

Teaching Biographies to Young Children

Research clearly illustrates that young children can understand history when it is taught in a relevant manner. Rich narrative prose can be a conduit to meeting this goal. Through written and oral stories and biographies young children can have meaningful experiences learning about the world around them and about the lives of others. Children love such stories and want to hear them again and again. It is, in fact, appropriate to retell the same story many times.

Many of us remember learning Bible stories as young children. These historical accounts often were related through the use of flannel boards. As the teacher told the story, he or she would place pictures illustrating events from the story onto a flannel board for all to view. The pieces remained on the board throughout the entire story, unlike a picture book where pages are turned hiding previous pictures from view. This old technique can be utilized but in a new way.

Directions:

1. Obtain two copies of the same picture book. Select a book that is well written and is appropriate for young learners. (Two copies are needed because pictures appear on both sides of a page.)
2. Cut out the pictures and mount on cardstock.
3. Glue the text to the back of the picture.
4. Number the pieces in order.
5. Laminate the pieces.
6. Add a piece of magnetic strip to the back of each piece.

The pieces can be used in many ways. The example that follows is based on using a book about the life of Harriet Tubman.

Pre-reading

Ask students to tell what they know about slaves. Fill in basic information as needed. Let them know that slaves must perform work for whoever owns them—a master—and that they have no rights. Slave children are also owned by the master and must obey the master, not their parents. Economically, slaves are considered “goods” and are bought with money like other goods such as cars, toys, and so on. Because slavery is unjust, it is now illegal in the United States. Tell the children you are going to tell them a story about a slave named Harriet Tubman who lived long ago.

Telling the Story

Hold up the first piece and show it to the children. Read the text as you show the illustration. Place the piece on a magnetic board so that the children can refer back to it. Continue telling the story, adding each piece, in order, onto the magnet board. Sequence the pieces from left to right. It can be effective to stop at various points to ask questions or to draw students' attention to a particular illustration.

Other Activities

There are many activities that can be used after the story is read. The pieces can be placed in a center so that the children can retell the story to each other. Other suggestions follow:

- Have the children sort the photographs in various ways. As an example, some illustrations highlight parts of the story that took place inside buildings while others highlight portions that occurred outside. Some scenes show sad faces while others show worried faces.
- Hold up an appropriate piece and ask a student to tell you what this part of the story was about.
- Select from three to five pieces that are appropriate. Have students sequence the pieces in order.
- Have students compare their lives to that of Harriet Tubman. As an example, hold up the piece showing Harriet scrubbing the floor. Ask students to tell what chores they have to do.
- Hold up an appropriate piece. Ask students, "How does the person in this picture feel? How do you know?"
- Select four or five pieces that will allow a student to retell the story in his or her own words. Give the student an opportunity to practice before telling the story in front of a group.
- Create a Venn diagram showing how people lived then and now.
- Have students describe all the details in a selected illustration. Place the illustration on the magnetic board and list students' ideas in a T-chart labeled, "What I see and what it Means."
- Select appropriate illustrations and post them on the magnetic board. Ask students questions about the art work. As an example, "How did the artist/illustrator use color to make the picture look like it is night? How does the color make you feel? Why are the slaves traveling at night?"
- Have students speculate about various illustrations. As an example, "Why wasn't Harriet wearing shoes when she ran away? If you ran away, what would you take with you? What did Harriet take?"
- Post two illustrations that show contrasting emotions. Have students discuss the different emotions. What made the person feel that way?

After some time has passed—perhaps a few weeks—retell the story. Stop at various points and ask the students to tell what happens next. Use other biographies in the same way. Children will never tire of this part of their social studies program.