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Using Disciplinary Literacy to Fill the Historical Gaps in Trade Books

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Using Disciplinary Literacy to Fill the **H•i•s•t•o•r•i•c•a•l** G•a•p•s in Trade Books

John H. Bickford III and Cynthia W. Rich

Many elementary and middle level teachers integrate history with disciplinary literacy.¹ Balancing fiction and non-fiction, or literature and informational texts, provides space for teachers to link multiple, diverse texts.² Pairing distinct texts positions students to explore connections between secondary sources, like textbooks and trade books, and primary sources, like letters and photographs. Scaffolding can assist close readings, text-based writing, historical thinking, and civic engagement.³ Where textbooks introduce readers to history via specific terminology and short passages, trade books present historical eras through relatable characters and engaging prose. For most topics, trade books are numerous enough for teachers to select multiple titles written at distinct reading levels to differentiate for diverse learners.

Misrepresentations, though, appear regularly in trade books for youth. Slaves are often wrongly depicted as well-fed and properly clothed, and descriptions of personal violence and family separation are minimized. In such stories, compassion shown by whites, optimism shown by slaves, and the possibilities of freedom are unrealistically amplified.⁴ Important elements of the Holocaust are frequently diminished or disregarded entirely: Europe's shameful history of anti-Semitism, the world's inaction towards Nazi aggression, the extent and demography of victims, and ordinary Germans' compliance and participation are a few recurrent omissions and misrepresentations.⁵

In too many trade books, segregation has no origins, little violence, and is more about separate drinking fountains and bus seats than about denial of rights and opportunities in voting, economic opportunities, and education. The Civil Rights Movement seemingly began as Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her bus seat and ended with Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.⁶ Christopher Columbus was motivated only by curiosity, religiosity, and spices—not at all by greed or glory—as a single voyage (not four) is detailed, and his cruel treatment of Tainos and Arawaks is disregarded.⁷ Native Americans' pre-contact history and conflicts with Europeans are often omitted.⁸ Historical figures are compartmentalized as Helen Keller remains a curious, rambunctious child; Anne Sullivan hardly

exists beyond the famous water pump scene with Helen; Amelia Earhart endures as a vanished aviator without Victorian resistance or competitors; and, most galling, Abraham Lincoln's death was nondescript.⁹ These are a few notable misrepresentations and omissions that can be found in trade books.

Historical misrepresentations are not easy to detect. Publishers' webpages provide only synopses and reading levels. Online reviews might be written by non-experts. A website, "Filling the Gaps with Primary Sources,"¹⁰ offers curricular support for several history-based, elementary-level topics: Native Americans; Christopher Columbus; Thanksgiving; Slavery; Abraham Lincoln; Child Labor; Amelia Earhart; and The Holocaust. One resource set focuses on the biographies of Helen Keller, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Rosa Parks.

The Value of Primary Sources

"Filling the Gaps with Primary Sources" provides historical background, alerts readers to frequent misrepresentations, suggests primary source supplements, and details specific information about particular books. The Thanksgiving webpages provide illustrative examples.

The first tab ("Home") gives teachers historical background and common misrepresentations of the historical Thanksgiving event. This shows the gap between historians' understandings and the narratives provided in many children's books. "Questions for Content Analysis" assist teachers in selecting trade books identifying possible historical gaps (e.g., "Which pre-1620 historical events/issues are mentioned?"). These questions can also be adjusted to aid students' close readings.

The second tab ("Gaps") has links that provide details about specific historical misrepresentations. A click on any particular misrepresentation provides historical background, specific misrepresentative patterns or gaps, and downloadable primary sources. These sources are intended to fill the gap. Each misrepresentative pattern is detailed (e.g., "English Royalty's Interest and Financiers' Investment").

The third tab ("Primary Sources") provides numerous primary sources. The sources are free for classroom use from Library of

Congress webpages. (e.g., A drawing of the Village of Secotan, 1619 C.E.). They connect to various historical gaps and can supplement most any trade book.

The fourth and last tab (“Books”) directs teachers to an inventory of trade books, their intended grade-level audience, and Lexile level; in this case, 24 books are listed. Such a list enables teachers to select a developmentally-appropriate book.

A Unit: Using Resources for Disciplinary Literacy

A second grade teacher, Blair, used the resources within Filling the Gaps with Primary Sources to develop a unit of study on Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan. Blair developed lessons to guide students’ text-based reading and writing. With an eye on engagement and differentiation, Blair selected books with enticing prose and written at various reading levels (**Figure 1**). Blair noted, “Students read at different levels and have such different interests.”

Using the information about historical gaps, Blair intention-

ally selected books with dissimilar representations of the same historical figures. She wanted to help students detect noticeable differences between the narratives. The five books each credited Helen Keller’s and Anne Sullivan’s collaborative achievements differently. Two praised both, two primarily Keller, or one mostly Sullivan. Blair purposefully selected books with distinctly different focuses.¹¹ Blair reasoned, “This helps children see how authors focus on different things and how that changes the story.”

Unless directed otherwise, students tend to read for comprehension.¹² Blair, though, wanted students to scrutinize. Using “Questions for Content Analysis” as a guide, Blair developed a list of close reading questions that prompted students to consider what is detailed, vague, and absent. Blair’s second graders probed their developmentally-appropriate trade book to consider how the author historically represented each historical figure. Before students did independent reading, Blair gave direct instruction about the intent of the questions (sidebar, p. 10), which helped ensure that students grasped expectations.

The prompts generated attentive reading and active questioning. Students first verbalized ideas in small literacy circles, groups in which the students had all read the same book. They listed questions and understandings for whole class discussions, where all students could hear about different books.

Figure 1. Selecting a Developmentally Appropriate Book about Helen Keller

| Scholastic Guided Reading 1 ^a | Lexile ^b | Rigby ^c | Grade Level “Equivalent” ^d |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Davis, Cathy. <i>A Teacher and a Friend</i> (Huntington Beach, CA: Teacher Created Materials, 2006) | | | |
| Q | ~650–700 | 26–27 | 3 |
| Hurwitz, Johanna. <i>Helen Keller: Courage in the Dark</i> (New York, NY: Random House, 1997) | | | |
| N | 520 | ~22 | 2 |
| Lakin, Patricia. <i>Helen Keller and the Big Storm</i> (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002) | | | |
| K | 410 | 17–18 | 2 |
| Lundell, Margo. <i>A Girl Named Helen Keller</i> (New York, NY: Scholastic, 1995) | | | |
| K | 350 | 16–17 | 2 |
| Walker, Pamela. <i>Helen Keller</i> (New York, NY: Scholastic, 2001) | | | |
| F | 150 | 6 | 1 |

Notes

- a. teacher.scholastic.com/products/guidedreading/leveling_chart.htm lexile.com.
- b. A rating preceded by a ff denotes an approximate measurement.
- c. www.readingrockets.org/article/finding-right-book-level-pals-equivalencies.
- d. “There’s no direct correspondence between a specific Lexile measure and a specific grade level. However, there are clearly a range of student reading abilities, and you might find it useful to see what the typical Lexile measures are within a given grade.” lexile.com/educators/measuring-growth-with-lexile/lexile-measures-grade-equivalents.

Questions to Guide the Reading

1. Did the author describe Anne Sullivan’s childhood? What did the book say?
2. Did the author describe Helen Keller’s childhood before “Miss Sullivan arrived” to teach her? What did the book say?
3. Which of Helen’s and Anne’s adult experiences were described? For example:
 - a. Helen attending school. (Did the book detail Anne’s assistance to Helen?)
 - b. Both women wrote books, gave speeches, and were depicted in movies.
 - c. Both worked as adults to help people with disabilities.
4. Did the author credit Helen and Anne equally or give more credit to one person for Helen’s accomplishments?
5. What questions do you have about Anne, Helen, and their overlapping life stories?

Blair supplemented the literature with primary sources to fill in a historical gap in a book, to add texture to the story, and to increase students' interest. Coupling primary and secondary sources challenged students to approach the texts like investigators looking for clues at a crime scene. They interrogated a source by posing questions about its author and its context (the era in which it was created) to better understand its significance then and today. They also compared sources and made connections between them.

Primary sources at The Library of Congress website are free for classroom use. Young learners can extract meaning when difficult-to-read historical sources are modified for reading level¹³ and are presented by the teacher with scaffolding. Blair shortened the length of passages and adjusted some language, but maintained the original meaning. She added reading prompts and questions to guide the students' scrutiny of the document. Direct instruction reminded students to read the clues prior to reading the document and to follow the steps of close reading.

Blair used multiple primary sources. Here is an illustrative example of one modified primary source with accompanying reading prompts and guided reading questions.

Blair prompted students for the guided reading by saying: "Before you read, remember, this is a letter from Helen Keller. She wrote the letter to Alexander Graham Bell. Mr. Bell was

the fellow who invented the telephone and also gave money to Helen and Anne for their work together."

Questions for Discussion:

1. Source: Who is the author? Why is the author writing this? What are the author's main points?
2. Context: When was this created? What do we know about this moment in their lives?
3. Corroboration: Do you see similar points in other documents or books? Do you see things here that are different from those in other documents or books?

Blair wanted her students to show what they learned from reading the trade books and primary sources. Given adequate time and support, students can develop writing they are proud of. Text-based writing should not intimidate or bore students; it can be improved over time and have creative elements. The second graders individually wrote, revised, and refined an essay about which lady was more historically significant. Students also celebrated their choices by drawing a draft of a memorial postage stamp for Anne Sullivan or Helen Keller. Blair felt this multistep project was an appropriate balance of writing and creativity. In her words, "Kids read a ton of different sources, used their readings to write, improved and fixed their writing, and then drew what they learned."

Students engaged in three drafts of writing. After the rough draft, students engaged in peer-review, focusing on capitalization and punctuation. After students revised their work and produced a second draft, they reviewed it with a focus on spelling, clarity, and complexity. When the final draft was approved, students celebrated their selection through artwork. The reviews and revisions were completed on separate days, so as not to overwhelm the writer with too many corrections. To incentivize writing, students completed the art (the memorial postage stamp) last.

Most students chose to write about Anne Sullivan. Blair thought there might be two reasons for that choice. First, students noticed Sullivan was given a lesser role in most of the trade books. Many were sad that Helen Keller's teacher was not given more credit and this would, in the eyes of the seven year olds, repair the authors' oversight. Second, Sullivan's accomplishments were recognized frequently in the primary sources, especially the letter written by Keller and about Sullivan. Keller, they reasoned, would not lavishly praise an unworthy candidate.

Students compared multiple texts and recognized inconsistencies. They were able to detect when important content was minimized or omitted in many trade books. Close readings of primary sources filled the gaps. Students demonstrated their newly generated understandings both textually in writing and visually through art. They shared and viewed countless essays and drawings. When inspecting their classmates' work, students asked questions and noticed differences. Doing so positioned them

Modified Primary Source:

July 5, 1918

Dear Dr. Bell:

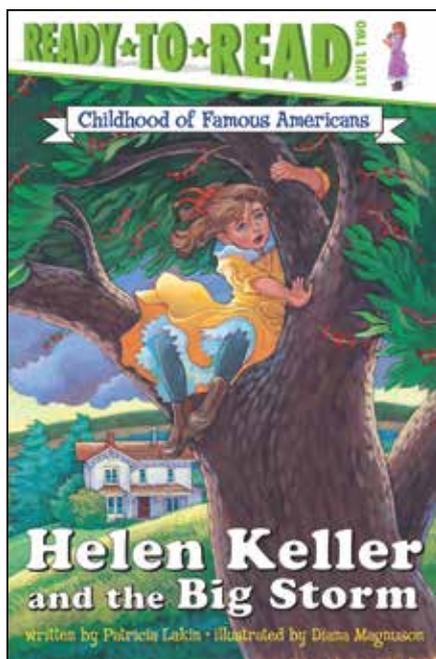
When we saw you several weeks ago, we told you that "The Story of My Life" will be made into a movie. Will you appear in it? The movie makers want to film people who have been important like you and Teacher. Indeed, it was because of you that Teacher came to me. You paid for her to come and have paid for her ever since.

Oh, it all comes back in my mind. I see me as the sad little child and Teacher as the young lady God sent. My fingers still glow with the "feel" of the first word: water! I love you for being so generous to pay for Teacher to come to me and to stay with me for so long. This is why I want so very much to have you in the movie.

I am always your friend,

Helen Keller

(Modified version of Letter from Helen Keller to Alexander Graham Bell, July 5, 1918. Series: General Correspondence. MSS51268: Folder: Helen Keller, 1888-1918, undated. Source Collection: Alexander Graham Bell family papers, 1834-1974. Repository: Manuscript Division. Digital Id: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/mss/magbell.12400318>)



to consider history as a mosaic of competing stories in which their own account of events was heard and seen, although it may be different from a friend's account.

If assigned to read a single trade book, students often take the easy road: viewing history as a narrative to be memorized or a timeline to be remembered. But by using multiple sources, students

explored and produced history. They shared and discussed the many histories their class created. Students unpacked the discrepancies. The seven year olds engaged in history as a process to be constructed and argued, not a product to be memorized. Historical understandings were not obtained from a textbook, but constructed and refined using diverse sources.¹⁴ Pairing the texts and tasks in such a way positioned students to think as historians. The web resource Filling the Gaps with Primary Sources helped to provide the discipline-specific guidance about age-appropriate texts, both trade books and primary source material.

Notes

1. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013). A free PDF of the C3 Framework is at www.socialstudies.org/c3. Or buy the paperback book (with explanatory essays) at www.socialstudies.org/store.
2. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).
3. Ann T. Ackerman, Patricia H. Howson, and Betty C. Mulrey, "Getting the Story Right: Developing Critical Analysis Skills through Children's Literature," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 26, no. 1 (2013): 22–28; Kristy A. Brugar, "Children as Civic Agents during the Civil Rights Movement," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 27, no. 4 (2015): 5–10; Elizabeth M. Frye, Woodrow Trathen, and Kelley Wilson, "Pirates in historical fiction and non-fiction: A twin-text unit of study," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 21, no. 3 (2009), 15–16.
4. Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (5th ed.). (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001); John H. Bickford, "Initiating Historical Thinking in Elementary Schools," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 8, no. 3 (2013), 60–77; Jeffrey Nokes, "Recognizing and Addressing the Barriers to Adolescents' Reading like Historians," *The History Teacher* 44, no. 3 (2011): 379–404. For illustrative examples of effective scaffolding see Bruce Fehn and Kimberly Heckart, "Producing a Documentary in the Third Grade: Reaching All Students through Movie Making," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 25, no. 3 (2013): 18–22; Kathleen Owings Swan, Mark Hofer, and Linda S. Levstik, "Camera! Action! Collaborate with digital Moviemaking," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 4 (2007): 17–20.
5. John H. Bickford and Cynthia W. Rich, "Examining the Representations of Slavery

- Within Children's Literature," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 9, no. 1 (2014): 66–94; John H. Bickford and Lieren N. Schuette, "Trade Books' Historical Representation of the Black Freedom Movement: Slavery through Civil Rights," *Journal of Children's Literature* 41, no. 1 (2016), 20–43; "Examining the Historical Representation of the Holocaust Within Trade Books," *Journal of International Social Studies* 5, no. 1 (2015): 4–50; Sara Schwebel, *Child-Sized History: Fictions of the Past in U.S. Classrooms* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011): ch. 4; T. Lee Williams, "A Closer Look: The Representation of Slavery in the Dear America Series," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 21, no. 3 (2009): 26–29.
6. John H. Bickford, Lieren N. Schuette, and Cynthia W. Rich, "Examining the Historical Representation of the Holocaust Within Trade Books," *Journal of International Social Studies* 5, no. 1 (2015): 4–50.
 7. John H. Bickford, "Assessing and Addressing the Historical (Mis)Representations of the Civil Rights Movement within Children's Literature," *The History Teacher* 48, no. 4 (2015): 693–736; John H. Bickford and Cynthia W. Rich, "Trade Books' Historical Representation of Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, and Helen Keller," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 9, no. 1 (2014): 18–65; Schwebel, ch. 4 (2011); Herbert Kohl, "The Politics of Children's Literature: What's Wrong with the Rosa Parks Myth?" in *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, vol. 1, ed. W. Au, B. Bigelow, and S. Karp (Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 2007), 168–171.
 8. John Bickford, "Examining Historical (Mis)Representations of Christopher Columbus within Children's Literature," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 8, no. 2 (2013): 1–24; Lynette Field and Judith Singer, "Talking with Children about the Columbian Exchange," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 18, no. 4 (2006): 24–26; Mary Beth Henning et al., "Listening to Children Think Critically about Christopher Columbus," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 2 (2006): 19–22.
 9. John H. Bickford and Cynthia Rich, "The Historical Representation of Thanksgiving within Primary and Intermediate Children's Literature," *Journal of Children's Literature* 41, no. 1 (2015): 5–21; John H. Bickford and Lauren Hunt, "Common Core, Informational Texts, and the Historical (Mis)Representations of Native Americans within Trade Books," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies* 75, no. 2 (2014): 1–16; Schwebel, ch. 2 (2011);
 10. Filling the Gaps with Primary Sources (www.eiu.edu/~eiu/tps/gap.php) is curated by Professor Cindy Rich, Director of Teaching with Primary Sources at Eastern Illinois University. If you have suggestions or ideas for these webpages, please email her at cwrinch@eiu.edu.
 11. Selections were made using findings from Bickford and Rich (2014) and Bickford and Silva (2014).
 12. Bickford and Rich (2014); John H. Bickford and Katherine Silva, "Trade Books' Historical Representation of Anne Sullivan Macy, The Miracle Worker," *Social Studies Research & Practice*, 11, no. 1 (2016): 56–72; John H. Bickford, Dylan Dilley, and Valerie Metz, "Historical Writing, Speaking, and Listening Using Informational Texts in Elementary Curricula," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies* 76, no. 1 (2015), 1–16.
 13. Samuel Wineburg and Daily Martin, "Tampering with History: Adapting Primary Sources for Struggling Readers," *Social Education* 73, no. 5 (2009): 212–216.
 14. Keith Barton, "Everybody Knows What History is...: Research, Instruction, and Public Policy in the History Curriculum," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 24 (1996): 391–415; John H. Bickford III and Molly Sigler Bickford, "Evoking Students Curiosity and Complicating their Historical Thinking through Manageable, Engaging Confusion," *The History Teacher* 49, no. 1 (2015): 63–88; Bickford (2013); Nokes (2011)

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