Trade Books’ Historical Representation of Anne Sullivan Macy, The Miracle Worker

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State and national initiatives provide teachers opportunities for interdisciplinary units with increased significance of non-fiction in English Language Arts and decreased reliance on the textbook in history and social studies. In these three disciplines, beginning in elementary school, students are expected to scrutinize multiple trade books of the same event, era, or person to construct understandings. Trade books are a logical curricular link between these three curricula. The initiatives, however, do not prescribe specific curricular materials; teachers rely on their own discretion when selecting available trade books. Historical misrepresentations have been found to emerge within trade books to varying degrees, yet only a few empirical studies have been conducted. We empirically evaluated trade books centered on the Anne Sullivan Macy, Helen Keller’s teacher. Celebrated as the Miracle Worker, she remains a relatively obscure figure. As a child, Macy faced the desertion or death of every family member and struggled to overcome poverty and isolation. Macy’s story, thus, complements Keller’s in consequential ways. We report various historical misrepresentations within the trade books and provide ancillary primary sources for teachers interested in addressing the historical omissions.

Key words: children’s trade books, Anne Sullivan Macy, Helen Keller, historical thinking, content area literacy, informational texts

Introduction

State and national initiatives have significantly increased both the rigor and the frequency of elementary students’ reading of non-fiction in English Language Arts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010), a substantial adjustment for a content area where fiction has a historically prominent position (McMurrer, 2008). Elementary social studies and history students are expected to scrutinize primary historical documents and secondary books (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013; NGA & CCSSO), a similarly considerable modification for a curriculum largely synonymous with textbooks (Heafner & Groce, 2007; McMurrer; Wilton & Bickford, 2012). Elementary students must skillfully engage in close readings of various primary and secondary accounts of the same event, era, or figure, to traverse the complex assessments emerging today (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC], 2012). The new educational initiatives center on diverse literacies and literature yet do not provide age-appropriate, historically representative curricular materials (Sapers, 2015).

There is a shortage of research on elementary history content, methods, and assessment due in large part to the discipline’s past focus on secondary history pedagogy (Brophy & Alleman, 2008). Elementary teachers can use textbooks, primary sources, and trade books, yet each has problematic elements. Textbooks are common yet cost-prohibitive, written at grade
level yet dry in prose, and comprehensive in coverage yet replete with historical misrepresentations and, at times, self-censorship (Chick, 2006; Clark, Allard, & Mahoney, 2004; Lindquist, 2009; Loewen, 2007; Matusevich, 2006). State and national initiatives require all students to compare and contrast two different texts on the same topic, which cannot be done with a textbook’s single narrative (NCSS, 2013; NGA & CCSSO, 2010).

Teachers can meet the aforementioned cognitive task by assigning multiple primary sources of the same event. Digital warehouses, like the Library of Congress, provide literally millions of photographs, letters, and diary entries that are freely available for classroom use. Teachers can adjust the prose and syntax to a comprehensible level for students (Wineburg & Martin, 2009; Wineburg, Smith, & Breakstone, 2012). Elementary students’ cognitive resources can be easily exhausted when engaging in historical thinking, a cumbersome and developed cognition pattern (Bickford, 2013b; Nokes, 2011; Wineburg, 2001).

Trade books are inexpensive and have engaging narratives; dozens—if not hundreds—of titles appear for most every historical topic. Trade book distributors provide various objective reading measures for each title so teachers can determine a suitable challenge level for the myriad levels of readers in the class. Despite trade books’ ubiquity in elementary classroom, there is very little research on their historicity, or historical accuracy and representation. Genre and subgenre denotations—like non-fiction, narrative non-fiction, expository, and biography—suggest but do not confirm historicity. Research on trade books’ historicity indicates frequent and significant historical misrepresentations (Schwebel, 2011; Williams, 2009). Researchers have examined only a few historical events, eras, and figures like Columbus (Bickford, 2013a), Native Americans (Bickford & Hunt, 2014; Schwebel), slavery and civil rights (Bickford & Rich, 2014b; Schwebel; Williams), and Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, and Helen Keller (Bickford & Rich, 2014a). In the latter, Helen Keller, a glaring oversight emerged. As the researchers scrutinized Helen Keller-based trade books for their historical representation of Keller and her experiences, accomplishments, and social and political initiatives, they inadvertently disregarded Anne Sullivan (later Anne Sullivan Macy). As her teacher, companion, and friend for decades, Macy’s influence is inextricably intertwined with Keller’s accomplishments. Oft-celebrated as The Miracle Worker (Einhorn, 1998; Herrmann, 1998; Nielsen, 2010), Macy might be the world’s most famous teacher. Historians recognize Macy’s influence and resilience, so too should elementary students. Elementary teachers likely select Keller as a topic because of her commendable resilience in overcoming seemingly impossible physical disabilities. Macy’s story is eerily parallel. She, too, experienced blindness, but she also faced abandonment by or deaths of each and every family member while struggling to overcome gripping poverty and social marginalization. Keller did not. Macy’s story complements and adds rich nuance to, but does not outshine, Keller’s. The importance of research on trade books is bolstered because of the central place of women’s history in curricular guidelines (NCSS, 2010), the increased expectations of non-fiction in elementary English Language Arts (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), and the enhanced rigor in elementary history content (NCSS, 2013).

Our inquiry has three presumptions: historical trade books can engage young children with age-appropriate prose and syntax to enliven history; children’s authors cannot—nor should they be expected to—include historians’ detail; teachers should know what was included, how it was included, and what was omitted. Researchers must accomplish the latter task because
elementary teachers’ time for inquiry is scant. We ask, “How is Anne Sullivan Macy historically represented in trade books” (centered on Sullivan, Keller, or both)?

**Historiography**

This research, when reduced to its core, is a juxtaposition of historians’ understandings with children’s authors’ narratives in order to determine what is germane for young students to learn. As such, the relevant historiography about Anne Sullivan Macy, Helen Keller, and their relationship grounded the inquiry (Einhorn, 1998; Foner, 1967; Herrmann, 1998; Nielsen, 2010; Waite, 1959). Keller’s own writing (1903/2004, 1913, 1927, 1929, 1938, 1955) was considered, as were various interviews stored in the Library of Congress.

Helen Keller’s international fame emerged before she was a teenager and originated from her exceptional progress beyond the grasp of her equally exceptional disabilities. Anne Sullivan Macy’s teaching methods and personal dispositions were a catalyst for Keller’s advancement, specifically her “courage, determination, inspiration, talents, and common sense” (Foner, 1967, p. 8-9). Keller’s cognitive and linguistic growth, while impressive, did not create a milieu of independence; she depended on many others throughout her life but none more significantly than Macy. Historians, as such, view Keller’s experiences and accomplishments as collaborative. Keller accepted and appreciated the attention, yet attributed her success to Macy. In her words, “I am glad that many people are interested in me and the educational achievements of my teacher, Mrs. Macy” (emphasis added) (Foner, p. 21). Macy’s contributions to Keller’s experiences and accomplishments should not be overlooked.

Macy’s successful instruction galvanized Keller’s international fame, which contributed to Keller’s curiosity—and opportunity to interact—with the world. Keller’s experiences with disabilities and her interactions with other disabled individuals impacted her social consciousness. Keller turned her attention to assisting others with disabilities and working to prevent the causes of disabilities. Keller’s advocacy was at times innocuous, like her active support of initiatives intended to expand medical disability coverage. At other times Keller’s advocacy was contextually volatile, like her support for socialist causes and candidates. While not a socialist, Macy sympathized with Keller’s interest in a movement whose language centered on empowering the economically disenfranchised and socially marginalized. Macy’s sympathy for society’s unfortunates lay, at least in part, in her own penniless, sickly childhood in Tewksbury Almshouse, an orphanage and institution for the destitute. She was sent to Tewksbury after her mother died and her alcoholic father abandoned her. There, her beloved younger brother, Jimmie, died and she developed a life-threatening eye infection that left her blind for a significant period. Macy’s visual impairment provided an experience that would prove instructive, as Macy understood Keller—and sightlessness—in ways that few others could.

Keller was uncompromising in her criticism of socioeconomic and racial inequality, lynching, politicians, business and industry leaders, war, and public norms that did not conform to her social vision. Her radical politics evoked denunciation from the mainstream American public, but not from Macy. In Macy, Keller had a former formal teacher turned confidante. Their companionship, however, could not prevent the subsequent reductions in paid speaking opportunities that resulted from public reproach. Such economic restraints, coupled with the Red Scare of the 1920s, softened Keller’s public advocacy of socialism. Keller and Macy worked in tandem as speakers for the American Federation for the Blind; their meaningful, collaborative work provided steady income throughout the 1920s. The subsequent years, however, proved heartrending as Macy’s health deteriorated. Macy lost sight first in one and then both eyes, and
she finally died in 1936. Macy’s experiences and accomplishments garnered prestigious eternal placement in the Washington’s National Cathedral. While Keller continued as an advocate for the blind and as a globally-celebrated public figure, she regularly spoke with gratitude of “Teacher,” who was also the central figure in her final book *Teacher: Anne Sullivan Macy* (Keller, 1955). Not every detail can be included in children’s trade books, yet teachers should be cognizant of what was included (and omitted) and how it was included because contemporary students—and Macy—deserve a more vibrant and foregrounded Macy.

**Methods**

From the hypotheses to the data collection methods through the analytic techniques, this research conformed to rigorous qualitative research methodology (Krippendorff, 2013; Maxwell, 2010; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Our methods mirrored similar empirical inquiry into textbooks (e.g. Chick, 2006; Clark, Allard, & Mahoney, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2009; Lindquist, 2009; Matushevich, 2006) and trade books (e.g. Bickford, 2013a; Bickford & Hunt, 2014; Bickford & Rich, 2014a, 2014b; Chick & Corle, 2012; Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010; Desai, 2014; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). We relied on the largest warehouses for children’s literature—Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Booksource, and Scholastic—to establish a representative, sizeable sample; collecting all children’s trade books currently in print that centered on Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan Macy, or both. To examine only trade books that could potentially be used in elementary classrooms, we targeted titles with reading levels between second and sixth grade. To determine reading level, we triangulated the books’ readability using Advantage/TASA Open Standard (ATOS), Lexile, Grade Level Expectations (GLE), and Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). This produced 75 titles.

To secure a representative and sizeable sample, we followed systematic sampling protocol, which is the most appropriate form of random sampling for children’s literature (Krippendorff, 2013). We selected a representative number \( n = 24; 30\% \) from the total by randomly selecting every third book (see Data Pool References). The steps to establish a representative, random, and sizeable sample are consistent with best practice methods.

To generate empirical findings, we employed open coding and axial coding. We read each book individually and took notes on both patterns and anomalies to the patterns. This initial scrutiny, or open coding, enabled us to better understand what was and was not included. We then shared and compared notes about emergent patterns. After initial discussion, we synthesized our notes into tentative, testable codes. To determine the frequency and credibility of the codes (or axial coding), we reread each book individually and reevaluated the presence (or absence) of content. Recognizing that an adult writer might encode historical content that a child would not decode, we noted how it was included. Specifically, we distinguished content that was explicitly detailed from historical content that was included but minimized to an extent that a young reader might struggle to grasp. No new patterns emerged that were in need of testing.

While not required, it is deemed good practice for multiple researchers to scrutinize the same trade books multiple times in order to minimize the chance of unnoticed, yet important details (Krippendorff, 2013). Reevaluations of literature and revisions of the content analysis tool are essential due to the ubiquity of historical misrepresentations and strong possibility that something could be overlooked (see Appendix I). The steps to generate empirical findings align with best practice methods.
Findings

Previous scholarship on trade books’ historical representations of Helen Keller identified important historical misrepresentations (Bickford & Rich, 2014a). The trade books largely compartmentalized Keller as a child. Many, but not all, trade books omitted the interconnections between Keller’s family’s socioeconomic status, racial position, and available resources; the impact of nascent media and emergent technology on Keller’s renown; and the more radical elements of Keller’s social activism. The researchers focused on Keller and did not explore how trade books represented Anne Sullivan Macy and their relationship. Considering historians view their relationship as reciprocal and accomplishments as collaborative, our current research fills this apparent gap. The subsequent subsections are organized based on the content analysis tool (Appendix I).

Genre

The vast majority of trade books were non-fiction as only a portion were historical fiction \((n = 4/24; 17\%)\) (Cline-Ransom, 2008; Hurtwitz, 1997; Lakin, 2002; Sutclifte, 2002). When contextualized with the research literature, this finding was both notable and predictable. It was notable because previous research on trade books for similar audiences uncovered sizeable percentages of historical fiction (e.g. Bickford, 2013; Bickford & Hunt, 2014; Bickford & Rich, 2014b; Desai, 2014; Schwebel, 2011; Tschida et al., 2014; Williams, 2009). It was predictable because previous research on trade books featuring a singular historical figure revealed a preponderance of non-fiction (Bickford & Rich, 2014a). Teachers and students reading non-fiction, or any non-fiction subgenre like narrative non-fiction, expository, and biography, presume the content is accurate and appropriately comprehensive. While egregious inaccuracies were not identified, subsequent findings indicated that germane historical content was incompletely included and weighed heavily towards Helen Keller at Anne Sullivan Macy’s expense.

Life Experiences Beforehand

Before meeting Keller, Anne Sullivan (as was her name at the time) characterized her childhood as sad and sickly with constant, conspicuous feelings of being unwanted by and alienated from others. She lost her Irish immigrant mother Alice to tuberculosis, her abusive father Thomas to abandonment, her eyesight for a period due to myriad afflictions, and her beloved brother, Jimmie, to an epidemic that decimated the Tewksbury State Infirmary. Various charities provided financial support to Sullivan for her ocular operations and for her schooling, from which she graduated as valedictorian ahead of countless unwelcoming daughters of social elites. Sullivan’s moxie enabled her to overcome obstacles to earn a degree, and secure employment. Sullivan’s resilience, in many ways, paralleled that of her future student. Sullivan’s dispositions and life experiences prior to meeting Keller are historically relevant because they provide insight into the world’s most celebrated teacher (Einhorn, 1998; Herrmann, 1998; Nielsen, 2010).

It is appropriate and reasonable to expect trade books targeting elementary students to include most, if not all, of the aforementioned items. Only a small portion of trade books \((n = 7/24; 29\%)\) included a simple majority of the items and, thus, earned the denotation of explicitly detailed (Davis, 2006; Delano, 2008; Lambert, 2012; MacLeod, 2004; Sabin & Mattern, 2006; Sullivan, 2007; Zonderman, 1994). Most authors included about half of the items \((n = 13/24; 54\%)\) and were designated as minimized representations of Sullivan’s early life experiences and dispositions (Benge & Benge, 2000; Dubois, 2003; Ford, 2002; Garrett, 2013; Hopkinson &
Colon, 2012; Hurwitz, 1997; Kent, 2004; Lundell, 1995; Lynch, 2005; MacLeod, 2007; Rappaport, 2012; Sutcliffe, 2002; Tourville, 2013). A portion \( (n = 4/20; 17\%) \) omitted this relevant historical content entirely (Adler, 1990; Cline-Ransome, 2008; Feinstein, 2004; Lakin, 2002).

Trade books’ explicit details about Keller’s childhood stood in stark contrast to the omissions and minimizations that characterized the trade books’ representation of Sullivan’s childhood and young adulthood. Every book, even books focused on Sullivan, explicitly detailed Keller’s healthy infancy, her scarlet fever or meningitis affliction before age two, Mrs. Kate Keller’s demonstrable impotency in the face of young Helen’s tantrums, and Captain Arthur Henley Keller’s (successful) appeal to Perkins Institute for the Blind for teaching support. In the trade books, Keller’s childhood experiences were afforded center stage as Sullivan’s were relegated to the rear. While each child’s burden was not equal, they were each significant in their own right. This is not intended to connote that Sullivan’s accomplishments equal Keller’s or that her place in history should mirror Keller’s. Keller and Sullivan are both notable, yet neither would gain international notoriety alone. Historians contend Keller and Sullivan relied upon and credited the other for demonstrable persistence (Einhorn, 1998; Herrmann, 1998; Nielsen, 2010); trade books largely recognized only Keller’s resilience.

**Subsequent Accomplishments and Interests**

Helen Keller’s initial resistance to, and subsequent reception of, Anne Sullivan’s instruction reveal the extent to which they each are remembered within popular consciousness (Loewen, 2007). With Sullivan’s encouragement and guidance, Keller was formally schooled, obtained a college degree, was paid for work as an author and actress, and engaged in social activism. Trade books, to varying degrees, included reference to Keller’s accomplishments and interests. Nearly every book explicitly detailed \( (n = 21/24; 88\%) \) Keller’s educational accomplishments while a portion \( (n = 3/24; 12\%) \) omitted it (Cline-Ransom, 2008; Hopkinson & Conon, 2012; Lambert, 2012). To varying degrees, half of the trade books included Keller’s involvement in the entertainment industry and as a public speaker \( (n = 12/12; 50\%) \) and most noted Keller’s ability to generate money and to not be reliant on wealthy benefactors’ contributions \( (n = 21/24; 88\%) \). In *Helen Keller’s Professional Life and Financial Achievements* (Table 1), we provide specific details about each book’s representation of these aspects of her life.

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Like her professional and financial accomplishments, Helen Keller’s social activism knew few boundaries. She advocated most frequently for people afflicted with physical disabilities, most specifically deafness and blindness. Keller also financially supported and publically promoted social movements, ideals, and political figures that sought to alleviate the structural causes of these maladies. These included, among other things, socialism and communism, industrial unionism, antimilitarism and pacifism, suffrage, civil rights, Eugene Debs, and Soviet Russia. The vast majority of trade books (n = 21/24; 88%) noted to some degree Keller’s advocacy for political, social, and disability issues. A portion (n = 7/24; 30%) explicitly detailed her involvement in a majority of the aforementioned ideals and causes (Dubois, 2003; Ford, 2002; Garrett, 2013; Kent, 2004; MacLeod, 2004; Tourville, 2013; Zonderman, 1994). Nearly two-thirds of trade books (n = 14/24; 58%) mentioned two social causes (Adler, 1990; Benge & Benge, 2000; Davis, 2006; Delano, 2008; Feinstein, 2004; Hurwitz, 1997; Lakin, 2002; Lundell, 1995; Lynch, 2005; MacLeod, 2004; MacLeod, 2007; Rappaport, 2012; Sabin & Mattern, 2006; Sullivan, 2007; Sutcliffe, 2002). A small portion (n = 3/24; 12%) mentioned one or no social causes (Cline-Ransome, 2008; Hopkinson & Colon, 2012; Lambert, 2012). It can thus be stated that most trade books included some or most of the relevant historical content about Keller’s adult accomplishments and interests, which corroborates previous findings about trade books’ overwhelming focus on Keller’s childhood (Bickford & Rich, 2014a).
The majority of trade books, however, overwhelmingly disregarded pertinent aspects of Anne Sullivan Macy’s (as was her married name) adult life. No books explicitly detailed her marriage and subsequent separation; a small portion \((n = 7/24; 29\%)\) included minimized references to it; and most \((n = 17/24; 71\%)\) omitted it entirely. Only one book (Delano, 2003) explicitly detailed Macy’s financial contributions through the entertainment industry, public speaking, and writing; most either omitted \((n = 11/24; 46\%)\) or included a minimized account \((n = 12/24; 50\%)\). While she loved and supported Keller, Macy also questioned Keller’s advocacy of unconventional social causes and radical politics. Macy sought credit for her contributions as a teacher, as an advocate for the deaf and blind, and as a disability prevention activist. All trade books either omitted \((n = 21/24; 88\%)\) or only vaguely referenced \((n = 3/24; 12\%)\) Macy’s own social advocacy and responses to Keller’s advocacy for radical social and political causes. In *Anne Sullivan Macy’s Adult Experiences, Accomplishments, and Interests* (Table 2), we provide specific details about each book’s representation of these aspects of her life.

Table 2.

*Anne Sullivan Macy’s Adult Experiences, Accomplishments, and Interests*

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The discrepancy in attention given to Helen Keller versus Anne Sullivan Macy is apparent. The trade books’ omissions of Macy’s childhood maladies and accomplishments along with her adult experiences and interests generated a simple, uncluttered construction of Macy. Macy, like Keller, was more complicated than the figure at the pump spelling “w-a-t-e-r” into the little blind girl’s outstretched hand. The trade books’ narratives provided little more.

**Mitigating the Misrepresentations**

Classroom educators are not bound by the historical content included in the narrative of a single trade book. Teachers could intentionally juxtapose their trade books to enable students to scrutinize and figuratively hear a second voice. Teachers can also supplement trade books with rich primary sources that intentionally fill the apparent gaps. The subsequent subsections provide guidance for both paths. These paths, admittedly, are not novel to our research, yet they are effective, essential routes to evoking and bolstering historical thinking.

**Trade Book Juxtaposition**

Elementary students learn to read, read to learn, and, unless otherwise challenged, read for comprehension. Close reading, or scrutinizing a text using discipline-specific techniques, is an unnatural act that must be taught; it is also an essential element of historical thinking (Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg & Martin, 2009; Wineburg et al., 2012). Historical thinking, like close reading, is taught. “Historical thinking is cultivated in age-appropriate ways within a developing mind; it is not uploaded at maturity and synced with their prior knowledge” (Bickford, 2013b, p. 61). Historical thinking is also a crucial element of current educational initiatives in both English Language Arts and history and social studies at all grade levels (NCSS, 2013; NGA & CCSSO, 2010; PARCC, 2012).

Elementary teachers can rouse such cognition through the intentional juxtaposition of two or more trade books that have divergent emphases. Educators could select books that cover distinct aspects of their lives. While reading the first book, students will likely read for completion and modest comprehension. Reading a second, related trade book compels the same students to identify emergent, conspicuous dissimilarities. A simple Venn diagram enables students to capture the areas of convergence and divergence. As students organize their understandings within the Venn, they will likely want to return to the texts. Students’ purposeful rereading can yield new content to be included or compel the reorganization of previously misplaced content within the Venn. In doing so, students grapple with how and why stories on the same topic can diverge dramatically. The subsequent discussions about the assembly of historical narratives enable young children to begin to view history as dependent upon the writer’s selection of content. This nascent awareness of history’s plasticity lies in the “shadows of historical thinking” (Bickford, 2013b, p. 62). While the aforementioned classroom activities—from trade book apposition to the Venn—are age-appropriate and discipline-specific activities that cohere with contemporary education initiatives, students’ historical thinking can be deepened through scrutiny of primary source material.

**Primary Source Supplementation**

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| Tourville (2013) | X | X | X |
| Zonderman (1994) | X | X | X |

* Denotes degree of historical representation (explicitly detailed, minimized but included, omitted) as noted within Appendix I – Content Analysis Tool.
Primary sources are foundational to historical thinking. They provide students a texture and depth not present in secondary children’s literature. Informational texts, to use the nomenclature of state and national initiatives, can enrich, corroborate, and even contradict the selected trade books’ accounting. Unlike trade books, primary sources are largely free for classroom use and readily accessible within Internet warehouses like The Library of Congress, which has an endless supply, or The American Foundation for the Blind’s website entitled Anne Sullivan Macy: Miracle Worker. The subsequent primary sources are illustrative supplements intended to address the historical lacunae reported above. They are intentionally taken from resources not represented within the aforementioned websites.

As a child, Anne Sullivan Macy confronted sickness, disability, poverty, and abandonment. Teachers can utilize historical documents that enable students to discover the miserable conditions that the world’s most famous teacher surmounted. Primary sources can evoke Macy’s original memories of horrid conditions along with their impact on Keller’s learning and influence on Macy’s own worldview.

Teachers should modify the sources’ length and language as is appropriate (Wineburg & Martin, 2009), so children may grasp Anne Sullivan Macy’s pitiable childhood with a short synopsis. “Very much of what I remember about Tewksbury is indecent, cruel, melancholy, gruesome…” (Nielsen, 2010, p. 72). Macy also provided richer material of Tewksbury Almshouse:

Again I see the unsightly folk who hobbled, cursed, fed and snored like animals. I shiver recalling how I looked upon scenes of vile exposure—the open heart of a derelict is not a pleasant thing. I doubt if life, or eternity for that matter, is long enough to erase the errors and ugly blots scored upon my brain by those dismal years. (Nielsen, p. 472-473)

Anne Sullivan Macy also spoke at length of the loss of her beloved younger brother, Jimmie:

I must have been sound asleep when Jimmie died, for I didn’t hear them roll his bed into the dead house. When I waked, it was dark. The night-lamps in the ward were still burning. Suddenly I missed Jimmie’s bed… I knew the dead house was behind the partition at the end of the ward, and I knew Jimmie was dead… It was all dark inside. I couldn’t see the bed at first. I reached out my hand and touched the iron rail, and clung to it with all my strength until I could balance myself on my feet. Then I crept to the side of the bed—and touched him! Under the sheet I felt the little cold body, and something in me broke. My screams waked everyone in the hospital. Someone rushed in and tried to pull me away; but I clutched the little body and held it with all my might. (Nielsen, p. 58-59)

Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy each provided perspective on the unintended implications of Macy’s experiences as a child. In Keller’s words, “So I say my education was accomplished in the tragedy of my teacher’s life. She [Macy] understood the void in my soul because her childhood had been so empty of joy” (Keller, 1929, p. 346). Macy’s perspective on the ripple effect of these childhood experiences was similar yet quite distinct from Keller, “I have endured much physical pain, and I can feel real pity for anyone who suffers. The misfortunes of the disinherited of the world rouse in me not only compassion but a fierce indignation” (Nielsen, 2010, p. 52). This collection of primary sources acts as a catalyst for students to discover previously unidentified historical gaps in the narratives they so effortlessly
read. With these primary sources, students can independently unearth relevant elements of Sullivan’s childhood and their resultant implications.

Similar to the symbiotic relationship that small *cleaner fish* (like wrasses and gobies) maintain with large *client fish* (like parrotfish, damselfish, and sharks), Helen Keller’s and Anne Sullivan Macy’s relationship was mutually beneficial. Trade books, however, largely centered on Keller’s accomplishments and relegated Macy’s contributions to little more than initiating young Keller’s language and communication. Teachers can provide students the primary sources that will lead to their unearthing of the reciprocity in their relationship.

Diverse voices speak to the ongoing, collaborative, and constructive nature of their relationship. Helen Keller also wrote passionately about the influence Anne Sullivan Macy’s ideas had on her own, “I rejoice for myself and for you if Miss Sullivan’s ideas are commingled with mine” (Einhorn, 1998, p. 82). She fondly recalled Alexander Woolcott’s characterization of Anne Sullivan Macy’s exceptional place in history:

> [Alexander Woolcott] told how some high-school girls asked him a great many questions. One of the questions was: “Who, in your opinion, is the greatest living woman?” He said he didn’t even need time for reflection; there was no doubt in his mind; and he replied, “Anne Sullivan Macy.” (Keller, 1938, p. 60)

Keller, at a different time, reminded readers about Woolcott’s superlatives about the lasting implications of Anne Sullivan Macy’s accomplishments:

> At 7:30 P.M. Alexander Woollcott broadcast a moving tribute to Teacher—“a memorial to one of the great women of our time—or any time.” His words, full of perceptive tenderness, caressed my fingers as Polly spelled them. She said he spoke beautifully, with a throb of emotion in his voice. Tears welled up in my eyes as he told how fifty years ago tomorrow Anne Sullivan Macy started a work which has been recognized the world around as one of the heartening triumphs of the human spirit.” I have never felt prouder than when he said she “was made of the original stuff of creation.” (Keller, 1938, p. 223)

Helen Keller also recorded Mark Twain’s observations about Anne Sullivan Macy’s dispositions:

> I loved [Twain] for his beautiful appreciation of my teacher’s work. Of all the people who have written about me he is almost the only one who has realized the importance of Miss Sullivan in my life, who has appreciated her “brilliancy, penetration, wisdom, character, and the fine literary competences of her pen.” (Keller, 1929, p. 50)

John Macy received unsolicited compliments about his wife’s achievements:

> Miss Sullivan's letters…reveal the fact that had long been suspected, that Helen's remarkable achievements are as much due to the genius of her teacher, as to her own brilliant mind. You have done wisely to italicized sentences that show that you fully appreciate the important educational principles developed by her, and they also prove that Miss Sullivan was wrong when she gave us the impression that she acted without method in the instruction of Helen — groping her way along and acting on the spur of the moment. They show that she was guided all along by principles of the greatest importance in the education of the deaf — that she did have a method, and the results have shown that her method was a true one.” (Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to John Macy, April 2, 1903. April 2,
Soon after Anne Sullivan Macy’s death, Helen Keller also wrote passionately about the emptiness she feared could not be filled:

The wrench of separation from a beloved, unique, lifelong companion seems to have torn away an essential part of me. Deaf-blind a second time, I find any effort to speak cheerfully, to resume interest in a changed world, to work alone through substituted guides and minds different from Teacher’s—all these I find as hampering as sharp pain-throbs. (Keller, 1938, p. 28)

Keller later affirmed that her previous worries were correct, “The certainty that her [Macy] creative intelligence and truly human quality of mind do not perish, but continue their vivifying work, sweetens my loneliness and is like the warm spring air in my heart” (Keller, 1955, p. 247). In Keller’s eyes, Macy’s contributions and devotion were irreplaceable.

Classroom teachers can provide students the primary sources to glean, from many diverse voices, the enduring nature of Anne Sullivan Macy’s many contributions. In articulating the complexity Keller’s ideas and ideals, Lois Einhorn (1998) encouraged all to “disregard the mythical aura that surrounds Keller’s memory” (p. 74). Macy is similarly nuanced yet simplistically constructed within the curricular resources most often used in elementary classrooms. Students should similarly disregard the mythical aura surrounding the world’s most famous teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy. Young children, with age-appropriate material, can uncover the complexities of The Miracle Worker.

References


National Council for the Social Studies (2013). *College, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the rigor of k-12 civics, economics, geography, and history*. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS.


**Web-based References**


Data Pool References

Appendix I – Content Analysis Tool

1. Historical Topic:
   a. Anne Sullivan Macy
   b. Helen Keller
2. Bibliographical information:
3. Expected age/grade of the reader:
   a. Lower Elementary (2-4)
   b. Upper Elementary (4-6)
4. Genre:
   a. Historical fiction
   b. Non-fiction (narrative non-fiction, biography, or expository)
5. Did the author contextualize A. Sullivan Macy’s life before she met H. Keller?
   a. How did the author represent (youthful) A. Macy’s dispositions, attitude, motivation, and behavior?
   b. How did the author represent A. Macy’s life experiences prior to meeting H. Keller?
6. Did the author contextualize H. Keller’s life before she met A. Macy?
   a. If yes, how did the author represent (youthful) H. Keller’s dispositions, attitude, motivation, and behavior?
   b. How did the author represent H. Keller’s life experiences prior to meeting A. Macy?
7. How did the author represent the emergent and ongoing relationship between Keller and Macy?
8. How did the author represent (adult) H. Keller’s dispositions, attitude, motivation, and behavior?
9. Did the author represent (adult) H. Keller’s experiences?
   a. Education: preparatory school, college, etc.
   b. Involvement in entertainment industry: Vaudeville, movie, etc.
   c. Generating money: books publishing, public speaking, etc.
   d. Social activism: disability awareness/support, peace advocacy, suffrage movement, communism/socialism, internationalist causes
10. How did the author represent (adult) A. Macy’s dispositions, attitude, motivation, and behavior?
11. How did the author represent (adult) A. Macy’s experiences and interests?
   a. Marriage/Separation
   b. Involvement in entertainment industry: Vaudeville, movie, etc.
   c. Generating money: books publishing, public speaking, etc.
   d. Her own political and social interests
   e. Her response to H. Keller’s social activism
Author Bios

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