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

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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 In addition to teaching historical content, these activities promote “historical thinking skills” by encouraging students to construct meaningful interpretations of the past through: (a) chronological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 the 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. 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.

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.

The social studies curriculum thematic strands that this unit addresses are: TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE; INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY; INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS; and CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.

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 Elderly. 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
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.

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. 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. 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.

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We use cookies to make interactions with our website easy and meaningful, to better understand the use of our services, and to tailor advertising. For further information, including about cookie settings, please read our Cookie Policy. By continuing to use this site, you consent to the use of cookies. Got it. We value your privacy. We use cookies to offer you a better experience, personalize content, tailor advertising, provide social media features, and better understand the use of our services. To learn more or modify/prevent the use of cookies, see our Cookie Policy and Privacy Policy. Acc Just this month, for example, former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick complained to Nike, the sports shoe maker, that “he and others found their latest line of footwear, which carried the Betsy Ross-era flag of a younger United States, ‘offensive.’ If we’re going to continue to be a nation of many different colors and creeds, then we need to bravely and honestly accept our history, warts and all. It is really the only way forward. @Robert_Bridge. Social justice is really the capacity to organize with others to accomplish ends that benefit the whole community. If people are to live free of state control, they must possess this new virtue of cooperation and association. This is one of the great skills of Americans and, ultimately, the best defense against statism. Let us begin by asking what most people think social justice is. After that, let us review how the term arose. It is a Catholic concept, later taken over by secular progressives. What social justice actually is turns out to be very different from the way the term is now used popularly. It’s the largest-scale abandonment of women by men in human history, what’s happening all through this country. And not only in urban areas: It’s happening out in Iowa and all across the country.