Picture Book Biographies: Fostering Active Student Involvement in Women’s History Month

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This article features the achievements of women through four picture book biographies, all of which are National Council for the Social Studies Notable Trade Books for 2011. These notable trade book selections underscore the contributions of four distinct ethnicities, symbolizing the cultural diversity of our nation and its citizens. They draw attention to women who accomplished great things, yet remain unknown and invisible in the historical record. The contributions of these women are highlighted, and developmentally appropriate extension activities are shared to help teachers encourage children to learn more about the lives of women who changed our nation not only during Women’s History Month, but throughout the year. Finally, this article discusses tips for engaging both girls and boys in the study of women’s history.

Key Words: picture books, biography, history, women, Women’s History Month, NCSS

Introduction

By first and second grade, children have successfully mastered time and history concepts (Alleman & Brophy, 2003), but by fifth grade, they have acquired the misconception that learning history means the memorization of names, dates, and places (Fertig, 2005). To prevent these misconceptions from developing, educators have found that integrating social studies with language arts helps children focus on the stories of the past, rather than on simply memorizing historical facts (Fuhler, Farris, and Nelson, 2006). To prevent these misconceptions from developing, educators have found that integrating social studies with language arts helps children focus on the stories of the past, rather than on simply memorizing historical facts (Fuhler, Farris, and Nelson, 2006). Primary grade teachers can ensure that history instruction is developmentally appropriate by selecting stories of historical events that capture the interest and curiosity of young children. Children, too, tell their own historical stories and include historical detail, human interaction, drama, and cause and effect relationships. This integration of stories, photographs, and discussions of times past is ideally suited for the early grades. These discussions are important because - without history instruction in the primary grades - they will have no framework for the formal presentation of history when it begins in the intermediate grades (VanSledright & Brophy, 1992).

Picture books are a resource that can be used to connect young children with important historical events. Books should be selected that are factually accurate, free of stereotyping, representative of diversity, and respectful of cultural differences. They also should include illustrations that precisely reflect the historical period so children have the opportunity to utilize
skills in visual literacy. Visual literacy allows students to make meaning from images, and excellent illustrations have the potential to increase comprehension skills. Enhanced understanding through illustrations is especially important when children are learning about multicultural concepts and issues (Madifold, 2000).

Most importantly, trade books bring drama to historical events and humanize history in ways that textbooks may not. They allow students to connect with characters, real or fictionalized, supporting their interest and engagement. Both historical fiction and biographies encourage students to become curious about various time periods, consider difficult or sensitive events, and become involved in discussions of diversity and social justice. Students are able to learn about the past within the context of authentic, meaningful, and engaging text (Ellermeyer & Chick, 2003).

Picture books with strong female protagonists are an excellent tool to help young children become aware of the contributions of women in history, especially during observances like Women’s History Month. Young children - most of whom have not yet realized the complexities and controversies of a male-dominated historical record - can learn early in their history studies the significant experiences and contributions of both genders. Although they may know very little about the deeds and contributions of female historical figures, both girls and boys can be enticed by the exciting stories in picture books about the adventures and accomplishments of women.

The integration of trade books into social studies is essential given that studies over the last fifty years have indicated the content of history textbooks is dedicated almost exclusively to the contributions of men (Chick, 2006; Clark, Allard, & Mahoney, 2004; Sadker and Sadker, 1994; Tetreault, 1986; Trecker, 1971). Although recent studies reveal that some progress is being made toward gender balance, there are still significantly more males than females in American history textbooks (Chick, 2006). The fact that women are “overlooked and undervalued in K-6 social studies textbooks and instructional resources” is of great concern (Hickey and Kolterman, 2006). If students do not understand the role of women in history, they may misunderstand the organization of our society (Baker 2004).

This article will feature the achievements of women through four picture book biographies. These biographies are all National Council for the Social Studies Notable Trade Books for 2011, representing the best of the best in current children’s social studies literature. They underscore the contributions of four distinct ethnicities, symbolizing the cultural diversity of our nation and its citizens. 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. The picture books and activities make connections with the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies through the themes of (1) Culture, (2) Time, Continuity, and Change, and (10) Civic Ideals and Practices (NCSS, 2010).

The contributions of these women will be highlighted and developmentally appropriate extension activities will be shared. The biographies can be read in 10-20 minutes each, and extension activities can be completed in an additional 15-20 minutes. The ease with which they can be integrated into the language arts/social studies curriculum enables young children to be actively involved in learning about the lives of women who changed our nation, during Women’s History Month and throughout the year. Finally, this article will discuss tips for engaging both girls and boys in the study of women’s history.

Betty Mae Jumper: Seminole Tribal Leader

She Sang Promise: The Story of Betty Mae Jumper, Seminole Tribal Leader (Annino, 2010), tells the story of a Seminole girl who grew up in the Everglades and in Dania Reservation in
Florida in the 1920s. Betty Mae is depicted as being very smart. In the book, she learns stories from Elders, tends gardens, collects plants for Tribal Medicine, and helps at birthing time. Although he speaks three languages, Betty but does not have the opportunity to attend school until is the age of fourteen. Betty Mae becomes a nurse and returns home to care for her people. She is extremely brave and takes many risks. Most of all, she wants to help her people - many of whom are uneducated and living without electricity or clean water. Betty Mae helps to set up a Tribal Council to work with leaders in Washington, D.C., starting the Seminole Indian News in 1961. In 1967 she is elected leader of the Seminole Tribe, one of the first female tribal leaders.

Introduce She Sang Promise by showing the cover and discussing the title. Engage students in a brief discussion of the history of the Seminole as documented in the chronology at the end of the book or at websites such as http://www.semtribe.com/history, that of the Seminole Tribe of Florida (see Web Based Resources), and at the Florida Division of Historical Resources). website (see Web Based Resources. Before reading the book, have students participate in Two Facts and a Fib (MeadWestvaco Corporation, n.d.). Arrange students into mixed-ability groups of three or four. Read each set of three statements aloud and have students discuss the statements and reach consensus on which statement they believe is a fib. See Table 1. Encouraging students to work in groups and reading the statements aloud allows all students to experience success with this activity. Then read the book aloud so students can check to see how many answers they got correct. Discuss Betty Mae Jumper’s accomplishments and have students share what they believe to be her most important contributions.

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Answers: The following statements are fibs.

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Betty Mae started school when she was four-years-old.

Betty Mae grew up in Michigan.

Betty Mae helped to start a television show about the Seminole people.

_Elinor Smith: Youngest Licensed Pilot in the United States_

In 1928, at age seventeen, Elinor Smith became the youngest licensed pilot in the United States. In _Soar, Elinor!,_ author Tami Lewis Brown (2010) begins the story of six-year-old Elinor and her quest for her first airplane ride. Flying lessons began at age ten, she soloed at age fifteen, and soon after earned her license. At that time, many people felt that women shouldn’t be flying. A stunt pilot bet Elinor that she wouldn’t be brave enough to fly under one of the bridges on New York’s East River. She surprised him by responding that she would fly under all four bridges, which had never been done. Elinor made history by flying under the first three bridges with ease, and flying under the fourth bridge sideways to avoid a Navy destroyer and a tanker.

After reading _Soar, Elinor!,_ ask students to name the two ways that this young pilot made history. Have students consider which accomplishment they believe to be the most daring - earning a pilot’s license at age seventeen in an airplane like Elinor few or flying under four bridges. Engage students in the readers’ theater script found in Table 2. Participants line up in the front of the room facing the wall. When it is each reader’s turn to speak, that student must turn around to face the class, turning back to the wall when finished. This arrangement adds a bit of drama to the performance and helps the audience to focus on the student reading. Have students perform the script several times to allow all students to participate. The more they practice and perform, the more fluent they will become.
Table 2: Reader’s Theater Script: Soar, Elinor!

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<td>Narrator: It was 1917 and most little girls were dressing their dolls, playing house, or jumping rope. But one little girl wanted more. Elinor Smith was born to soar. Airplane rides- $5.</td>
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| Father: Five dollars is a lot of money, Elinor. But if you really want to….
Elinor: Oh father, thank you, thank you! |
| Narrator: Elinor’s father knotted her blond braids together to keep them from blowing in the wind, and lifted Elinor and her little brother, Joe, into the airplane. Too soon they were landing. |
| Elinor: The potato farms and ocean spread out like a map. I was free, like I’d flown to heaven. |
| Mother, father, I must take flying lessons. |
| Narrator: When Elinor was ten she began flying lessons. |
| An Old Pilot: She will fly one day with the great ones. She has the touch. |
| Elinor: Father, mother, I am ready to fly alone. |
| Father: No, Elinor. You are far too young. |
| Mother: If flying airplanes is what you want to do, be like the U.S. Mail. Don’t let rain, sleet, or snow keep you from flying. |
| Narrator: Mother hired Elinor a new flying teacher. Elinor flew many times. |
| Mr. Holderman: Take her around. She’s all yours. |
Elinor: It’s now or never!

Narrator: Elinor took off and climbed to 1000 feet.

Elinor: In that instant I knew I was home and would never look back.

Newspaper Reporter: Girl’s shouldn’t fly! That flying flapper is just playing at being a pilot!

Stunt Pilot: Girls should stay on the ground! She’s not good enough. Hey Elinor, I bet you couldn’t fly under one of the bridges across the East River.

Elinor: I can do it anytime. I’ll fly under all four bridges. I’ll be safe too. I’ll hang by my heels from all the bridges checking everything out.

Narrator: On Sunday, October 21, 1928, Elinor planned to fly low under all four bridges. She climbed into her little plane.

Charles Lindbergh: Good luck, kid. Keep your nose down on the turns.

Narrator: Elinor took off and headed for the first bridge.

Bridge One: Her she comes, diving toward the water! Wow! She just zipped out the other side!

Bridge Two: Her she comes, waving to the crowds! Oh boy! She slipped right under me!

Bridge Three: I have a lot of streetcars and automobiles on me! I hope she makes it! YAH!

Bridge Four: Elinor hasn’t planned for river traffic! I have two big ships under me! Oh, no! She’s turning sideways! She made it!

Narrator: The crowd shouted and cheered as Elinor landed. Then she had to go see the Mayor of New York City.

New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker: You are very brave but you have broken the law. You won’t be able to fly for a short time. But, please name a plane to honor the city.
Narrator: Elinor got a letter asking her to stop flying under bridges, but they also asked for her autograph! Soar, Elinor, soar!

**Odetta Holmes: Folk Singer and Civil Rights Activist**

Odetta Holmes was a legendary folk singer and civil rights activist. In the book, Odetta: The Queen of Folk, author Stephen Alcorn (2010) uses poetic verse to tell the story of her young life in Birmingham, Alabama, and her love for music. As a young child, Odetta thought Jim Crow was a person who hung “whites only” signs and made them sit in a different car on the train. Things changed when she and her family moved to California, affording her the opportunity to have piano lessons. Odetta’s musical talent and career took off as she sang the spirituals and melodies of her childhood. In the author’s notes, readers learn that Odetta played Carnegie Hall, was an inspiration to singers such as Joan Baez, Janis Joplin, and Bob Dylan, participated in several civil rights marches, and received the Lifetime Achievement Award of the World Folk Music Association.

Cover the picture book, Odetta: The Queen of Folk, with wrapping paper so students cannot see the title or cover. Collect artifacts that represent the life of Ms. Holmes, such as a sheet of folk music, a “whites only” sign, a guitar, and a birdcage. Show the artifacts one at a time and have students make predictions on how each artifact might be related to the story. Guesses can be recorded on chart paper or the chalkboard. Unwrap the book, show students the title and cover, and allow them to modify their predictions. Read the book, reminding students to listen for the way each artifact is used in the story. Consider each artifact, asking students to explain how close their predictions were to the actual significance of each item (Ellermeyer & Chick, 2003). From the list of recordings included in the text, play one of Ms. Holmes’ songs or have students watch one of her many YouTube videos such as This Little Light of Mine found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6vmlg37dto (Youtube, n.d.) Discuss with students her contributions to American folk music and our nation’s civil rights journey.

**Sonia Sotomayor: First Hispanic Justice of the United States Supreme Court**

In Sonia Sotomayor: Supreme Court Justice (Bernier-Grand, 2010), free verse tells the story of Sonia Sotomayor’s childhood in New York City. She grew up in a Spanish speaking family in the projects near Yankee Stadium. It wasn’t until fifth grade that she began to understand the stories she was reading in English. Sotomayor entered Princeton University, practiced long hours to improve her writing skills, was accepted at Yale Law School, and became editor of the Yale Law Journal. She became a federal judge in 1991 and was promoted to judge of the Court of Appeals of the Second Circuit in New York in 1997. She was confirmed as the first Latina Supreme Court Justice in 2009 after being nominated by President Barack Obama. The free verse, illustrations, and glossary of Spanish words make the life and accomplishments of this female role model accessible to young children.

Go to http://www.supremecourt.gov/about/members.aspx (Supreme Court of the United States, 2009). Click on the name of each current Supreme Court Justice so students see a photograph of each member and the date on which he/she was confirmed. Show students a photograph of the Supreme Court building found at http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/washdc/supremecrt/supremecrt.html (Sullivan, 2002). Discuss with students the role of the Supreme Court. Read Sonia Sotomayor: Supreme Court Justice, aloud to students. Have students brainstorm what makes Sotomayor special.
Then, place students in mixed-ability groups of three or four students. Have the groups choose various scenes from the book for a story retelling. Provide students with heavy-weight interfacing or felt. Students draw the characters and props for their scene onto the interfacing and cut them out. Demonstrate how to make small group flannel boards by gluing a sheet of felt to the outside of a two-pocket folder. The flannel board characters and props can be stored in the folder’s inside pockets. After each group makes a flannel board, students can choose who will play each part, what each character will say, and who will move the props to and from the flannel board (Ellermeyer & Chick, 2003). Encourage students to incorporate some of the Spanish words found in the book’s glossary, such as Mami (Mommy), Papi (Daddy), and pircua (snow cone). After the groups practice, they can retell the story with the scenes presented in the order they took place in the book.

**Common Character Traits**

In classes that have read all four picture books, students can discuss common character traits for Betty Mae Jumper, Elinor Smith, Odetta Holmes, and Sonia Sotomayor. In semantic character analysis, students mark a plus (+) to represent yes, a minus (-) to represent no, or a plus/minus (+/-) to represent sometimes, for each character trait (Ellermeyer & Chick, 2003). See Table 3. This analysis can be done in small groups so students have the opportunity to discuss each character and reach consensus on that character’s attributes.

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**Engaging Both Girls and Boys in Women’s History**

Studies show that children prefer same-gender protagonists, although girls are more likely to cross gender lines and enjoy books with male characters. While girls tend to read fiction and stories about relationships, boys prefer non-fiction, graphic novels, magazines, and biographies, with stories focusing on science fiction, history, war, sports, and adventure (Chick & Heilman-Houser, 2000; Dutro, 2001/2002; Zambo and Brozo, 2009). If this is the case, how can teachers get both girls and boys interested in picture books about women? Table 4 provides tips for engaging girls and boys in the study of women’s history.
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Print Based Resources


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Answers: The following statements are fibs.

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Elinor: The potato farms and ocean spread out like a map. I was free, like I’d flown to heaven.

Mother, father, I must take flying lessons.

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