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Biographies in the Basals: Which People Are Featured?

**Teri S. Lesesne
Lee Mountain**

Whenever educators choose selections for a series of basal reading textbooks, they include some biographies. But they always face a problem of priorities and space. There is only a little room in a basal series for biographical selections but there are many famous people who could be featured, so they have to decide which people get to occupy the limited biographical space.

The people who are chosen are brought to the attention of youngsters in a uniquely powerful way, since basals are the most widely used textbooks. Basals determine the content and form of much of the reading instruction delivered in grades 1-8 (Shannon, 1982; Durkin, 1978-9). Each selection in a basal usually receives extensive classroom treatment. The potential impact of the biographical selections, therefore, is great.

These selections often entice eager students into reading full-length biographies of the people presented. The same short selections, which are mere appetizers for the eager readers, may be the whole biographical meal for students who read very little beyond their textbooks. Both eager readers and reluctant readers, however, do encounter the people who occupy the biographical space in the basals. Therefore, being featured in a basal biography means being presented to millions of youngsters.

The message we are sending to these youngsters is clear: the people featured in basal biographies are important. Therefore, teachers need to know which people are being presented to our youngsters in the basal textbooks.

Is there a common core of famous persons who are regularly presented in today's basals? Or does each series feature a different set of people in its biographical selections? In either case, who are these people? And what are their characteristics? Are the majority of them female or male? ...living or dead? How are they distributed by ethnicity? ...by areas of achievement?

To answer these questions, a content analysis was done on the series of basals currently distributed by these five publishers: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; Houghton Mifflin; Macmillan; Scribner's; and Scott, Foresman. These five series, adopted in Texas and widely used across the nation, are representative of basal series as a whole.

The contents of the texts for grades 1-8 were examined to identify the selections that were primarily biographical in nature and to record relevant items of information about each of these selections. The items of information included grade level, publisher, title of selection, author of selection, topic descriptors, gender and race of main character, and setting.

These biographical selections, ranging from a page or less about a person to a sizable excerpt from a book-length biography, were analyzed, and the information about them was entered into a data base program. An alphabetical listing of the people presented in these biographical selections, by publisher and grade level, is presented below, in Table 1.

Findings

All together, there were 125 people who received biographical coverage in these five basal series. Of those 125 people, only two, James Ramsey Ullman and George Washington, received some form of biographical coverage in three series.

Only the 19 people listed below were featured in two of the five different series. These people had little in common. They ranged from an Olympic ice skater to a television star to a painter to an inventor:

John James Audubon, Alexander Calder, George Washington Carver, Tiffany Chin, Bill Cosby, Juan dePareja, Benjamin Franklin, Jean Fritz, Helen Keller, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Quimby, Paul Revere, Eleanor Roosevelt, Eric Shackleton, Anne Sullivan, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Orville and Wilbur Wright.

Clearly, the great majority — 83% — of the biographical selections were single appearances. According to this data, there is not a common core of famous people frequently featured in biographical selections in these five series.

Additionally, many teachers find quite a few names in Table 1 that they cannot readily identify. Not all of these names are household words, by any means. Each series seems rather individualistic in the type and degree of fame required of the people chosen for basal biographies, people who range from Galileo to John Madden.

The publishers differed also in the grade level placements of the subjects of their biographies. Bill Cosby, for example, appeared at the second grade level in one series and at the

Table 1
People Presented In Biographical Selections
In the Five Basal Series

Abrams, Polly, SF, 5	Cosby, Bill, SF, 2,
Alcott, Louisa May, HM, 7	HM, 8
Ali, Muhammad, MCM, 7	Dahl, Roald, MCM, 7
Alioto, Michelle, HBJ, 6	Davidson, Robyn, SF, 8
Appleseed, Johnny, SF, 5	daVinci, Leonardo, MCM, 8
Audubon, John, HBJ, 5,	deMagnon, Leonor, SCR, 7
SCR, 6	dePaola, Tomie, HBJ, 3
Auriol, Jacqueline, SF, 6	dePareja, Juan, HM, 7,
Baker, Russell, SCR, 7	HBJ, 7
Banneker, Benjamin, SF, 5	deSaint Exupéry, Antoine, MCM, 6
Bannister, Roger, HBJ, 6	deVarone, Donna, HBJ, 5
Barrera, Elma, SCR, 5	Dolson, Hildegard, HBJ, 8
Baylor, Byrd, HBJ, 4	Durham, Katherine, HBJ, 8
Beethoven, Ludwig, SF, 1	Earhart, Amelia, MCM, 1
Bell, Jocelyn, HBJ, 8	Ebright, Roger, SF, 8
Benoit, Joan, HBJ, 6	Ederle, Gertrude, HM, 7
Benson, Benny, HM, 3	Forten, James, HM, 6
Bird, Isabelle, SCR, 8	Frank, Anne, SF, 6
Bourke-White, Margaret, HM, 6	Franklin, Benjamin, HBJ, 2,
Bradbury, Ray, HBJ, 7	SF, 5
Brooks, Gwendolyn, HM, 8	Fritz, Jean, HBJ, 6,
Buford, Gulon, HBJ, 4	SCR, 6
Byars, Betsy, HBJ, 4	Frost, Robert, HM, 8
Calder, Alexander, HBJ, 1,	Gallaudet, Thomas, HBJ, 8
MCM, 1	Galilei, Galileo, HBJ, 3
Calle, Chris, HBJ, 5	Garza, Ernesto, MCM, 7
Carson, Rachel, HBJ, 7	Giovanni, Nikki, HBJ, 7
Carver, George Washington,	Graham, Bette, SCR, 8
SCR, 6, HM, 7	Hacken, Scheila, MCM, 7
Chagall, Marc, HM, 5	Haley, Alex, SF, 6
Chin, Tiffany, MCM, 1,	Hamilton, Margaret, SF, 8
HM, 7	Hautzig, Edna, SF, 8
Cisneros, Henry, SCR, 8	Herriot, James, HBJ, 8
Clark, Eugenie, HM, 4	Heyerdahl, Thor, SCR, 8
Clemente, Roberto, HBJ, 8,	Hill, Cassie, MCM, 4
SF, 6	Hodges, Margaret, MCM, 6
Columbus, Christopher, SCR, 2	Houston, James, SF, 6
Conford, Ellen, HBJ, 5	Hyman, Trina Schart, HBJ, 4
Cooney, Barbara, HBJ, 3	Inouye, Daniel, SF, 8

- Keller, Helen, SF, 8,
SCR, 7
- King, Martin Luther, MCM, 7,
SF, 6
- Frantz, Louis, SCR, 6
- Lawrence, Jacob, HM, 8
- Lawrence, Mary, HBJ, 7
- Levenson, Sam, MCM, 7
- Lewis and Clark, SCR, 5
- Lincoln, Abraham, SF, 5,
HM, 8
- Lindbergh, Charles, SF, 6
- Madden, John, HBJ, 6
- Matisse, Henri, HBJ, 2
- Monet, Jean Baptiste de, HBJ, 3
- Morse, Samuel, HBJ, 5
- Muir, John, HM, 7
- Nagenda, John, MCM, 6
- O'Dell, Scott, MCM, 6
- O'Keefe, Georgia, SF, 8
- Ortega, Katherine, SCR, 6
- Pepe, Maria, SR, 6
- Perlman, Itzhak, HBJ, 4
- Price, Leontyne, HBJ, 7
- Quimby, Harriet, SF, 5,
SCR, 6
- Revere, Paul, SCR, 5
- Ride, Sally, HBJ, 3
- Riis, Jacob, HBJ, 7
- Rodgers, Bill, HM, 7
- Rodriguez, Paul, HM, 7
- Roosevelt, Eleanor, HBJ, 3,
SF, 1
- Rudolph, Wilma, HM, 7
- Sacajawea, SCR, 5
- Santillippo, Margaret, HBJ, 8
- Saukini, HM, 5
- Savage, Augusta, SCR, 8
- Sensah, Hannah, HBJ, 8
- Sequoyah, MCM, 2
- Shackleton, Eric, SF, 5,
HM, 5
- Standish, Miles, SCR, 7
- Stinson, Katherine, SCR, 7
- Sullivan, Anne, SF, 8,
SCR, 7
- Tharpe, Twyla, HM, 7
- Toussaint, Cheryl, SCR, 7
- Tubman, Harriet, SCR, 7
- Uchida, Yoshiko, HBJ, 6
- Ullman, James Ramsey,
SCR, 6, HM, 6, HM, 8
- Valenzuela, Fernando, SCR, 8
- Ward, Lillian, HM, 8
- Washington, George,
HBJ, 5, SCR, 3, SF, 5
- Webster, Noah, MCM, 7
- Wheatley, Phyllis, HBJ, 5
- Whyte, Edna, HBJ, 7
- Wilder, Laura Ingalls, SF, 4,
HM, 4
- Wonder, Stevie, SCR, 6
- Wright, Orville & Wilbur,
MCM, 1, HM, 4
- Zaharias, Babe, SCR, 8
- Zenger, Anna, HM, 8

KEY

**The name of the person is followed by initials
indicating the publisher of the basal series
in which the biography appears
and a number indicating the grade level.**

HBJ=Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich

HM=Houghton Mifflin

MCM=Macmillan

SF=Scott Foresman

SCR=Scribner's

eighth grade level in another. That span of grades, however, was unusually wide. The majority of the publishers placed most of their biographical selections in the upper half of their series, so the majority of the subjects appear in the grade four to grade eight range.

Another difference among the series centered around the number of people chosen for biographical coverage. The HBJ series, which featured many children's authors and illustrators, included a total of 47 biographies. The totals for the other basal series ranged from 19 to 28 biographies.

What are the characteristics of the people featured in these basal biographies? Here are a few descriptors:

Of the people featured, 57% were males and 43% were females. The analysis by race showed 58% Caucasian, 26% Black, 6% Hispanic, 3% Oriental, and 7% members of other groups. The distribution in terms of current versus historical personages showed that 41% of the featured people were living, 59% dead.

Additionally, some areas of achievement received much more attention in basal biographies than did others. Book-connected people (authors and illustrators) fared the best. They dominated the biographies, representing over a third of all selections.

In descending order, other areas of achievement were service-providers (e.g., inventors, politicians); adventurers (e.g., explorers, aviators); and entertainers (e.g., stars, athletes). So, while there was some agreement that book-connected people were most worthy of attention, the variation among the series denied any appreciable commonality.

Discussion

Some of the best minds in reading instruction are involved in work on basal series. But these people are surely not unanimous in their thinking, at least not insofar as basal biographies are concerned. The divergence of the experts emphasizes the fact that there is no common ground, no core of agreement about who receives biographical coverage in basals. This situation can be viewed as a case of good news/bad news.

On the positive side, this situation allows for the inclusion of some high-interest "newcomers to fame," such as Bill Cosby and Sally Ride, who might serve as excellent role models for today's students. It also enables the basals to respond quickly to current concerns and to reflect the impact made by such groups as feminists and ethnic minorities. The content analysis of these five basal series revealed that women occupy 43% of the biographical space and that ethnic minorities account for 42% of that same space.

On the negative side, however, the lack of a common core may be viewed as weakening the transmission of our cultural heritage. *The Closing of the American Mind* (Bloom, 1987) and *Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch, 1987) are recent books which deplore the lack of background knowledge of our cultural heritage evidenced by today's students. The deficit is alleged to be especially severe in the areas of history and literature (Ravitch and Finn, 1987).

Biographies enrich the areas of history and literature, so they can make a contribution to the cultural literacy of today's students. However, if these five series are any indication, the disparate coverage from one series of basals to another may weaken the transmission of a common cultural heritage.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "The Psalm of Life," (here quoted in a slightly altered version) provides us with this answer for the question: Why read biographies?

*Lives of great ones all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints in the sands of time.*

Some of the people featured in basal biographies are making footprints in the sands of today. And some, who have died, achieved a degree of fame in their time. But not all the subjects currently featured in basal biographies have made recognized, historically significant contributions.

So we return to the initial considerations of priorities and space. There is limited room in a basal series for biographies; there is a vast array of people who might be featured. The judgments have been made for the current series of basals, and Table 1 shows the results of those judgments. For each new edition, however, the question arises again: which people will occupy the biographical space?

Voices on both sides of the Atlantic are calling for the return of more "heroes of legend and history" (Rae, 1988; Ravitch and Finn, 1987). In the past, biographies of such giants as Moses, Ulysses, Florence Nightingale, and Joan of Arc were standard fare for young readers. According to Rae (1988), reading about magnificent heroes and heroines helps children learn that people can triumph over misfortunes and that the first defeat need not be final.

We want today's young people to know that they can struggle against life's difficulties and emerge victorious, like

the heroes of history and legend. If the basals of the 1990's reflect the groundswell of interest in preserving our cultural heritage, we are likely to see those basals contain more biographies of people who have made significant footprints in the sands of time.

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