

# Young Children as Activists: Celebrating Black History Month and Marian Wright Edelman’s Work

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“**G**ood schools for everyone!” “Safe homes for kids!” The righteous and robust voices of 15 five- and six-year-olds filled the cold air as we marched across the brick paths of Lafayette Park in Washington, DC, directly across the street from the White House. We were following in the footsteps of generations of activists and demonstrators who gathered at this very spot to declare their passionate belief in a cause and to advocate for change. As the line of kindergarteners wound its way around historic statues and monuments, one boy exclaimed, “Maybe the president will see us!” All eyes turned toward the windows of the White House. President Obama’s inauguration had taken place one month before, just two miles away, and the children had absorbed the excitement that gripped the city in the wake of his historic election. As they waved their hand-painted signs in the direction of the White House, they seemed to be confidently acknowledging the power that lay inside.

## A New Approach

How did this kindergarten class from Capitol Hill Day School, located in the heart of Washington, D.C., find the motivation and interest to conduct a demonstration for the needs and rights of children on this frigid winter morning in the shadow of the White House? Their inspiration came from the life of Marian Wright Edelman, who was the subject of a school-wide Black History Month study at our pre-K-8 grade independent school. Each year, teachers vote to select one black American to be the focus of an in-depth exploration in every classroom during the month of February.<sup>1</sup> At each grade level, teachers frame the scope of the study to respond to specific interests, needs, and developmental stages of the children whom they teach. The shared knowledge that grew out of this school-wide approach to Black History Month unified the school community across

grade levels and became a tradition that students and teachers looked forward to each year. This article details our exploration of the life of Marian Wright Edelman as it unfolded in a kindergarten classroom.

## Beginnings

Born in South Carolina in 1939, Marian Wright Edelman was raised with a firm belief in personal responsibility, service to others, and spiritual faith. At Spelman College, a historically black college in Atlanta, she was a student of the noted progressive historian Howard Zinn. She came of age in the 1960s and emerged as a young leader in the Civil Rights Movement, graduated from Yale Law School, and was the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar. After directing NAACP offices in Jackson, Mississippi, Edelman served as counsel for Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign. In 1973, she founded the Children’s Defense Fund, and she continues to serve as president today. She and her husband, Peter Edelman, are an interracial, interfaith couple with three children and four grandchildren; they have been married for four decades.

Edelman’s lifelong commitment to improving the lives of children made her an especially accessible subject for kindergarten students to explore. In addition, her life story proved particularly meaningful because she was a local figure (the Children’s Defense Fund’s headquarters is located in Washington, D.C.) as well as a national one. As our exploration of Edelman’s life and contributions got underway, kindergarten students and teachers alike began to feel that she was becoming a member of our classroom community. Because young children at Capitol Hill Day School address their teachers by first name, we began referring to her as “Marian,” which helped our students develop a closer connection to the subject of our Black History Month study.

## Developmental Concerns

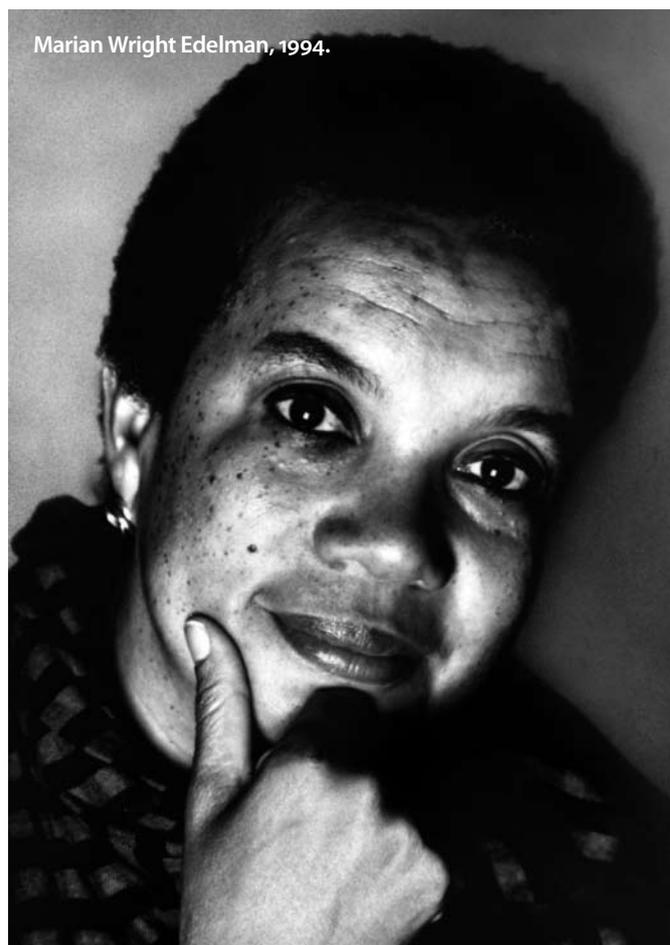
Our nation's stories of social justice, and the struggles for it, are often considered beyond the scope of early childhood education, and teachers often hesitate to introduce troubled incidents from U.S. history at a developmental stage when students' notions of kindness, compassion, and community are still developing. A kindergarten teacher once remarked, "I felt we shouldn't be teaching about Rosa Parks at this point in children's development. I didn't want my students to think they'd have to sit at the back of the bus!" Concerns such as these are rooted in teachers' knowledge of young children's social and emotional development and are frequently justified. But they can also needlessly deprive children of meaningful opportunities to begin identifying with the concept of active citizenship in age-appropriate ways.

Active citizenship, social justice, and service to community—these concepts resonate with young children's identities as members of families and classrooms, as well as with their future identities as members of a democracy. Schools play a role in developing active, engaged citizens. As one study showed, "Youth seem more likely to become socially engaged if they have family or teachers to support this activity."<sup>2</sup> But how can teachers provide this type of support? We looked to the people, events, and struggles in U.S. history and found, in Marian Wright Edelman, an engaging life that young children could identify with, choices they could relate to, and brave actions that they could "try on for size." Exploring Marian's life would bring us to the intersection of real-world learning, knowledge, and action.

## Getting Involved

Many teachers are familiar with the saying, "Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand." Young children construct knowledge through interaction with the world around themselves.<sup>3</sup> Deep, meaningful explorations for young children must engage them physically, be relevant to their life experiences, and build upon their prior knowledge.<sup>4</sup> We were cognizant of these needs when we planned our approach to the exploration of Marian's life. Rather than learning about citizenship through abstract ideas, children experienced it creatively through literacy, music, poetry, art, and active outdoor experiences. Our focus on Marian's formative childhood experiences and relationships enabled the children to draw on prior knowledge and their innate expertise on the subject of childhood.

Our investigation of Marian's life provided opportunities to address the social studies curriculum standards and to incorporate the disciplines of history, anthropology, and psychology into our curriculum. Exploring Marian's childhood and later life experiences allowed us to explore the concepts of **⌚ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**.<sup>5</sup> Learning about her upbringing and the influences on her life helped students explore her identity and, in turn, their own **👤 INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**. Discovering and ultimately emulating Marian's actions as an



Marian Wright Edelman, 1994.

(CDC Public Health Image Library)

activist helped students learn about civic ideals by exercising them (**🗳️ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**). Kindergarten-aged children often have a keen sense of justice, an interest in rules, and strong opinions about what is fair and unfair. This made it easy to use Marian's struggle for civil rights as a touchstone for the concepts of **🏛️ POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**.

## Building Background Knowledge

Our kindergarten students were hungry for information about Marian. A variety of learning experiences helped them build understanding about her life and ideas. The classroom book area overflowed with young readers' biographies about Marian, picture books by black authors and illustrators, and stories about families of all colors, which were accessible to children during read-aloud sessions and as independent reading selections throughout the day.

Teachers created a Go Fish-style activity, made of colorful magnetic cards containing printed, factual information about Marian's life. Using fishing poles with magnets, small groups of children "fished" for facts about Marian's life with a teacher, who read each card aloud and facilitated conversations in which students compared and contrasted their lives to Marian's. After learning about Marian's development from childhood to adulthood, the students made puppets that represented Marian as a child, teenager, and adult, which echoed a lesson about different stages of life taught earlier in the year. We encouraged the

children to integrate these puppets into their socio-dramatic play and the classroom puppet theater.

Young children love to study interesting photographs and illustrations, as well as objects, books, and other materials. With this in mind, we infused the classroom with images from Marian's life that would be relevant and intriguing to kindergarteners. During circle time, we introduced photographs of Marian as a girl, with her family and friends, at her childhood home, school and church. Then we displayed these images on bulletin boards throughout the classroom. We looked at photos of Marian as an adult with her husband and young children. Some students noted the diverse shades of skin color within Marian's family. This sparked a conversation during which students observed and acknowledged the beautiful and varied skin colors that were part of our own classroom community.

### **Literacy Development**

A key component of young children's future success in reading is the development of phonemic awareness, that is, the ability to identify the smallest units of sound that make up spoken words. Exposure to the rhyme and rhythm of poetry and music provides opportunities for young children to develop phonemic awareness skills. In lieu of reciting a poem each day as a class, as was our routine, we began to introduce students to passages from one of Edelman's books for children.<sup>6</sup>

With their music teacher, students learned to sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a banner song of the Civil Rights movement that has become known the black national anthem.<sup>7</sup> Introducing students to an historically important song of the Civil Rights movement provided an authentic connection to a formative period in Marian's life and our nation's history. Additionally, a faculty member who was a frequent classroom visitor and talented singer wrote a song about Marian for the kindergarten students. She taught the children the lyrics, sung to the tune of "Lift Every Voice and Sing." With great enthusiasm, the kindergarten students adopted these words and tune as their own banner song of sorts, calling it "The Marian Song."

### **Real-World Learning Experiences**

The children were learning a great deal about Marian's life story and her contributions to society, yet something was missing. We wanted to help students understand Marian as a real person who lived and worked in our hometown, rather than as a distant figure inhabiting an abstract world. How could we support the children in making richer, deeper connections to their learning?

As a resident of Washington, D.C., Marian lived and worked just a few miles from our school. To bring the images and stories of her family and home to life, we arranged a field trip to her neighborhood, where we saw her home and played on a nearby playground. Remembering the names of her three sons, one child exclaimed, "Maybe Joshua, Jonah, and Ezra played here!" In an unplanned surprise, we met her next-door neighbor,

who was happy to answer students' questions. We also saw the headquarters of the Children's Defense Fund.

Our exploration continued in the classroom with some photographs carefully selected by teachers. Students showed particular interest in photos showing young people civil rights demonstrations: integrating lunch counters, singing with linked arms, and gathering by the thousands on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Using age-appropriate language and explanations, we talked about these images. I said, "Back when Marian was a girl, there was a rule that black people and white people couldn't do some things together. Does that sound fair to you? A lot of people wanted to change that rule, so they got together in groups like this to let everyone know that rules should be fair. Sometimes they made signs to help communicate their ideas with other people." Teachers introduced students to the words "demonstrating" and "picketing."

### **Looking at Images**

The students examined photographs from more recent decades of children advocating for their own rights alongside Marian. One image showed young children marching in front of the White House, their hand-painted signs declaring "Mississippi Children Are Hungry for Food and Education." Another depicted children gathered around Marian in front of the U.S. Capitol, holding signs that announced, "Kids Count, Too!"

The kindergarteners' eyes widened at this evidence of young children presenting themselves so powerfully as protagonists, rather than secondary characters. I remarked, "Marian works very hard to make sure children get what they need: healthy food, good schools, grown-ups who take care of them, doctors and medicine when they are sick. Having a demonstration helps Marian share her good ideas with people."

Noting the impression that the photographs were having on the children, I posed a question. "Do you think we could be like Marian and have a demonstration?" The children were eager. "If we did, what would our signs say? What do we know that children need?" Their ideas were wide-ranging. I listened, writing down the ideas they spouted. "Kids need books to read." "They need good schools and teachers who love them." "Kids need toys and things to play with. They need places to play." "Kids need safe homes." "We should take care of the Earth. No one should litter." Together, we created a long list. With support from teachers, students sounded out words and painted their messages on signs. We were ready for our demonstration.

A few days later, the school bus dropped us off on Pennsylvania Avenue. Students cradled their handmade signs in their arms. Voices quieted as we walked the last few blocks to the White House, only to rise again with the noise of righteousness as we began our march across the sidewalks of Lafayette Park. At first chanting the messages on their signs, the children then broke into the words of their Marian Song.



The author's students picket the White House to ask that "children get what they need" in February 2009.

*Marian Wright Edelman  
 She thought things should be fair  
 If they were not, she would make  
 Signs and picket there;  
 Born in the south, moved to DC,  
 True to yourself you should be,  
 She has three sons, works hard for you and me.*

A group of tourists stopped and watched. A few police officers on motorcycles waved. And the children, small but powerful figures that they were, holding the attention and respect of all around them, sang louder.

### **Authentic Assessment**

The demonstration was the highlight of our exploration of Marian's life, but it was not the finale. Indeed, the experience of demonstrating had been too important to serve as a finale; it warranted discussion and reflection. Throughout the course of the exploration, teachers used a digital camera to photograph the children's learning experiences. These images served as a form of documentation that made the children's learning visible.

These photographs of the children's learning experiences enabled us to assess learning in a way that integrated seamlessly with classroom activities rather than taking time away from them. At the early childhood level, verbal comments that emerge during play and classroom discussion are an important form of learning assessment. Teachers can encourage conversations of this type by using photographs to provoke dialogues that reveal children's understandings and ideas about the content they have learned. Additionally, in our classroom literacy center, we made available a wide variety of

photos that documented the course of the students' exploration. We invited each student to select a photo and write about the story that the image captured. Working in small groups with a teacher, each child composed a brief story and used his or her developing knowledge of sound-symbol correspondence to sound out the words and represent them visually with letters on the page. This form of authentic assessment supported our literacy goals, while also allowing us to evaluate students' content knowledge about the topic of our exploration.

Last, students and teachers together studied photos of the kindergarten demonstration and compared them with images of Marian's earlier demonstrations with young children. Using images to juxtapose our experiences with Marian's provided context for the kindergarteners. It took them back to the origins of our exploration, which was Marian's biography. It helped them make connections through history between demonstrations that Marian had led and their own activities. It helped them identify, in a personal way, with the experience of demonstration as a form of active citizenship.

### **Writing a Letter**

Despite all of our work, we knew that one thing was missing: communication with Marian, herself. We were, after all, residents of the same city. We had explored her life and accomplishments from childhood to adulthood, visited her neighborhood, and seen where she worked. We decided to write a letter to Marian that would let her know of all we had learned. We gathered as a whole group on the large classroom rug, and each child took a turn dictating a fact or two. I used large chart paper and a marker so that all the children could see and participate in the collective process of writing the letter. I began by writing, "Dear Marian Wright Edelman" and then

recorded the sentences that each child voiced, which served as the body of the letter. The final letter served as additional assessment of the children’s knowledge. We included photos of our demonstration and the *Marian Song* lyrics with our letter.

*Dear Marian Wright Edelman,*

*We are studying about you in our classroom for Black History Month. We are making signs and picketing and protesting to make things more fair just like you did a long time ago, because you thought things weren’t fair. We are wondering why there were separate places for everyone to go to, like separate schools. We are sorry this happened a long time ago. Thank you for making things more fair for everyone.*

*Here are some things we know about you.*

- 1. We know you loved to sing in church when you were little.*
- 2. We remember that you liked to play piano and your brother liked to play clarinet.*
- 3. We remember that you were a majorette in parades.*
- 4. We remember that you loved to read books.*
- 5. You were named after a famous singer, Marian Anderson.*
- 6. When you were little, you sat at the table and studied from 6:30 to 7:30. Your dad said, “Assign yourself!”*
- 7. We know you have three sons.*
- 8. We know you were born in the south and moved to DC.*
- 9. We know your dad worked at a church.*

*In this letter, we are sending our song about you. We are also sending you pictures of us protesting just like you. We hope you like them.*

*—Love,  
The Kindergarten Class  
at Capitol Hill Day School*

It was a happy day several weeks later when the kindergarteners received a letter in the mail from Marian herself. “I love your poem and have put it up in my office to cheer me on,” she wrote. “I love your Lafayette Park witness to make a difference... I am so honored you chose me as the person to study this year... Much love to you all. Thank you for wanting to make a difference.”

The circle of reciprocity, it seemed, was complete. 🌱

#### Notes

1. The author has used the term “black American” rather than “African American” throughout this article in order to maintain consistency. The Association for the Study of African American Life and History, which founded Black History Month in 1926 (then known as Negro History Week) under the direction of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, and which continues to designate themes for the annual celebration, relies primarily on the term “black American” or “black” in its discussion of the event’s origins. For further information, see [www.asalh.org/blackhistorymonthorigins.html](http://www.asalh.org/blackhistorymonthorigins.html).
2. Antoinette Ellis-Williams. “Discovering the Possibilities: A Study of African American Youth Resistance and Activism,” *Educational Foundations* 21 (Winter/Spring 2007): 107-124.
3. Julie Mester. “Creatively Constructing a Community of Learners,” *Early Childhood Research and Practice* 10, no. 1 (2008), [ecrp.uiuc.edu/v10n1/mester.html](http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v10n1/mester.html).
4. See, for example, Sigmund Tobias. “Interest, Prior Knowledge, and Learning,” *Review of Educational Research* 64 (Spring 1994): 37-54.
5. National Council for the Social Studies. *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
6. Marian Wright Edelman has written several books for children, including *I’m Your Child, God: Prayers For Our Children* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), from which I chose selected passages to read aloud. One of her most accessible books for classroom use is *I Can Make a Difference: A Treasury to Inspire Our Children* (New York: Amistad, 2005), which she gave us as a thank you gift at the end of the unit.
7. Lyrics and history at [www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-history-lift-evry-voice-and-sing](http://www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-history-lift-evry-voice-and-sing).

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