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Beyond Heroes & Role Models: Using Biographies to Develop Young Change Agents

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All children like to imagine that they might some day accomplish great things as adults, but many of our students seem unable to find immediate connections with noble historical figures. These figures are introduced in many elementary classrooms as heroes or role models, and their most notable adult accomplishments are highlighted (making it easier for students to recall on a test), but when we place a person on a pedestal in this way, we usually fail to give students a deeper understanding of how that person developed throughout his or her life, or how the information might shed light on our own choices in life.

We as teachers could provide a fuller picture of a historical person, rather than a quick snapshot. History should not be trivialized into a matching question on a test or a caption below a photo. As gatekeepersⁱ and mediatorsⁱⁱ of information and multiple perspectives, we choose what to share and how to share people's stories, and this can become a weighted task. Yet, we owe it to our students to persevere.

When teachers tell a story about a key figure in history, children benefit from hearing about events from that individual's life, the community from where he or she came, and the dispositions that person possessed.ⁱⁱⁱ These real-life connections regarding personal struggles, home origins, and personality traits add depth and substance to what might otherwise be a cardboard-like figure on a timeline. As educator Jerome Bruner explained, "Any story one may tell about anything is better understood by considering other possible ways in which it can be told. That must surely be as true of [one's own] life stories we tell as of any [stories we share about other people]."^{iv}

Change Agents vs. Heroes & Role Models

To deepen the story of a historical figure, we suggest exploring the term "change agent" in contrast with the more common terms "hero" and "role model." What is the difference between waiting for a hero and acting as a change agent? In today's popular culture, children are surrounded by representations of heroes and superheroes in film, video games, comic books, graphic novels and the

daily news. The traditional image of the hero, as derived from Joseph Campbell^v, is a person who is called by extraordinary events to act in extraordinary ways. For example, a hero may be an otherwise nondescript person who is compelled to overcome a series of fantastical obstacles, or, on a less literary level, a passerby who sees a house on fire and jumps to action to rescue the dog trapped inside. Studies have shown that young children picture heroes accordingly: five- and six-year olds describe heroes as having superpowers, and five- through nine-year olds frequently identify acts of saving as key characteristics of a hero.^{vi}

Children's worlds are also peopled with role models: athletes, actors, and political figures, some of whom almost reach hero-status by virtue of seemingly magical abilities. These figures are frequently depicted as individuals with exceptional talents who are chosen by distant "others" to serve as "exemplars." They are admired and mimicked for their positive dispositions and actions; however, a role model is typically not self-appointed. Instead, they focus intently on their own activities and are culturally selected as paragons. Examples of role models for young people are often determined by popular culture and the media: Some of them have true talent (Tiger Woods in golf, the Jonas Brothers in music), while others seem to be notable primarily because of media exposure (Paris Hilton).

Small, Steady Steps

The literature suggests that the change agent is a demonstrably different construct from the hero or the role model.^{vii} For starters, she is more strategic. She observes inequities, notices gaps, locates groups and individuals with common or related purposes, and troubleshoots in a thoughtful and goal-oriented manner. She consciously and mindfully initiates a stance toward change over a period of time. Met with adversity, she is supported by a network or community (small or large in scope) in favor of a cause. This definition suggests a more deliberate attitude and a larger focus on personal and community action than the definitions of hero or role model. It also takes the supporting social networks into account.

By advocating for the concept of a change agent, our goal is not to take away from any heroic acts or those worthy of admiration. Instead, we want students to consider the many steps a person follows in order to reach a goal and to think about the many people who collaborated in the effort. Children need to know that change usually does not happen overnight, without support, or without specific skills and knowledge. The process is as important as the results. For these reasons, a change agent seems to be a more accurate and appropriate description for many key figures we study in elementary social studies curricula and the term we chose to use in this article.

Examples of Change Agents

Reading, writing, and discussing biographies provide unique opportunities for teachers and students. Critical thinking can be developed through questioning, predicting, and analyzing various biographical mediums—texts, photographs and illustrations, book reviews, websites, films, news articles, etc.—to learn more about an individual’s life experiences and choices. Decision making skills can be enhanced when students juxtapose their perceptions of heroes and role models to that of a change agent, even considering how their own life experiences and choices may be contributing to larger actions of change.

Below we discuss six biographies that could be used with young people in the elementary classroom to study change agents. We carefully selected and organized our literary choices into four categories: (1) familiar historical figures, (2) familiar living persons, (3) less familiar figures, and finally (4) students and teachers themselves—because we can act as change agents today on a local and personal level.

(1) Familiar Historical Figures

A popular thematic unit, especially in the younger grades, is “Heroes and Holidays.” Key people, as listed in state standards, include Martin Luther King Jr. (and the national holiday in honor of him) and Abraham Lincoln (President’s Day).

Frequently, however, by positioning these key significant historical figures as heroes, we teach our students to be pedestal-gazers. Historical figures become iconic and distant, people who are admired but not replicable because of the seeming “magic” of their feats. There is a different lesson, however, that we could be teaching: Historic accomplishments are usually the result of hard work, careful planning, and community building over an extended period of time.

Rather than a “heroes and holidays” approach, we recommend Richard Griswold del Castillo’s bilingual book, *César Chávez: The Struggle for Justice* as the story of a change agent.^{viii} Del Castillo does not portray Chávez as a hero with extraordinary facilities but as an observer of injustice whose personal experiences led to his development as a community organizer among migrant farm workers. He is not propelled into action by a single event; this biography emphasizes the amount of time and work it took for him to cultivate the networks to create social and political change. Chávez’s work is depicted as involving outreach, scholarship, and thoughtful, persistent action. While a typical hero’s story might involve a breath-taking intervention, del Castillo’s telling of Chávez’s life recognizes the deliberate, social process of creating change.

Likewise, Rosa Parks’ story is one that is often depicted as heroic, but it benefits from a “change agent” perspective. Popular versions of her story revolve around a seamstress’s fatigue after a long day at work and her brave defiance in not giving up her bus seat.^{ix} Nikki Giovanni’s telling of Parks’ experiences in *Rosa* goes beyond that single act of protest to acquaint children with the networks and groups that acted in her support and helped to make her action internationally visible.^x Starting with a glimpse into Parks’ family life, the story demonstrates how local and national organizations moved to shift Parks’ action from a singular Montgomery incident to a landmark Supreme Court case. Bryan Collier’s illustrations, which depict both small and large moments of public and private protest, consistently underscore the aspects of change agents acting in concert. Also, Parks was an activist. She “had a long background of service and commitment to promoting the rights of African-Americans, and

was part of an ongoing effort by the African-American community in Montgomery, Alabama, to resist Jim Crow segregation.” Her “spontaneous” protest was, in many ways, planned.^{xi}

(2) Familiar Living Persons

Often, as teachers and students, we look at the end results, the victories or defeats that make newspaper headlines and textbook chapter titles. But astute students of history examine the various paths, chosen or not, that have led to a “final destination.” With regard to current events, our recent presidential election has merited discussions and activities in classrooms across the country. Nikki Grimes tells the story of President-Elect Barack Obama’s path as a change agent with her picture book (also illustrated by Bryan Collier) *Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope*.^{xii} Grimes describes his education, family, and church as important networks that supported his route towards the presidency. The ending of the book, a call to action of “Yes! We can!” reiterates for young readers the role of working collectively for social change.

Senator John McCain is another example of someone whose life journey has steered him—sometimes intentionally and sometimes not—in the direction of wanting to better his country. Like Obama, McCain had influential networks within his own development as a change agent: his family, the Navy, the U.S. Naval Academy, and his colleagues in the political arena. Meghan McCain, John’s daughter, describes his path in her picture book, *My Dad, John McCain*.^{xiii} This book enhances young readers’ understanding of the role of conviction and passion in the life of a change agent when Meghan McCain concludes, “I know that he will never give up fighting for what he believes in.”

(3) Less Familiar Figures

Equally important are the “everyday people” working within their own communities. The biographies above tell the stories of Americans who have created opportunities to make great changes through their choices and actions. Thoughtful planning and passionate conviction resonate not only locally, but also within global communities. Students may find interesting connections between

themselves and Wangari Maathai of Kenya in the picture book *Wangari's Trees of Peace* by Jeanette Winter.^{xiv} This true story tells the struggles of a young woman who learns that trees have been ripped from the land to make room for new construction. Rising to action, Wangari begins planting seedlings in her own backyard, an individual act that gains support from many local women and grows into a national environmental movement. The women are mocked and Wangari is imprisoned; however, their efforts eventually lead to the planting of over 30 million trees, which is important for soil conservation and the well-being of human and natural communities. Because of Wangari's perseverance in restoring the greenery across Kenya, "[w]omen walk tall, their backs straight." This biography illustrates that change agents are often faced with adversity.

In 2003 Alia Muhammad Baker, the chief librarian of the Central Library in Basra, Iraq, saved over 30,000 books from being destroyed by wartime bombs and fire. Her story is shared in graphic novel format in *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq* by Mark Alan Stamaty.^{xv} This true story lays out the various methods Alia pursues in saving the documented culture and history of her country: brainstorming ideas, speaking with government officials, smuggling books from the library to her home, asking for assistance from other citizens, and reaching success. When the library eventually burns to the ground, Alia and the people of Basra continue to make a difference as they network with local architects to rebuild the library. Alia's story shows that being a change agent is not a one-step process and typically requires endurance to see the task through to fruition.

(4) Books about Children (Ourselves)

The change agents in the books above are adults, yet it is equally important to share stories of young protagonists. As adults we sometimes neglect the roles that children can pursue within their school or community. Even small "acts of kindness" are like seeds that can blossom into a lifetime of activism. Seeing other young people who are willing to take action, in small and large ways, can bridge a gap between being an observer and being an advocate, allowing young readers to see that they are capable

of making a difference. To this end, teachers can create a classroom library that includes fiction and non-fiction stories of children who are change agents. Titles to consider: *Ryan and Jimmy and the Well in Africa that Brought Them Together*, *Something Beautiful*, *The Carpet Boy's Gift*, *Hair for Mama*, *A Little Peace*, and *Freedom on the Menu: the Greensboro Sit-Ins*.^{xvi}

I Want to Learn More!

Ask students if they can find examples of heroes, role models, and change agents in a variety of genres, such as comic books, graphic novels, sports articles, and political websites. Focusing on the texts' protagonists, teachers can ask students to identify and discuss how authors portray the main character:

- Is the main figure given the status of a hero, role model, or change agent—or some combination?
- How do any illustrations add to the text's portrayal of the protagonist?
- Is the main figure depicted standing alone or in a group?
- Does the text focus on independent acts or actions taken in relationship with others?
- Is the individual called to action by a sudden event, or does her activism grow over time and in response to a developing awareness of complex needs?
- Does the individual act with the intent to make change, or is she described in terms of doing a job well and acting in admirable ways that may or may not lead to direct change?

Scaffolding students through their initial exploration assists them in critically thinking about the thoroughness of each term and prompts students to make more insightful decisions about where each character falls.

I Can Do That!

In the biographies highlighted in this article, change agents observed issues or inequities “in their own backyards.” A variation of the Heroes and Holiday unit could ask students to make similar observations about their own social environment. To start the unit, students explore what distinguishes

people as change agents by researching change agents “then” and change agents “now.” Then students can extend that exploration into action. Ask students to generate a list of situations, both global and local, that appear to call for change. For example: Does the school need a parent resource room or a recycling center? Does the community need beautification or larger numbers on the local police force?

After choosing a problem to focus on, students decide what people or organizations could help them pursue their goals. Do students need to create a partnership with the PTA or ask for help from businesses and organizations? Within small groups, the students work with teachers, parents, and other local resources to explore the feasibility of their project and to carry it to fruition.

Throughout such a project, it is crucial that the teacher prompt reflection and sharing within and across the small groups. Like all change agents, students will face obstacles. Therefore, it is important to celebrate the small strides and attempts as well as successes. Use setbacks as teachable moments for future planning and redirection: What have we learned? Who can help us evaluate what happened and what our options are? Should we redefine the goal? Do we need more resources? Should we change our own behavior, or persist and try the same thing again? Where do we go from here?

Closing Comments

In the National Council for the Social Studies, the curricular strand IV. INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY describes the importance of recognizing how personal identity is shaped by culture, groups, and institutional influences.^{xvii} This theme ought to inspire teachers to take the social studies curricula beyond the basic standards, to encourage students to question themselves and others, and to create reflection opportunities for students regarding personal life choices. When we consider men and women as change agents, we open doors for teachers and students to engage in thoughtful and self-reflective discussions and activities. Teachers who help their students learn how to be change agents are reaching the core of our primary task: to prepare citizens, the future members of our

democracy. While Americans don't always agree on which areas need change or what the change should look like, we do agree that change is both inevitable and necessary for maintaining the democratic ideal.

Additional Resources

Cesar Chavez

Cesar Chavez: Fighting for Fairness by Lilia and Rick Guzman. (New York: Enslow Elementary, 2006).

Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez by Kathleen Krull and illustrated by Yuyi Morales. (San Diego, CA : Harcourt Brace, 2003).

Cesar !Si, Se Puede! by Carmen T. Bernier-Grand and illustrated by David Diaz. (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Children, 2004). Written in Spanish, this book could be a welcome addition to any classroom library or ESL setting.

Between Dirt and Sky: A Musical (dirtandsky.org). This website includes video segments of the musical, a timeline, and lists of related materials.

The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers' Struggle (PBS Documentary). Dir., Rick Tejada-Flores and Ray Telles. Paradigm Productions in 1997.

Rosa Parks

Hilary Landorf and Ethan Lowenstein, "The Rosa Parks "Myth": A Third Grade Historical Investigation," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 5 (January/February 2004): 5-9.

If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks written and illustrated by Faith Ringgold. (New York: Aladdin, 2003).

Freedom Walkers: The Story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott by Russell Freedman. (New York: Holiday House, 2006).

Putting the Movement Back Into Civil Rights Teaching: A Resource Guide for K-12 Classrooms edited by Deborah Menkart, Alana D. Murray, and Jenice L. View. (Washington, DC: Teaching for Change PRRAC, 2004).

The Departure of Rosa Parks. This symphony was created by David Sosnowski in 2005 (<http://www.davidsosnowski.com/>). The audio recording and score (in PDF) are available.

They Changed the World: The Story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott (<http://www.montgomeryboycott.com/>). Includes a timeline, historic newspaper articles, radio news reports, and video clips of civil rights participants.

The Library of Congress: A Guide to Materials for Rosa Parks (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/rosaparks/rosaparks.html>). Includes timelines, news articles, lesson plans, photographs, music/anthems, and other useful resources.

Barack Obama

Barack by Jonah Winter and illustrated by A. G. Ford. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

Yes We Can: A Biography of Barack Obama by Garen Thomas. (New York: Feiwel & Friends, 2008). This chapter book may be a helpful tool for upper grades as an additional resource or even as a teacher read aloud.

Barack Obama: Speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention (americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/bobama.html). This speech, which brought Obama into the national spotlight was given in Boston, MA on July 27, 2004. A transcript is available.

Alia Muhammad Baker

The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq written and illustrated by Jeannette Winter. (New York: Harcourt, 2005).

As the Crow Flies: Tales from Four Directions (flickr.com/photos/habibmi/sets/72157594237201411/show/). This puppet show was produced by Paperhand Puppet Intervention. A slideshow is available.

Wangari Maathai

Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai written and illustrated by Claire A. Nivola (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008).

Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai (Marlboro Productions, 2008). This award-winning documentary film may be a useful teacher resource for building content knowledge or to share video clips with your students. An article at takingrootfilm.com/index.htm gives an overview of the film and details about the making of the film including an interview with one of the producers. Teachers can share an inspirational and poignant video-trailer with students.

Global Young Greens (www.globalyounggreens.org). A worldwide network of young activists who want to work together for change in “environmental sustainability, social justice, grassroots democracy, and peace.”

ⁱ Stephen J. Thornton, "Teacher as Curricular-Instructional Gatekeeper in Social Studies," in J. P. Shaver, *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Teaching and Learning* (New York: Macmillan, 1991): 237-248.

ⁱⁱ Lilia I. Bartolome, "Beyond the Methods Fetish: Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 64, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 173-194.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 71, no. 3 (2004): 691-710.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968; 1949).

^{vi} Steven White and Joseph E. O'Brien, "What Is a Hero? An Exploratory Study of Students' Conceptions of Heroes," *Journal of Moral Education* 28, no. 1 (1999): 81-95.

^{vii} See Ira Shor, *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). See also Denis Goulet's introduction in Paulo Freire's, *Education for Critical Consciousness*. (New York: Continuum, 2005; 1974): vii-xiii.

^{viii} Richard Griswold del Castillo, Anthony Accardo, illus., *César Chávez: The Struggle for Justice*. (Houston, TX: Piñata Books, 2002), in Spanish and English.

^{ix} See Lorain Stewart, "Celebrating the Life and Legacy of Rosa Parks," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 1 (January/February 2006): 23-26.

^x Nikki Giovanni, Bryan Collier, illus., *Rosa*. (New York: Square Fish/Henry Holt, 2005).

^{xi} Hilary Landorf and Ethan Lowenstein, "The Rosa Parks "Myth": A Third Grade Historical Investigation," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 5 (January/February 2004): 5-9.

^{xii} Nikki Grimes, Bryan Collier, illus., *Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

^{xiii} Meghan McCain, Dan Andreasen, illus., *My Dad, John McCain*. (New York: Aladdin, 2008).

^{xiv} Jeanette Winter. *Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2008).

^{xv} Mark Alan Stamaty. *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

^{xvi} Herb Shoveller. *Ryan and Jimmy and the Well in Africa that Brought Them Together*. (Tonawanda, NY: Kids Can Press, 2006); Sharon Dennis Wyeth, Chris Soentpiet, illus., *Something Beautiful*. (New York: Dragonfly Books, 1998); Pegi Deitz Shea, Leane Morin, illus., *The Carpet Boy's Gift*. (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House, 2003); Kelly A. Tinkham, Amy June Bates, illus., *Hair for Mama*. (New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2007); Barbara Kerley, *A Little Peace*. (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2007); Carole Boston Weatherford, Jerome Lagarrigue, illus., *Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins*. (New York: Puffin Books, 2005).

^{xvii} National Council for the Social Studies. *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*. (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).