

Using Biographies to Explore Social Justice in U.S. History

Gary Fertig

Critically important to the vitality of any democracy is the measure of freedom its citizens have to achieve social justice. But what is social justice? Do some Americans enjoy more of it than others? What can the trials and tribulations of groups seeking social justice tell us about the meaning of democracy in America? How do the efforts of individual members affect the success of such a group? What can we learn by looking at historical movements for social justice—the individuals and the groups that worked to move America closer to the ideals of freedom and fairness.

The unit of study outlined here describes how elementary teachers can use historical biography to motivate students to explore these and other questions related to the character of individuals and the nation's striving toward social justice and democracy through its history. In addition to teaching historical content, these activities promote "historical thinking skills" by encouraging students to construct meaningful interpretations of the past through: (a) chronological reasoning, (b) identifying cause and effect, (c) cultivating historical empathy, (d) using multiple sources of information to understand the meaning of history from different perspectives, and (e) evaluating the historical significance of individuals, issues, and events.

Using biography to teach American history constructs a scaffold for instruction and assessment. Biographies present social history in a form that children find interesting and understandable. Exploring the historical circumstances of Americans who sought social justice provides an introduction to values, beliefs, and behaviors that change society and make history. Individual effort can be seen as a source of change in institutions at the level of the family, religion, schools, and government.

The unit of study described here can provide students in grades 3 through 6 with interesting and compelling content to read and to write about. It uses historical biography to motivate students to engage in historical inquiry.¹ Students learn United States history while using the language arts—reading, writing, speaking, and drama—to investigate the lives and times of Americans who stood up for their rights.² Research indicates that young learners will personalize the past to make it meaningful by focusing on the social interactions and material conditions of identifiable groups of people. (The complex activities of social institutions that influence people's values, beliefs, and behavior can, in general, be reserved for secondary grades.)³ The social studies curriculum thematic

strands that this unit addresses are **II TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**; **IV INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**; **V INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**; and **III CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**.⁴

The lesson plan in brief is as follows: Pairs of students will

1. read a biography and background material;
2. identify what they believe to be the three most important or historically significant events that took place in a person's life;
3. list the three events in chronological order on a graphic organizer;
4. find or make an artifact to represent each event; and finally,
5. tell about events in the life of their historical figure with the use of the "artifacts."

Their audience for this last step could be a second pair of students, or the whole class, as determined by the teacher.

The teacher models the work that students will do by briefly walking through steps 1 through 5: reading aloud a passage from a biography (say, of Thomas Jefferson); identifying with the class important events in the reading (writing the first draft of the Declaration of Independence); summarizing these on a graphic organizer up on the board; holding up an "artifact" (such as a quill pen) that represents an event; and explaining the connection between the artifact and the event (Jefferson used a quill pen to draft the Declaration).

1. Reading a Biography

After the teacher has demonstrated the whole activity, students can work together in pairs, reading a biography of an American who led or took part in a struggle for social justice. Examples of such individuals include Benjamin Franklin, Molly Bannaky, Benjamin Banneker, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Helen Keller, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Blackwell, Amelia Earhart, Sacajawea, Crazy Horse, and Gertrude Ederly.⁵ In addition to biographies, it is good to have other materials in the classroom for research into the historical context: the significant events, themes, and controversies of an era in United States history. For example, biographies of Benjamin Franklin and Betsy Ross might be grouped together with informational books and other research materials related to Colonial America and the Revolution of 1776.

My selection of biographies is guided by a desire to locate stories of individuals and groups in American history told from within an authentic historical context. Each book's facts and settings must be historically accurate and the characters' situations historically plausible. Biographies should also present children with a rich variety

of images depicting the past, for example, in the form of detailed illustrations or photographs.

2. Evaluating Historical Significance

Students will benefit from listening as the teacher identifies a historically significant event from a read-aloud passage from a biography. In this task, students are looking for an event that involves social justice or injustice, which many students may understand as an incident involving “fairness” or “fair play.” Teachers can help their students recognize and identify issues of social injustice (now and in the past) by first sharing their own stories, and then asking students to share about an incident in which they felt that they were treated unfairly. For example, many children have had the experience of being falsely accused of taking something that did not belong to them, or of not telling the truth when, in fact, they had been truthful. Being excluded from a game can be a painful experience when one’s peers are doing the rejecting. Ask students how such injustices made them feel and, if appropriate, how an inequitable situation might have been avoided or “made right” afterwards. Reflecting on these and other types of personal experiences can help students to recognize meaningful events in the biography.

3. Using the Graphic Organizer

Put a graphic organizer to up on the board as an example (See below). Work with students to decide upon one important event as described in the passage that you read aloud. Write that event down in the first column, which has the heading “Three Events.” Under the second column (“Why Significant?”) explain in short phrases why that event was important for that person, for society,

and for social justice in America. In the third column (“Artifacts”) list an artifact that could symbolize the event. In the fourth column (“How Connected?”) use short phrases to explain how each artifact represents the event. In what way is it symbolic? Once students understand how to use the organizer, give everyone a copy of the handout.

4. Creating “Artifacts” and Stories

Teachers should assess all graphic organizers before students find or make their three artifacts. Class time can be used, or students can create these artifacts at home.

Ordinary construction paper, for example, can be used to create the telescope through which Benjamin Banneker peered during his exploration of the stars, a gold medallion inscribed with a tribute to Gertrude Ederle’s heroic journey in 1926 swimming twenty-one miles across the Channel, or a cut-out version of the city bus on which Rosa Parks rode and refused to give up her seat to a white man one day in 1955.

Once partners obtain their three artifacts they arrange them in chronological order—as the events they represent occurred in the biography—and practice presenting them to each other as a way of telling about their historical figure. Larger groups are possible for storytelling. For example, if four pairs of students read four different biographies of people seeking social justice in America just before the Civil War, then all eight students might convene as a single group. Each pair of students takes turns telling about their historical figure using three artifacts; the members of these larger groups may continue to collaborate with one another during the historical inquiry activity that follows storytelling (see below). Small

Graphic Organizer: Events and Artifacts

Use this graphic organizer to help you describe three events from the biography of a person who worked for social justice in America. Short phrases are okay. Complete sentences are not necessary.

Three Events	Why Significant?	Three “Artifacts”	How Connected?
Identify and list three important events concerning social justice.	Tell why each event was important to the main character and in history.	Draw a picture of three “artifacts” and label them.	Explain how each “artifact” and event are related.
1.	1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.	3.

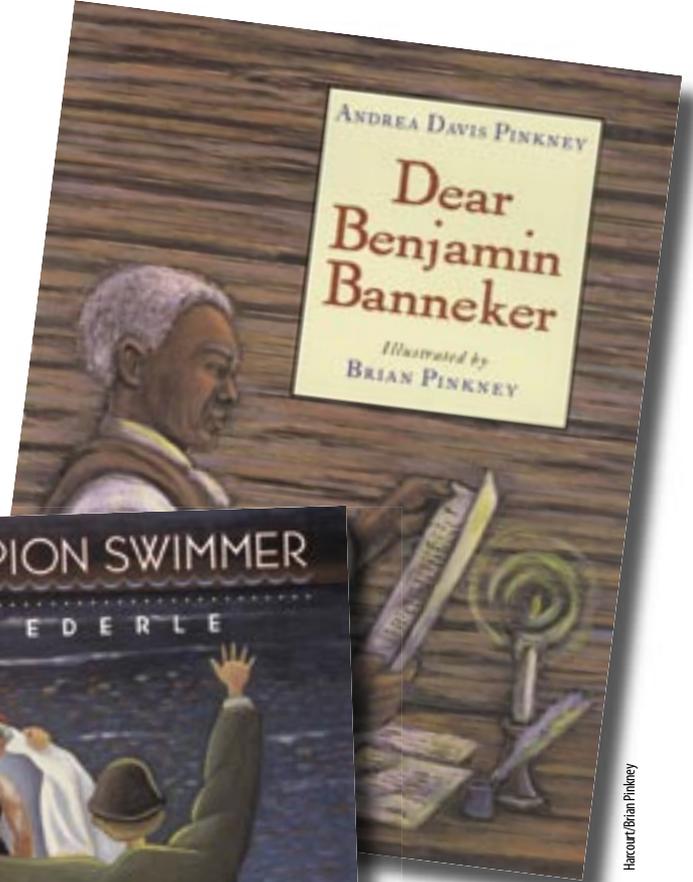
or large groups may read biographies based on a common historical event (for example, the Underground Railroad), issue (slavery and abolition), or theme (workers' rights) in American history.

5. Using Historical Artifacts for Storytelling

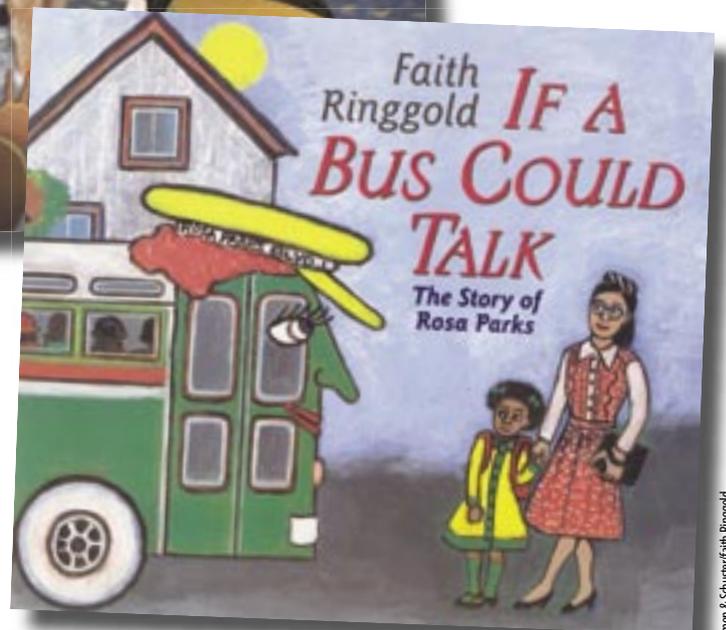
After partners gain confidence using their artifacts to relate part of a biography, they meet with another pair of students and take turns making short presentations. Students display the cover of their biography to listeners but do not open the book during storytelling. Biographies should be told with expression and in as much detail as possible using the artifacts only. When presenting artifacts, storing and removing them one at a time from a historically appropriate "container" (usually something seen or mentioned in the biography) adds an element of authenticity and suspense to the storytelling drama. Tell students to think of these three artifacts as "mental book notes" that will help them remember what to say and when to say it. When partners finish speaking, they invite listeners to ask questions, which they try to answer, referring to the written biographies as needed. Partners then switch roles, so that storytellers now become listeners.⁶



Harcourt/Terry Widener



Harcourt/Brian Pinkney



Simon & Schuster/Faith Ringgold

Character, Social Justice, and Democracy

After telling their stories and sharing their artifacts, the students and teacher together can try to identify those qualities of character possessed by Americans who struggled to achieve social justice. This could be an interesting discussion. Do students have the vocabulary to describe such virtues as courage, responsibility, truthfulness, caring, self-discipline, persistence, and fairness? These are all examples of qualities that help define the character of Americans who made personal sacrifices to gain respect and secure equal treatment for themselves and others. Additional questions students might consider include:

- How did groups of people address a problem of social injustice?
- How did individuals, acting on their own, address a problem of social injustice?
- What role did social institutions (like newspapers, courts, churches, or schools) play in perpetuating the problem?
- What role did social institutions (like newspapers, courts, churches, or schools) play in bringing justice to an unfair situation?
- How did people protest, resist, or dissent against injustice?
- Did such actions seem appropriate to everybody at the time?

- In what ways did the achievements of these individuals and groups contribute to the common good? How did their struggle benefit all citizens?

Bringing the Unit to a Close

If students have enjoyed this activity, partners can try their hands at writing a "biopoem"—a short bit of formula poetry that outlines a person's life.⁷ Or they could write a very short script—a conversation, discussion, or debate—that involves the subject of the biography and a person (who can be fictional) who opposed his or her efforts to achieve social justice. Students then perform their script—

presenting it to a small group or whole class—in the form of a short dramatic skit. Actors may read from their prepared scripts, dress for the part, and use their historical artifacts as props.⁸ If students lack experience with public presentations, creating and using puppets to perform the skit can be a good way to lower the stress of performance. Although the topic of social justice is serious, it is okay to undertake these dramas with a light attitude. Poking gentle fun at mean and oppressive behavior can remove some of the fear that sustains any unjust situation. And history students of all ages need to believe that difficult struggles can have a joyful outcome. 📖

Notes

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7. P. Whitin, "Leading Into Literature Circles Through the Sketch-to-Stretch Strategy," *The Reading Teacher* 55, no. 5 (2002): 444-450; E. Webre, "Integrating Social Studies Texts and Trade Books with Formula Poetry," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 14, no. 3 (2002): 3; M. Inzerella, "Using Biographical Poems in a Fifth Grade Class," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 14, no. 3 (2002): 4; L. Levstik and K. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating With Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000).
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