

## **Celebrating the Lives of Women with Picture Book Biographies**

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### **Abstract**

Picture book biographies have key features that make them valuable teaching tools: brevity, accessibility, cultural relevance, and engaging artwork. Biographies of women serve to fill in existing curricular gaps regarding the accomplishments of women. This article highlights the value of these texts and demonstrates how one teacher used biographies of women to integrate Social Studies and English Language Arts, and actively engage her students in writing poetry.

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“I am glistening with knowledge.”  
From “Helen Keller” by Kai-lei, 5<sup>th</sup> grade

The proliferation of beautifully illustrated biographies for young readers has been a delightful development in children’s book publishing, and the ever-expanding genre presents a rich opportunity to celebrate the lives of women while integrating Language Arts and Reading with Social Studies in the intermediate grades. Using nonfiction literature of high quality allows teachers to meet English Language Arts and Reading standards and focus on vital Social Studies themes at the same time. Some of this generation’s most talented authors and illustrators have turned their attention to delivering powerful, pertinent concepts through the picture book format, and the number of biographies depicting women of diverse backgrounds and cultures has expanded with each year. The resulting books, of varied text difficulty, are engaging and aesthetically pleasing to the children and make differentiation possible in the classroom. This article highlights the benefits of how Christina, a fifth grade teacher, engaged all of her students in learning by using picture biographies of women to integrate Social Studies, Reading, and English Language Arts.

### **Background**

Research supports using picture book biographies of women to engage students, to foster comprehension, and to promote critical reading. Kelsey (2001) finds that compelling nonfiction “has the potential to reverse student indifference to academic content, and enhance students’ willingness to read because well-written nonfiction turns distant times, distant places and the abstract into real and compelling drama” (p.36). Chick (2011) asserts that integrating social

studies with language arts helps children focus on true stories of the past and disrupts the misconception that the study of history is all about memorization.

It is essential to introduce students to texts that are more culturally accessible and inspirational than standard textbook fare, which still omits the contributions of women to politics, science, sports and the arts. Children and adolescents who feel alienated by the curriculum often become disengaged in the classroom and disenchanting with education. Hunsberger (2007) suggests that students who experience such alienation from assigned reading "...find it far easier to stay silent and allow their teacher to assume laziness, rather than to admit their lack of comprehension" (p.422). Digiovanni (2004) writes about the hidden curriculum of omission:

The hidden curriculum has this propensity for females. Women *are* conspicuously absent from the formal curriculum, leading girls to believe that women do not "do" history, science, or math. Women are not the important authors, movers, or shakers; their tasks and accomplishments are relegated to the sidelines, or to a month-long celebration in the year that is often brushed aside on the elementary level for more fun activities like leprechaun visits and springtime celebrations. (p.12)

Illustrated biographies have key features that make them valuable teaching tools: brevity, accessibility, cultural relevance, and engaging artwork. Although illustrated biographies vary greatly in the amount of text on each page, their picture-book format makes them highly accessible to students who struggle with grade level texts and to those who are learning to read English. The illustrations aid comprehension, appeal to visual learners, and ensure that any student can learn something about the subject of the biography. The mere brevity of illustrated biographies ensures that students will not find them intimidating. There are many ways students in the intermediate grades can respond to biographies within one class period: partner sharing; using maps and timelines; or, as Christina's class did, by a variety of responses involving poetry and visual arts.

Christina noticed that her fifth graders loved reading about people from other countries and cultures. One of their favorite texts in this project was *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* by Jeanette Winter. They had heard about Iraq in the news media and around their dinner tables, and it was exciting for them to read about the country in a different context. When students are exposed to biographies of international figures, both current and historical, the boundaries of their thinking are expanded.

Zarnowski and Turkel (2011) highlight the importance of reading biographies of creative problem solvers because their stories exemplify qualities

that researchers associate with successful thinking and learning: identity, or being a person who sees himself or herself as a creative thinker; agency, having the ability to impact a situation; and knowledge, being a person who knows relevant content and how to use it. (p. 30)

It is important to feature problem solvers from groups typically underrepresented in textbooks, like women, to inspire students who become discouraged and disengaged with school. Thomas, one of Christina's students, wrote about "How to Be Wangari Maathai," creating a plan for reforestation that included these problem-solving steps: "Convince perplexed women in your

village to sow seeds. Give women wages for scattering seeds. Stand up for trees and get detained.”

Boyesen (2017) writes of her own work with biographies,

Through studying biographies in my classroom, we have a platform for not only learning about great Americans, who through grit and perseverance, have helped change history, but we have an opportunity to apply what we've learned from these biographies to our own lives. (p.24)

Writing specifically about biographies of women, Chick (2011) says, “Most importantly, many of these picture books will draw attention to women who accomplished great things, yet remain unknown and invisible in the historical record” (p. 70).

### **The Project**

Christina had a class of 26 fifth graders with widely varying reading levels. Her class included several struggling readers, with three who received Reading Intervention and five who had IEPs. Because of the multitude of picture books that Christina regularly checks out of the library, her dedication to Writing Workshop and the children's familiarity with Community Circle, her students were accustomed to reading, writing, and discussing with one another. During the last month of school, Christina had the fifth graders read picture book biographies of notable women every day for a week. She used a writing workshop format and also included poetry writing as an ELA workstation. Integrating Social Studies and English Language Arts gave her the opportunity to be flexible with scheduling, allowing ample time for reading, writing, sharing the poems, and discussing new ideas.

Christina began the week by doing an Interactive Read-aloud. She first modeled the use of a familiar type of poem which the children had already written successfully, demonstrating how she would find and document the information in the text that she would need to include in the poem. Then each day she would demonstrate a new way to respond to the biographies by writing or drawing. Every day, the children each chose a biography of a different woman to read from a selection with a wide range of text difficulty and a wide variety of female subjects. Initially, she noticed that many children were carefully selecting books based on the perceived level of difficulty but, as the week progressed, they used their individual areas of interest (sports, science, the arts, etc.) to guide their choices. The buzz around the classroom gained momentum as students shared their responses and recommended texts for each other.

After reading and writing daily, the children always came back to share in a circle. Each child shared one thing they learned about the subject of their biography or read one line of their poem aloud. In Community Circle discussions, the children revealed that they were shocked by the obstacles women had to overcome. This realization led to rich discussion about how challenges often become the driving force for highly successful people. One vivid example was illustrated by the biography of Wilma Rudolph, who overcame polio and poverty to win three Gold Medals at the 1960 Olympics. One child in the class exclaimed, “She is just a miracle!”

The forms of poetry introduced to the children included Recipe Poems, Bio Poems, and “How to be...” Poems. Other written responses included creating Historical Heads and writing lists of “The Top Ten Reasons I Would Want to be...” The Recipe Poems (source unknown) use

abstract nouns, which causes the writers to think critically about the attributes that represent their subject. For example, one boy wrote that a recipe for a Ruby Bridges cake called for a “gallon of bravery” and “one cup of not fighting back.” Another child’s recipe for Emily Dickinson required a “gallon of loneliness” and a “quart of heart-felt stories.” One student displayed a sense of history as he concluded his recipe for a Ruby Bridges Cake with the words, “Bake for 100 years.”

Bio Poems have been used by many teachers, and take various forms. Christina asked the students to begin each line with verbs such as:

I am.... (insert name of biographical subject)  
I hear...  
I see...  
I feel...  
I hope... etc.

Individual students chose their own verbs and used cry, wonder, try, worry, dream, and others. Making such decisions required them to draw inferences from the text about the biographical subject. They concluded the poems with another “I am...” statement that served as a summary. Some chose to repeat the name, others made different creative choices. To end a Bio Poem about Sacagawea, Nick wrote, “I am a brand new person because I went through this terrible experience.”

The “How to be...” poems come from educational consultant Barry Lane. This exercise helps students determine the main events in subject’s life and to put information in chronological order. In a piece about how to be Annette Kellerman, the Mermaid Queen, one student listed such things as: “go to many places to demonstrate your dazzling dives all around the world,” “put forth a lot of effort to try and swim across the English Channel but fail,” and “become brave enough to create ‘new waves’.” This format is an engaging way to teach note-taking, and it also leads to summarizing and inferential thinking, as evidenced by some of the students’ responses. In “How to be Jane Goodall,” one child wrote “You need to have a passionate understanding of animals...You must spend your childhood observing biology and nature.” She also included the following instructions: “After getting your dream job, travel to African jungles and observe the behavior of chimpanzees. Bond with them, and soon gain their trust to the point you can hold their children.”

In a “Top Ten Reasons” assignment, also from Barry Lane, students listed the reasons they would want to be their biographical subject. This activity strengthens comprehension and organizational skills, as students prioritize the reasons as they count down to #1. Jalen, for example, wrote the Top Ten Reasons she would want to be Victoria Woodhull, saving for the number one spot, “I would be able to follow my dream.”

Many teachers across the country have used the Historical Heads activity (origin unknown). Teachers give students the blank outline of a head and ask them to fill in the space with images and/or words that represent what was “on the mind” of the person studied. Christina particularly liked this experience, as drawing pictures gave some of her artistically inclined struggling writers the opportunity to show that they understood the content of the biography. She and the students were pleased by the outcome.

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### Ideas for the Future

Based on her experience with picture book biographies of women, Christina has some definite ideas about the use of biographies with her future classes. She would teach an entire lesson, early in the year based on the Author's Note in biography. She would model using that feature to gather and list information that may not be explicit in the body of the text.

She would also employ the biographies to encourage further research, using the bibliography at the back of the book as a springboard. Christina's students did this with the Emily Dickinson book, as they wanted more detail than was provided in the text. The students had never before paid attention to the bibliography in a non-fiction book, so this was a wonderful opportunity to introduce that text feature.

Christina plans to introduce and/or close every social studies unit with writing activities in response to a carefully selected group of picture book biographies. She will gradually, throughout the year, introduce various poetic forms and other means of responding to the texts, until the students are able to choose the format they wish to use from their own wide repertoires.

There are several effective approaches for using illustrated biographies of women to compare two or more texts. Fontichiaro (2009) suggests having students work with partners, each reading about a different person and then creating a Power Point presentation to compare and contrast the two subjects. Students can read picture book biographies in pairs and "triplets" to compare biographical subjects with data charts. Zarnowski (2003) describes using this strategy to engender questions about historical thinking and develop important critical thinking skills. For example, students could read Ehrlich's *Rachel, The Story of Rachel Carson* and compare it to Locker and Bruchac's book, *Rachel Carson, Preserving a Sense of Wonder*. Recording their findings on data charts can help them better understand the work of historical researchers and discern the choices that authors make.

Much has been written about using picture books as touchstone or mentor texts for teaching writing (Ray, 2002). Illustrated biographies lend themselves well to this endeavor. As Saunders and McMakin (2004) point out, these texts are "often chock-full of inviting leads, facile transitions, and memorable conclusions" (p. 25). Together, the class can begin to deconstruct the biographies they read, creating organizational data charts to show how and when authors of biography introduce important information about their subjects. Word Walls can be created of key descriptive geographical terms, transitions that indicate the passage of time, terms that introduce historical events. Students can construct timelines of the lives of their chosen subjects.

Using a collective biography like Chin-Lee's *Amelia to Zora: Twenty Six Women who Changed the World* as a model, students could write short biographical sketches around a theme and publish the resulting text as a class project. The subjects could be well-known women or admired relatives or community members. Adding their names to a class timeline and/or map reinforces the learning. A single learning experience can involve multiple aspects of literacy and crucial Social Studies themes. The emphasis should be on choice, cultural relevance, genuine response, and an authentic audience for the final product.

The picture book biographies of women listed below are widely available at school and public libraries. The list is by no means exhaustive. Many libraries are now linked with others through interlibrary loan programs, and with a little planning, teachers can probably find any book they are searching for to use with their students. Students can also be encouraged to seek out engaging, culturally relevant picture book biographies of women. Finally, learning about the

accomplishments and contributions of women is instructive for all our students, male and female. Picture book biographies of women can be an engaging, useful, and inspirational addition to any classroom (see Appendix).

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## Appendix

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