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Analyzing picture book biographies of Ruth Bader Ginsburg: Doing the work of citizens

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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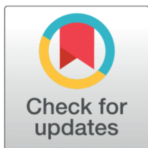
I am the Leo A. Guthart Distinguished Professor in Teaching Excellence, specializing in Social Studies Education, at Hofstra University, as well as the Head of the Minors in Civic Engagement and Peace and Conflict Studies. Prior to Hofstra, I taught high school social studies and was lead teacher for elementary social studies. My ultimate goal at every grade level is to nurture curious, questioning civic beings who can seek out reliable information on which to make informed judgments and take action to better their local, national, and global communities. I am interested in examples of thoughtful, justice-oriented curriculum and instruction at every grade level; to that end, I have observed and written about exemplary teachers throughout my career. Of late, I have been spending my time learning about the craft of non-fiction picture books because I think that every book can be a social studies book and a way to get social studies into the elementary curriculum, which is too often dominated by the tested subjects of literacy and math. Outside of my professional pursuits, I love being told stories – in novels, biographies, memoirs, podcasts, movies, plays, and by my friends, spouse, children, grandchildren and, now, great-grandchild!



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INTRODUCTION

Throughout my teaching career, I have sought to nurture students to do the work of citizens, that is, to determine where they can find reliable knowledge and then act, based on that data. One aspect of assessing the reliability of sources is recognizing that people with different perspectives may have different stories to tell. I have introduced this understanding of

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multiple perspectives in an activity where students write about an important event in their lives and then interview someone else who was present at the same event to get that person's take. Students often find that the two versions of the same event reflect differences in tone. For example, to one fourth grader, a block party meant playing in the street, free from anxious parental warnings about cars; the student's mother, on the other hand, remembered the party as a lot of work, including the lugging out of lawn furniture, grills, and coolers, followed by the lugging back in of everything at the end of the night, not to mention getting a permit to close down the street, as well as signatures from neighbors. Even more memorable was the student who had taken a fishing trip with his father; their two versions went beyond different perspectives to a difference of fact: The father remembered seven fish caught, while the son insisted that the number was ten. Obviously, father and son could not both be right (though they could both have been wrong), so I led the now highly motivated students to figure out what sources might give us the reliable data we sought (Libresco et al., 2011, p.82). In a similar vein, literature circles using biographies can provide students with an opportunity to compare different picture books about the same person with respect to tones, facts, omissions, and perspectives. Supplementing those books with still more sources can provide students with fuller pictures of the people studied, as well as the times in which they lived and the institutional obstacles to their achievements.

THE RESEARCH

I have worked with literacy colleagues for years, introducing students to citizen-role models, people who made a difference, through the vehicle of biography-literature circles, in the hope that students will be inspired to look for ways to make a difference, themselves.

Students sign up for an individual (three or four students read about the same activist); select a picture book biography of their own choosing from the library; read it actively, interacting with the text; then come in ready to participate in a literature circle with their classmates who have read different biographies about the same individual. Students' discussions in their literature circles address the content of their person's life, including personal factors that led to activism, as well as the society in which s/he lived, including systemic barriers to equality and social justice.

Because students select their own books, there are different biographies representing the same figure in each group. This variety produces rich discussion among students as they examine each other's books, debate the value of artwork versus photographs, notice the omission of certain data in different books, discuss the extent to which a single biography can adequately represent a life, and derive a process for assessing the accuracy of different sources.

As detailed in the C3 (NCSS, 2013), this source work is the stuff of social studies, which, in turn, is the work of a well-informed citizenry in a democracy, wherein students – and citizens – analyze and interpret information and "work together to reach conclusions based on incomplete and conflicting information" (Barton & Levstik, 2015). Elementary social studies methods students and the elementary students they teach share the different information

and perspectives found in their biographies, as they seek to get a fuller, more accurate picture of their activist and the society in which s/he lived.

In an age of standardized testing of literacy and mathematics and the concomitant shrinking time for social studies (Fitchett et al., 2014), having picture books do double-duty may be a necessary methodology. It is worth noting that the use of books to teach social studies skills and concepts in addition to literacy skills can enhance or undermine social studies goals and objectives (Alleman & Brophy, 1991; 1993). Employing biographical literature in the service of social studies requires "healthy integration" wherein "reading/language arts are recognized as tools for helping children come to understand the work and how to communicate that understanding" (Hinde, 2015, p. 25).

Ruth Bader Ginsburg is one of the citizen role models explored in the biography literature circles. In addition to the research that children's book authors have compiled on Ginsburg (Krull, 2018; Levy, 2017; Winter, 2018), it is useful to examine the stories of Ginsburg's nine female classmates in the Harvard Law class of '59 (Lithwick & Olmstead, 2020). These women's reflections on hazing at Harvard, professional setbacks, balancing career and family, and the feminist legal movement provide insight in corroborating Ginsburg's biography and the society in which she and they achieved, despite extraordinary institutional obstacles.

Lithwick and Olmsead's (2020) interviews with Ginsburg's classmates and relatives complicate the stories conveyed in the picture books. They find the experiences of Ginsburg's classmates in some of her most famous opinions and dissents:

> "And there they were. The class of '59. The story of Carol Brosnahan and absurd pay discrimination peeks through Ginsburg's dissent in the Lilly Ledbetter fair pay case in 2007. The stories of Rhoda or Alice's career-dampening pregnancies or pregnancy losses are simmering under the surface of her 2014 dissent in Hobby Lobby, where she writes about the burdens of inaccessible contraceptive care. The slights and stings of the discrimination each of these women faced in job interviews, promotions, and fair pay form the spine of her dissent in the 2011 class-action discrimination case that was Wal-Mart v. Dukes. And the story of all these women and that infamous dinner party at Dean Griswold's house is suddenly the subtext of her historic majority opinion in the Virginia Military Institute case that desegregated an august all-male military institution in 1996."

I did not come upon this article about Ginsburg's nine female classmates until after we had completed our biography literature circles this past fall, but I would certainly share it with students in the future. Its inclusion as another source may help students think about the other women who, while they did not become Supreme Court Justices, were pioneers, nonetheless. Further, the article may induce students reading about activists in the future to widen their lens to include the stories of activists' contemporaries to gain a fuller picture of the life and times of their subjects.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

A comparison of the three NCSS Notable picture book biographies of Ginsburg (I dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg makes her mark by Debbie Levy, 2017 ; Ruth Bader Ginsburg: The case of R. B. G. vs Inequality by Jonah Winter, 2018; No truth without Ruth: The life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg by Kathleen Krull, 2018) reveals differences in emphasis but no factual conflicts.

When I reviewed two of the books, I found that The case of R. B. G. vs. Inequality (Winter, 2018) focuses more on Ginsburg's upbringing prior to her work on the bench, as well as her style of "dignity, civility, intelligence, and a soft-spoken manner," whereas I dissent (Levy, 2017) explores more of the substance of her work and the notion that "disagreement doesn't mean being disagreeable," as her disagreements have been "with creaky old ideas, with unfairness, with inequality." In that review, I was disappointed that neither book focused enough on the particulars of the cases she argued before the Supreme Court and decided (or dissented) while a Supreme Court Justice:

> "It does not seem beyond the comprehension of elementary students to read about the problematic predicament of Sharron Frontiero, a lieutenant in the Air Force who, in the early 1970s, discovered that she did not qualify for certain military benefits (like a spousal housing allowance) given automatically to men. Nor would nine- and ten-year old students have difficulty understanding the inherent unfairness in a prestigious, state-run institution like the Virginia Military Institute's refusal to admit women (Libresco, 2019, p. 32)."

Of course, no single book can cover everything (an important understanding for students); happily, the most recently published biography, No truth without Ruth, focuses on the specifics of the cases. This summary of the Lilly Ledbetter case both lays out the inherent unfairness of the case, as well as the ultimate remedy, derived from Ginsburg's dissent:

> "One decision that angered her came in 2007. An Alabama woman had sued her employer on finding out after twenty years on the job that she was being paid much less than men holding the same job. The Court ruled against her, saying too much time had passed for her to take legal action. Ruth dissented so strongly that Congress later overruled the Court. In 2009, the first piece of legislation that President Barack Obama signed was the Fair Pay Act in honor of the woman who had sued, so that this wouldn't happen again. Ruth's dissent had become the law (Krull, 2018)."

In its Endnotes, this recent biography provides an annotated list of ten cases where Ginsburg "fought for fairness."

In the most recent iteration of the biography literature circles, group members in my elementary methods class noted the different focuses of the three biographies and found that discussing all three made them aware of more than their single book had, including: "women's rights, job discrimination, anti-Semitism, gender in the workplace, the ACLU,

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the civic purpose of dissent, representation on the Supreme Court, how these issues [manifested] during RBG's childhood, how RBG fought for or against these issues, [and] how much or little the United States has undergone" (student work, Fall 2020). Even when the data in the books are not in conflict, the benefits of reading multiple sources with varying emphases become clear to students.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

Providing students with questions to consider prior to and during their literature circles can help focus the discussion: What societal need did the individual discover, and how did this discovery shape her/his motivation to be a change agent? What characteristics (personal, family, societal) shaped the individual's ability to be a change agent? What obstacles did the individual face in her/his struggle for change? How did this individual contribute to the society in which s/he lived? To help students visualize both the differing and corroborating information their biographies and other sources bring to their understanding of the subject, write each of the questions above on separate pieces of chart paper. Each group member, then, records her/his responses to the questions based on the reading of her/his own book. If each student uses a different colored marker, it will be clear that different sources yield different information on the same historical figure. After this activity, have students discuss how their book's account compares to those of their classmates and how they decide which is/are the most reliable account(s).

In addition, the group can assess the individual's contribution to society by designing a fitting monument to her/him. Groups can discuss the extent to which reading the life story of their individual affected the way they want to live their lives. If a textbook is used in the class, students can check to see if these activists get their due in the text. If not, information about the person can be inserted in the textbook on a series of Post-it notes (Libresco et al., 2011, p. 92-3).

An addition to this interdisciplinary biography activity is a second round of literature circles that reorder the groups so that students who have read biographies about different individuals are placed together. In their new configurations, students look for similarities and differences in the lives of the different activists shared within the group. Thus, might the challenges and achievements of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Ida B. Wells, Susan B. Anthony, and Cesar Chavez be compared. Students may marvel at the fact that all students in the circle can contribute to thoughtful discussion when each of them has read a different book about a different activist (Fusco & Libresco, 2009).

Finally, the picture books, Seven Blind Mice (Young, 2002), which retells the fable of blind men who individually investigate the different parts of an elephant and argue about what each has found, and The True Story of the Three Little Pigs (Sciescka, 1996), which recounts the fairy tale from the wolf's point of view, can reinforce the understanding that students have acquired from their biography-literature circles that different sources tell different stories and it is our job as citizens to assess their accuracy. Or, as one fourth grader explained it to me, "You have to go all the way around the elephant to get the full story."

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Q & A WITH ANDREA LIBRESCO

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

What are some other ways teachers and students can take action—do the work of citizens—as a result of interrogating and determining the reliability of texts?

Andrea Libresco's Response:

I very much appreciate this question, for I fear that completing the biography-literature circles may be seen as the end of the work when, in reality, it is the beginning. It seems to me that there are three different issues here: the first is about the process of comparing multiple sources to arrive at a more accurate and complete conception of a topic; the second concerns sharing the work of these citizen-role models; and the third involves following in the activist footsteps of the subjects of these biographies.

Comparing multiple sources ought not end with this assignment; rather, it should be incorporated into future assignments, current and historical. One accessible way to incorporate this practice is in the area of sports reporting. If students are interested in a team, they can compare the coverage of a game in their hometown paper with that of the paper in the opposing team's city. Is the hometown paper free of bias or does its coverage reflect a "rooting" interest? Similarly, coverage of news events from different outlets (on television or in print sources) can be charted for an easy-to-see comparison regarding the headlines, facts, tone, visuals and sources quoted in the stories. (For an example of such a chart, see Libresco et al., 2011, p. 84.)

Making others aware of the good works of the citizen-role models can be achieved by extending the literature circle idea among parents/guardians of students. Instead of having parents/guardians be passive recipients of student presentations on these historical activists, why not engage parents in the same kind of activity that their children experienced, so parents can also become familiar with the importance of source comparison and evaluation in researching historical figures?

Finally, with respect to following in these activists' footsteps, the more we present children with models of people who take action to better society, the more they might see such a course as a possibility for their own lives. Presenting models of young people like climate activist Greta Thunberg or the many children involved in the George Floyd and March for Our Lives protests might be most effective, given their ages and the visibility of their actions. Street protests are certainly not the only forms of activism; it is incumbent upon teachers to share with students multiple actions they have read about, seen, and/or participated in to provide students with ongoing, real-life activist role models. Using letters-to-the-editor, op-eds, political cartoons, and photographs of posters regularly in class shows students different ways of expressing their well-researched opinions on a variety of issues.

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Question #2

Teacher's Question:

Do you envision that critical literacy skills are embedded in this work? In other words, as students analyze for reliability, do they also interrogate the perspectives, examine issues of power and act to interrupt the status quo? (M. Lewison, A. S. Flint, and K. van Sluys, "Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices," Language Arts 79, no. 5 (2002), 382–392.)

Andrea Libresco's Response:

Thank you for including this source, which reminds us that teachers and our students are at all different places in terms of critical literacy, the skills of which need to be continually revisited. The article you reference is an excellent introduction to the different elements of critical literacy, including interrogating texts and language; seeking out multiple perspectives, which includes asking whose voices are missing or marginalized; moving beyond the personal to the political; and using language to question privilege and dominant systems.
Critical literacy skills are integral to doing the work of citizens; and comparing multiple biographies – like completing document-based questions [DBQs] - may be but a gateway to deep critical literacy work. Like other skills, those of critical literacy can be supported; using social justice texts, scaffolding students' thinking with deliberate questions (e.g., "Whose voices are not represented in these works?" "What societal barriers to advancement did these historical figures encounter?" "What societal barriers to advancement do activists today encounter?") can move students to an examination of power dynamics in society, past and present.

One of the important conclusions in the article you cite is that teachers need time to absorb and practice these critical literacy skills, themselves, and listen to and observe colleagues as they do so. Another essential point is that most elementary teachers were not history majors. The teachers under study in the article indicated that their professional development in critical literacy created a hunger for expanding their own knowledge about historical events and sociopolitical issues…which is wonderful but also points to the need for professional development that addresses both skills and content.

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

How do you recommend teachers scaffold strong collaborative practices in literature circles?

Andrea Libresco's Response:

The structure of biograpy-literature circles, wherein each student in the circle may have a different book, lends itself to collaboration. Students want to hear about and examine their group members' books and compare to their own. In addition, the meaningful nature of the task, in which students examine activists' lives to ascertain what they can learn about living

their own, can encourage agency for student learning and connection with other students and their life aspirations.

Many teachers find it helpful to assign roles within groups, and to cast those roles against type (e.g., giving the role of facilitator to a more talkative student). Asking students in the group to agree on several answers to certain questions encourages thoughtful and deep discussion, as group members weigh the value of and carefully select their responses. As with many new practices, scaffolding is important at the beginning, but we should look to phase it out over time. After all, one of the goals of literature circles is that students have the autonomy to run the groups, themselves, asking their own questions, nurturing the members in their own mini-communities. Implicit in this phasing out over time is that literature circles on topics with social studies import are conducted throughout the year so that students have multiple opportunities to practice collaboration and autonomy, as they make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections.

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

What resources or stories would you suggest that could help students practice these skills before they delve into biographical representations?

Andrea Libresco's Response:

As indicated at the end of the article, children's literature that examines the same subject from different viewpoints is good scaffolding for exercising these skills in biographical analysis. For example, in They All Saw a Cat by Brendan Wenzel, every pair of eyes that sees the same cat sees it differently, according to their particular perspective. Judy Blume's The Pain and the Great One presents two stories told by two siblings, each of whom thinks the other is their parents' favorite. In Anthony Browne's Voices in the Park, the same interaction is told from four different perspectives, a sort of Rashomon for the primary grades.

In addition to published children's literature, teachers can use events in their students' own lives to explore multiple perspectives. My co-authors of Every Book is a Social Studies Book and I have elementary students write in class about a memorable event in their lives. Students often write about being in a family wedding, getting a new pet, their first Communion, a block party, or a family vacation. We collect the students' papers and then assign them to interview someone else who was present at the same event (often a relative). In class the next day, students compare their version of the event with that of their relative, making a list of similarities and differences. Students often discover that their recollection has a totally different emphasis than their relative's. For example, one student recalled a block party and the fun and excitement of riding her scooter up and down the street all day long, while her mother remembered the headache and the expense of ordering all of the food. The comparisons may also reveal factual differences between the two versions. One of our students told about the fishing trip he took with his father. In the boy's version, he caught ten fish; in his father's version, only seven were caught.

Stories where there are factual discrepancies, like the fishing trip, provide us with the opportunity to discuss how such different versions could exist and how we can figure out where the truth lies. We ask students what information they would need to figure out whose recollection about the number of fish caught was accurate. Students brainstorm alternate sources of information: photos of the fish caught, videos from the day, the bait seller's receipts about how much bait was sold, the recollection of the person who rented them the boat, the person who cooked the fish, the diary entry by the child who caught the fish, the number of fish in the freezer, and some kids even suggest reconstructing the fish bones in the garbage to ascertain the true number of fish caught. After these sources of information are generated, we ask students to consider the reliability of each. Perhaps the most interesting discussion revolves around the diary, as students explore why diaries may or may not be reliable sources (Libresco et al., 2011, p. 82). These kinds of activities should prepare students to compare biographies with differing perspectives and data, as they go through the same process as historians and, presumably, citizens, amassing a variety of sources and assessing their accuracy.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

To what extent do you think the current political climate impacts how you would advise teachers to enact this approach?

Andrea Libresco's Response:

In any era, in our diverse democracy, if teachers do not introduce and continually give students opportunities to practice the skills of identifying perspectives, evaluating sources, and engaging in civil discourse, we are guilty of malpractice. If anything, the current political climate makes even more necessary the teaching and reinforcing of these skills. However, elementary teachers, who may not have been social studies majors, may not have had enough exposure to assessing the accuracy of sources and engaging in civil discourse. Therefore, it is worth using professional development sessions to address these skills, vital to citizens in a democracy.

To become more facile at source examination, teachers can engage in the same media analysis assignments they might subsequently use with their students, watching and reading about news stories from different sources, comparing coverage, points of view, and assessing accuracy. Teachers can grapple with the questions they will ask of their students:

- What differences did you discover in the way multiple sources covered the same story?
- Which source do you think is most reliable and why?
- What other sources should be investigated to provide a fuller picture of the issue?
- What is the value in consulting multiple sources?
- To what extent did where the source was published or broadcast affect its coverage?
- What questions does the coverage of this story raise in your mind?

- To what extent does this comparison affect what papers you might read and news channels you might watch in the future?

Using materials from the National Issues Forum (NIFI), teachers can participate in deliberative dialogues, acquiring the skills of exploring different positions held by multiple stakeholders and posing questions about whose perspectives may not be represented in the room. The questions in the booklets (NIFI) are models for students in biography-literature circles, as well as for citizens:

- How has your thinking about the issue changed?
- How has your thinking about other people's views changed?
- How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?
- What perspective might have been absent from our discussion?
- What do we still need to talk about?

If teachers engage in both media analysis and deliberative discussion, themselves, they may be more likely to do so with their classes, fostering the skills of perspective-taking and civil discussion in their students — future voters and civic actors. Thus, will their students be living John Dewey's maxim that "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (1916, p. 87).

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