**Incorporating Disability Studies into a Secondary U.S. History Classroom:**

***The Radical Lives of Helen Keller***

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**Abstract**

Incorporating the use of a biography into a secondary United States History classroom can enable students to relate the lives of others to their own, especially those whose perspectives and experiences they consider to be radically different. Perhaps the most difficult of these is that of the disabled due to the reality that most students and teachers are able-bodied, and the societal tendency is to reduce the lives of disabled people only to their disability. The life of Helen Keller provides students with a means of exploring the history of the Twentieth Century, disability, and activism through the lens of disability studies, and *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* by Kim E. Nielsen can guide them through this journey. Although, not a perfect tool, the book does follow most U.S. History curricula, is easily read, and powerful in its approach that challenges the limited understanding of the lives of disabled people in a way that can be transformative for student understanding of Keller, American history, and disability generally.

*Keywords*: biography, Helen Keller, history, secondary education, social studies

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The most difficult aspect of teaching a comprehensive United States History course to students at the secondary level is ensuring that a variety of perspectives and experiences are woven into the class so that the cultural fabric of America is represented. The most challenging perspective to adequately present is that of disabled Americans, due to the simple reality that most teachers and students are able-bodied and their perspectives on the issue of disability are limited because of the societal tendency to reduce disabled people to their disability. Rather than focus on how a person with disabilities contributed to the larger society, the tendency, when discussed at all, is to discuss the limitations the disability placed on the individual. Luckily, the example of Helen Keller provides teachers and students with a means of discussing the history of the United States, disability, and activism—rich with complexities that can open pathways to a number of different thoughtful conversations. An excellent entryway into this is the book *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (2004) by Kim E. Nielsen.

“The biographical approach centers on study of the lives, beliefs, and surroundings of historical actors.” Students “learn to view history as culturally significant and important to their personal concerns, identify with historical figures being studied, and become increasingly able to relate world developments to their own lives” (Johns, 1979). This approach can open avenues for learning while maintaining a relatable focus on the individual, which makes it relatable to students. This approach allows for an academically valid way to build empathy and connect historical events to lives that otherwise may seem remote and unrelatable. Warren (1992) warns that this is “not really an easy way into murky waters. In fact, it is a technique that introduces highly charged, and opinionated perspectives into the classroom. Biographies are laden with inferences and difficulties that can be surmounted only if one is well aware they exist.” Because the nature of a biography is subjective, the opportunity exists to teach students vital critical reading and thinking skills. In doing so, it provides “gentle ways by which the seemingly alien can be imported and absorbed. Creative use of biography, moreover can enable one to graft ethnic, gender, and religious issues onto political and geographic ones and to do comparative studies” (Warren, 1992). Using biography as a means to incorporate disability studies into a secondary Social Studies classroom works remarkably well. It challenges students’ preconceived ideas about what disability is, what the life of a disabled person can be, and can cause a paradigm shift regarding the nature and necessity of education for all students. Using the example of Helen Keller is a logical means of achieving this, given her internationally popular reputation and what little is remembered today of her life and accomplishments.

The legacy of the play and film versions of *The Miracle Worker* is that Keller’s name conjures up images of an angry little girl, frustrated by her blindness and deafness, brawling with her tutor while filling a bucket at a well; Helen ultimately experienced overcoming her disabilities when she understood and screamed out, “Water!” in one sudden, agonizing cry. These events happened well before Helen was even ten years old, and to focus on them exclusively belittles the life of a woman who lived to be nearly ninety. Her life was full of complexities and contradictions, politically radical ideology, deep friendships, and love. In her book, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (2004), Nielsen portrays Keller as the successful, opinionated, world-renowned figure that she was. She attempts to provide a more thorough picture of Keller that moves beyond the popular image of the little girl standing at the water well. She argues that Keller adopted a variety of political personas over the course of her life, which reflected the larger movements of the century. Nielsen’s book could be a valuable tool in a secondary Social Studies classroom when addressing general history, social history, political theory, disability perspectives, or even an examination of the juxtaposition of a figure in popular culture as opposed to the totality of the life they led.

Nielsen breaks down Keller’s life into segments that align with most U.S. History curricula, starting with the onset of the 20th century, and the challenges Keller faced during college; criticism that she was simply a puppet for her teacher Anne Sullivan; the enormous workload their communication methods required; and being ostracized by peers. Keller found her college years to be deeply rewarding both intellectually and personally but was at a loss as to what to do with her life after graduation, and soon took up the cause of the working poor. Nielsen explains that Keller became enmeshed in the ideas of socialism and even flirted quite heavily with communism. Simultaneously, she advocated for the rights of the disabled to be employed. The 1910s saw her actively involved in a new religion led by Edward Swedenborg, who preached the perfection of man was when he existed in service to others. This spurred her activism in the suffrage movement, calling for legalized birth control, and a host of other issues that she believed would raise people out of poverty and would lead to a national embracing of socialism. It was also during this time that Helen began to first tentatively argue for the greater recognition of contributions of those with disabilities through an economic lens. She believed that the economy placed an importance on skills and that everyone should be able to develop those skills necessary to thrive within the society, even those with disabilities. (Nielson, 2004). Almost a century later, Erevelles (2000) addresses the same issue, but succinctly describes it as, “Disabled people, especially those with more severe disabilities have seldom been included in the market economy because their 'real' physiological and cognitive differences are thought to affect the productivity of their labor and as a result impede the efficient and rapid accumulation of surplus.” Not only does Keller struggle to articulate connectedness of these ideas at this point in her life, but she seems to have been overly optimistic in her beliefs that an individual’s skills could overcome personal characteristics, traits, and societal norms that might limit financial opportunities for the disabled otherwise.

By the 1920s, these views softened as she became the spokesperson for the American Federation for the Blind (AFB). Blindness became her chief cause, elevating her fame to new heights. In the 1930s, she became a staunch critic of fascism, and she began to travel to Europe and Asia to raise awareness of issues for blind people everywhere. The 1940s saw Anne Sullivan die, and, after an intensive mourning period, Helen reemerged and was socializing with celebrities, activists, and artists. Patriotically, she visited disabled veterans in hospitals, serving as a beacon of hope for returning to the lives they had before the war and their injuries. By the late 1940s, her public persona had changed, yet again, into its final incarnation. Keller increasingly focused on international cooperation, becoming a semi-ambassador for the United States, working with both the AFB and the U.S. State Department to discuss issues of relevance to the blind community in numerous nations around the world; At the same time, she was working as a good will ambassador for the United States in a time of heightened tensions in the Cold War (Nielsen, 2004).

What makes Nielsen’s approach to Keller’s story relevant to the classroom is her willingness to discuss both the personal and professional conflicts that often appeared in Keller’s adult life, creating a humanizing and educative portrait. Nielsen shows Keller as a woman, fully formed and complicated, without belittling her life or accomplishments; and shatters the idea that Keller’s life somehow both started and ended at the water well on that fateful day in her youth. For example, in the early 1900s, Keller often wrote of her belief that employment and civic responsibility were tied together, and this was the keystone to her argument for the need for jobs training for the blind. However, Keller, herself, had trouble maintaining her own lifestyle by finding fulfilling employment. Additionally, the jobs she often wrote of for blind people were almost exclusively in white male dominated professions, and she ignored racism and sexism. Even into the 1940s, she confusingly argued that the disabled were people with tremendous potential but who were inherently flawed because they had not overcome their disabilities, as she had. These points of view are perplexing to the modern reader but add layers to our understanding of who Keller was as both a revolutionary trail blazer for the rights of the disabled and very much a woman of her time. In doing so, Nielsen opens the door for student conversations concerning identity and disability. Furthermore, in my own classroom, I have repeatedly witnessed students begin to question the possibility that, perhaps because of her blindness, Keller did not fully comprehend the concept of race and the role it has played in shaping American society, and what it might mean if society were truly racially colorblind.

Nielsen also does not shy away from Keller’s personal life, which at times seems to have been confusing, hypocritical, and sad. There is no doubt that the closest person to Keller was Anne Sullivan; soon after Keller graduated from college, Anne married, and Keller lived with Anne and her husband John. Nielsen points out that Keller often wrote of the situation as “we three,” and, when divorce loomed on the horizon, Keller regularly wrote to Anne’s husband, begging him to return home. This was unusual but matters took an even stranger turn when Helen herself wished to marry, and, despite having spent nearly twenty years arguing for the rights of the disabled, allowed herself to be persuaded into ending the relationship by Sullivan and the AFB. Nielsen argues this was most likely romantic and sexual, for fear that the marriage might produce children and Helen would be unable to care for herself and the child. Again, Nielsen does not shy away from shining a light on the dark, uncomfortable corners of Keller’s life, and points out the hypocrisy of Helen being bent to the will of people who spent their lives fighting for Helen and others in the blind community to lead lives of choice and self-fulfillment. Nielsen manages to do this within the context of the great debate of disability advocacy while simultaneously showing the human nature of all parties involved, an aspect that particularly resonates with students.

In portraying Keller as a complex person, complete with seemingly incompatible views, Nielsen raises the issue of eugenics, ripe for Keller to wade into as an advocate for the disabled. In the 1920s, the nation was enthralled by a news story involving a doctor who had refused to perform a lifesaving operation on a newborn because the baby had severe birth defects. The nation was split over the issue. Keller sided with the doctor and even wrote publicly in his defense, arguing that the humane decision was to let the “idiot” [her word] die. It’s a shocking stand for a woman who had built a career by campaigning against the assumptions of society, of who the disabled are, and what they are capable of doing. To Keller, a disability was something to be overcome, as she perceived that she had done with her own life – something the baby would not be able to do. Eugenics can be a returning point in classroom discussions regarding turn of the century Progressives, the Holocaust, Feminism, and Civil Rights. Keller’s arguments, and problematic logic, can serve as a lens on the reproductive issues at play in each movement.

By far, though, the strongest aspect of Nielsen’s book is her willingness to discuss the private thoughts had by Keller, often in the face of criticism. The issue that stung Keller the most was, when she wrote about her life or her disability, she had a ready audience that viewed her as a brilliant and insightful patron of the disabled. However, when Keller attempted to communicate her thoughts on economic or social issues, she was largely discredited. Critics argued she was incapable of independent political thought. When she openly questioned racial attitudes, the backlash that followed, especially in the American south, resulted in pressure for her to write that, although she agreed with the concept of equal opportunity, she did not believe in the equality of the races. Nielsen also goes on to explain the frustrations Helen felt by not being able to support herself through gainful employment of her own fruition: accepting money from Andrew Carnegie, whose politics she despised; the AFB; and even briefly working for FDR in the New Deal Administration.

Nielson (2004) shows that, although Keller was both blind and deaf, the deaf community wanted nothing to do with her, showcasing the diversity of views in the disability community. Keller, herself, believed that deafness was far more isolating than blindness, but deaf culture historically saw itself as a separate culture from the hearing world—some even arguing that deaf culture perceived itself to be superior to the hearing one, unencumbered by the distractions of sound. In his work, Bauman (2008) argues that in the deaf world “eye gazing” is a major component of communication, but that was an impossibility for Helen. Furthering this, McDermott and Varenne (1995) argue that any culture can find ways to push people out, and in Helen’s case she wasn’t "just" deaf, and the blind community and its national organizations had already embraced her. Because of this, she was largely ostracized by the deaf community, and, despite her deafness, they simply did not see her as one of "them." The role that perception plays in accepting or ostracizing is one that speaks to students, which can serve as a jumping off point for further conversation, in both classroom and social settings, regarding the social construction of identity and how those constructs limit the development of the individual.

Competency is an issue that seemingly is continuous in Keller’s life. She advocated tirelessly for the disabled, to allow for the recognition of their competency. She personally struggled to be seen as something more than “disabled,” desiring to be an advocate for women, the poor, minorities, and governmental reform, too. Yet, at the same time, she argued in support of eugenics, allowed others to make decisions concerning her personal life, and found employment difficult. Despite these contradictions, she saw herself as having overcome disabilities, and saw the struggles of others as personal failing. Keller’s definition and application of competency seems to have been highly selective. This is an excellent point for further conversation in a classroom setting.

By incorporating these ideas into her own writing of Helen Keller’s life, Nielsen presents Keller as a person of intelligence, nuanced emotions, and, at times, competing and conflicting points of view that are puzzling. This isn’t a sequel to *The Miracle Worker*. There, Helen is little more than a child full of anger at being cut off from the world. She is devoid of thought, possessing only raw emotion. Ironically, this is the cultural stereotype of a disabled person. She is not portrayed as a fully formed person. This alone justifies the inclusion of the book into a Social Studies classroom to counter the portrayal. However, this is not to say that Nielsen is without flaws in her approach. Nielsen repeatedly gives the impression that Keller was in the minority with her views, when this is debatable. For example, Keller was reluctant for America to enter World War I because she saw it as an event being pushed by industrialists as a way to profit, when, in fact, many Americans believed this, and it was a significant factor in Americans demanding a return to isolationism after the war’s conclusion. Additionally, Nielsen often includes statements that are without reference. Some are clarified in later pages, but others, such as a passing comment about a humorous interaction with the Pope, are never explained (p. 83). It gives, at times, a somewhat disjointed and distracting quality to the book that is otherwise consistent in chronology and its approach to present the life of a person who succeeded not despite of her disabilities, but because of them.

These critiques are minimal, though. *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* needs to be incorporated into a variety of secondary Social Studies classrooms, but particularly in United States History classrooms. It raises a number of interesting questions for discussion that are applicable at both the secondary as well as the undergraduate and graduate levels. These questions begin with Keller’s life, but can easily be used in a reflective nature for students. How did Keller’s beliefs and activism reflect the larger social changes taking place in the United States in the first half of the 20th century? How does the story as presented by Nielsen highlight and call into question the various social constructions of disability, race, and gender? What are the various factors at play in the formation of identity? The book can be paired easily with Nielsen’s *A Disability History of the United States* (2012), to allow students to dig into disability studies more deeply. Further, a fascinating critical thinking activity for students would be for them to access primary sources from the Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan digital archives (<https://www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive>) and <http://www.perkins.org/history/archive/helen-keller-and-anne-sullivan-collections>) in order to consider how Nielson arrived at the content of her book and how her own opinions of the material shaped its story. While not a lengthy read, the book is complex, and there are a variety of political views that are discussed (capitalism, socialism, communism, liberalism, conservativism, and so forth), with no elaborations provided. It is important, therefore, to ensure that students have a solid foundational understanding of these philosophies before diving into the book. Additionally, some students might get lost trying to follow the general timeline of the book and become overwhelmed by the disability and political discussions that occur regularly in its pages. For this reason, it would be most practical to ensure students are well versed in these issues beforehand or to read the book together as a class and allow for discussions of the issues it raises concerning politics, gender, disability, and society. Teachers may use portions of the text as secondary source material to give insight into the issues of the various time periods presented. Some advanced students, after a classroom introduction to these topics, may be able to navigate the book on their own.

It is interesting and fitting that Nielsen uses “*Lives*” in the title of the book (2004). At different points, Keller seemed to take on different personas. She was a political radical and a champion of the blind around the world. Yet, for many, her life will be one of disability, defined by a single word – “Water!” The lives she did not lead are also just as appealing to consider: a true advocate for the disabled in a broad sense, a mother, a wife, or an active member in the deaf community. Keller’s true identity was somewhere in the middle of all the identities she adopted. For secondary school students, fixated on identity formation, this aspect of the book will speak to them, and do so through a disability studies lens, which has the potential to be deeply impactful.

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