6. King, “Interpreting Black History.”
7. Gholdy Muhammed, “School Principles: Abolitionist Education 101,” interview by Melissa Harris-Perry, in *The Takeaway*, National Public Radio, September 16, 2022, <http://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/takeaway/segments/school-principles-abolitionist-education-101>.
8. Brienne Pitts, “Black History Month in Suburban Schools: An Examination of K–12 Pedagogies” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2020).
9. King, “Black History Is Not American History”; King, “Interpreting Black History.”
10. See chart on p. 4 in this issue.
11. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Africa World Press, 1933/1990).
12. Carole Boston Weatherford, *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre*, illus. Floyd Cooper (Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, 2021); Titles selected as an NCSS Notable Trade Book Committee selection in the year of publishing contain a \* following the book title.
13. Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped (For Kids): Racism, Antiracism, and You*, adapted by Sonja Cherry-Paul, illus. Rachele Baker (Little Brown and Company/Hachette Book Group, 2021).

14. Shannon Griffin, "The Freedom Seeker Narrative: Centering Humanity and Agency While Teaching American Enslavement" (conference presentation, Teaching Black History Conference: Mother Africa, University of Buffalo, Buffalo, NY, July 2022).
15. Schele Williams, *Your Legacy: A Bold Reclaiming of Our Enslaved History*, illus. Tonya Engel (New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2021).
16. Kadir Nelson, *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*, illus. Kadir Nelson (New York: Balzer + Bray, 2011).
17. Atinuke, *Africa, Amazing Africa: Country by Country*, illus. Mouni Feddag (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2019).
18. Carole Boston Weatherford, *Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library*, illus. Eric Velasquez (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2019).
19. Rio Cortez, *The ABCs of Black History*, illus. Lauren Semmer (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 2020).
20. Derrick Barnes, *Crown: An Ode to a Fresh Cut*, illus. Gordon C. James (Evanston, IL: Agate Publishing, 2020).
21. Chris Barton, *What Do You Do with a Voice Like That?: The Story of Extraordinary Congresswoman Barbara Jordan*, illus. Ekua Holmes (San Diego, CA: Beach Lane Books, 2018).
22. Carole Boston Weatherford, *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*, illus. Ekua Holmes (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2015).
23. Akiea "Ki" Gross, *Woke Kindergarten*, [www.wokekindergarten.org](http://www.wokekindergarten.org).
24. Nikole Hannah-Jones and Renée Watson, *1619 Project: Born on the Water*, illus. Nikkolas Smith (New York: Kokila, 2021).
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27. Dinah Johnson, *H Is for Harlem*, illus. April Harrison (New York: Christy Ottaviano Books, 2022).
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29. Natasha Anastasia Tarpley, *The Me I Choose to Be*, illus. Regis Bethencourt and Kahran Bethencourt (New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2021).

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## Teaching Writing in the Social Studies

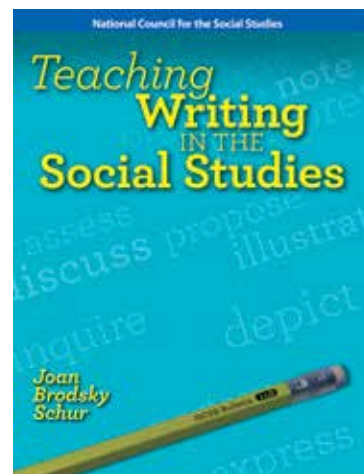
Joan Brodsky Schur | NCSS Bulletin 118, 143 pages, 2020

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