

Inspiring Young Girls' Civic Engagement with Biographies of Women

Jesse A. Haight and Vanessa C. Boryenace

“The Statue of Liberty,” “my Mom,” “my teacher,” “Hillary Clinton,” “nurses,” “and doctors.” These were all answers given when we asked pre-kindergarten and kindergarten learners to name the most influential woman in history. When asked about the most influential man in history, the replies were “Donald Trump,” “Barack Obama,” “the boss of your work,” “my Dad,” “police men,” “doctors,” and “men who make fancy clothes.”

These answers prompted a conversation between colleagues about how women are often underrepresented within, or missing entirely from, social studies curricula, materials, and textbooks targeting early learners. Even though these answers are developmentally appropriate for this age group, clearly there is work to do in relation to building their knowledge and redressing misconceptions regarding the leadership potential of women.

A troubling observation is that—outside of Black History Month in February and Women’s History Month in March, during which students are acquiring some knowledge about noteworthy women and minorities—teachers in every grade level often teach about the same figures rather than expanding their lessons to include less-conventional or less-well-known individuals.¹ This presents the erroneous perception that studying the lives of women and minorities is not important, as if there were not sufficient achievements by women to warrant their inclusion in our studies throughout the whole year. While this trend is reflected in a study, commissioned by the Museum of Women’s History, which found that less than 25 percent of adult Americans were well educated regarding the influence of notable women,² it does not reflect the goals and values of today’s educational standards or professional organizations.

Overview and Goals of Little Leaders

To address these gender equity gaps related to social studies instruction, the “Little Leaders,” a group consisting of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten girls, was established. All members were former preschool students with whom we had worked

or had participated in various community service projects with the authors. Additionally, each girl expressed an interest in the project topic and a desire to work collaboratively with other girls. While the authors acknowledge that young boys also need to learn about influential women, the decision was made to invite only girls so as to develop an alliance of young women working towards a common goal. Meetings were held in a community center on alternating Friday evenings for two hours beginning in April of 2018.

When mapping out a framework for the group that operated within developmentally appropriate contexts that could be replicated in any elementary classroom environment, it was important to look beyond the curriculum and examine the social context in which these girls were living. The historic presidential candidacy of Hillary Rodham Clinton and politics in general,³ the momentum of the #MeToo movement, and the prevalence of research detailing the need to boost the representation⁴ of women in non-traditional fields in general⁵ and STEM fields in particular⁶ are all societal indicators of a turning of the tides. Another impetus for this gathering of girls was the pervasiveness of both national and global campaigns⁷ endorsing the critical need for young women to find female role models breaking down barriers.⁸ Furthermore, cultivating talent within very young populations of women will provide them with opportunities to trust their own voices rather than allow society to silence, threaten, intimidate, or deter them from telling their stories and making an impact.

Using the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards,⁹ and the Inquiry Design Model,¹⁰ we developed several goals when considering the Little Leaders’ mission: The young participants would learn to be able to

- See themselves as active citizens, capable of making positive impacts in their community.
- Engage in service learning events by selecting a prob-

lem in their lives, identifying a female leader with whom they can collaborate, and working cooperatively to find a solution.

- Speak knowledgeably about notable women and their contributions to the world.

Resources: Thought-Provoking Books

Reading is a transformative process, so we chose books that highlight women who have made a difference in the world or texts that enhance self-concept in children, thereby targeting the goals established for this learning event. Provided with thought-provoking texts, young children can recognize the challenges and “rights of other people,” while developing the self-awareness necessary to become active citizens whose actions can positively impact the communities in which they live.¹¹ Picture books provide the access for children to explore the world around them and determine their place in it.¹² Through critical examination of high-quality literature, even the youngest learners can discuss the societal impacts of historical figures and situate themselves within their communities to replicate these impacts.¹³ Discussions of literary elements can be extrapolated to analyze the contributions of key individuals.

We emphasized nonfiction literary elements such as text structure, organization of key information, and supporting graphic features when discussing text content with this group.¹⁴ When considering a biographical subject’s development over time, our conversations also centered on the illustrations within the book (which were, in some cases, works of art by the subject herself). We guided children to uncover the meaning and historical context supported by the illustrations.

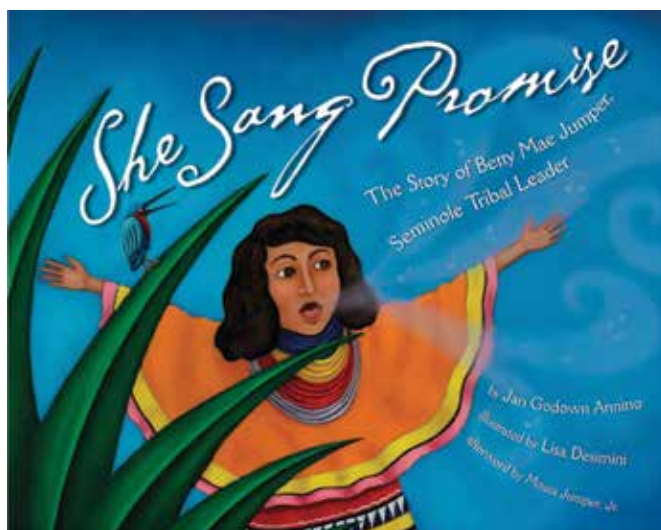
Quality literature written and illustrated by women was a priority when purchasing suitable reading material. Board books, easy readers, graphic texts, and early chapter books were also included with the picture books and made available to the participants (**Table 1**, p. 11). We selected books for this project on the basis of annual awards given by three professional organizations:

- The Amelia Bloomer Project is sponsored by the Feminist Task Force of the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the American Library Association (ALA).
- The Jane Addams Book Award, which recommends books that promote messages about peace, social justice, global community, and equity for all people, is given by the Jane Addams Peace Association.
- The Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People list is a joint project of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and the Children’s Book Council (CBC)

Establishing Background Knowledge and Self-Awareness

Fundamentally, the Little Leaders group was about becoming active citizens, and so for our first meeting we needed to ascertain the young students’ background knowledge related to the responsibilities of citizens. We also needed to guide the children to identify within themselves the character traits that correlate to the roles and responsibilities of citizens.

Knowing that children feel more ownership of content when they are able to co-construct knowledge, we asked the girls to complete an interactive writing activity in which they listed the responsibilities of citizens on chart paper in words and drawings. We adapted their contributions into a list of the character



traits that citizens need to have in order to be contributing members of society. (**Sidebar** below)

We then explained to the girls that the purpose of the group was to help them become active citizens who could help address problems in our community. At this point one of the participants said, “I am only five. I have to go to kindergarten next year, so I don’t think that I will be able to fix a lot of problems until after kindergarten.” Another child responded, “I’m in kindergarten and we are just learning how to read. We don’t

Responsibilities of the Good Citizen

During the interactive writing activity, with teachers assisting by writing the more complex words, students arrived at these responsibilities that citizens have: (1) Don’t drive fast; (2) Keep kids safe; (3) Don’t litter; (4) Share; (5) Be nice; (6) Follow rules; (7) Use manners; (8) Don’t swear; (9) Keep animals safe; (10) Pay taxes; (11) The 3 R’s—reduce, reuse, recycle; and (12) Help people.

Table 1: Literature List for the Little Leaders Project (Books about Women Leaders)

| Category | Title, Author, Publisher | Award | Reading Level |
|---|---|---------|----------------------|
| 1. Artist | <i>Bloom: A Story of Fashion Designer Elsa Schiaparelli</i> by K. Maclear. New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2018. [about Elsa Schiaparelli] | A | 670L |
| | <i>Maya Angelou</i> by L. Kaiser. New York: Lincoln Children's Books, 2016. | A | Not listed (100–400) |
| | <i>Maya Lin: Artist-Architect of Light and Lines</i> by J.W. Harvey. New York: Henry Holt, 2017. | N | 800L |
| 2. Athlete | <i>Girl Wonder: A Baseball Story in Nine Innings</i> by D. Hopkinson. New York: Aladdin, 2006. [about Alta Weiss] | J | 570L |
| 3. Biographical Collections | <i>Founding Mothers: Remembering the Ladies</i> by C. Roberts. New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2014. | A | 1120L |
| | <i>She Persisted: 13 American Women Who Changed the World</i> by C. Clinton. New York: Philomel Books, 2017. | N | NC1170L |
| | <i>Rad American Women A-Z: Rebels, Trailblazers, and Visionaries Who Shaped Our History and Our Future!</i> by K. Schatz. San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2015. | A | 1040L |
| 4. Environmental Stewardship and STEM | <i>Me Jane</i> by P. McDonnell. New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2011. [about Jane Goodall] | N | 740L |
| | <i>Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya</i> by D.J. Napoli. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010. | N | AD710L |
| | <i>One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia</i> by M. Paul. Minneapolis, MN: Millbrook Press, 2015. | A, N | AD480L |
| | <i>The Tree Lady: The True Story of How One Tree-Loving Woman Changed a City</i> by H. J. Hopkins. San Diego, CA: Beach Lane Books, 2013. [about Kate Sessions] | A, N | 760L |
| | <i>Swimming with Sharks: The Daring Discoveries of Eugenie Clark</i> by H. Lang. INDPB, 2016. | A | 770L |
| 5. Advocacy, Social Reform, and Political Issues | <i>Before She Was Harriet</i> by L. Cline-Ransome. New York: Holiday House. 2017, [about Harriet Tubman] | A, N | Not listed (100–600) |
| | <i>Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909</i> by M. Markel. New York: Balzer and Bray, 2013. [about Clara Lemlich] | A | 760L |
| | <i>Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote</i> by T. L. Stone. New York: Square Fish, 2008. | N | 700L |
| | <i>Hillary Rodham Clinton: Some Girls Are Born to Lead</i> by M. Markel. New York: Balzer and Bray, 2016. | A, N | Not listed (100–500) |
| | <i>I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark</i> by D. Levy. New York: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2016. | A, J, N | 710L |
| | <i>Luba: The Angel of Bergen-Belsen</i> by L. Tryszynska-Frederick and A. Marshall. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press, 2003. [about Luba Tryszynska] | J | AD750L |
| | <i>My Name is Truth: The Life of Sojourner Truth</i> by A. Turner. New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 2015. | A | 1180L |
| | <i>She Sang Promise: The Story of Betty Mae Jumper, Seminole Tribal Leader</i> by J. G. Annino. Washington DC, National Geographic Children's Books, 2010. | N | 820L |
| | <i>Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer: Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement</i> by C. B. Weatherford. Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2015. | N | 820L |
| 6. Youth | <i>Malala's Magic Pencil</i> by Malala Yousafzai. New York: Little, Brown, 2017. [autobiographical] | N, J | 600L |
| | <i>Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan</i> by J. Winter. San Diego, CA: Beach Lane Books, 2009. [about Taliban rule and denial of education] | N, J | AD630L |
| | <i>Through My Eyes</i> by Ruby Bridges. New York: Scholastic, 1999 [autobiographical] | J | 860L |
| | <i>The Tree in the Courtyard: Looking Through Anne Frank's Window</i> by J. Gottesfeld. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2016. | N | AD590L |

Book Awards Key: A = Amelia Bloomer Project; J = Jane Addams Book Award; N = Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People. The biographical subject of a book for youth is in [brackets] at the end of the citation, if that full name does not appear in the title. **Reading level:** Lexile level (trailing L), AD: Adult Directed, NC: Non-conforming.

learn about fixing problems. But I know what to do. You have to say ‘I’m sorry’ if you make a mistake. But if you used a pencil then you can get an eraser and you don’t have to say anything.” Understandably, kindergarten is a lot of work and a huge time commitment for students, leaving little room for major undertakings. Furthermore, learning to read is the primary learning objective in kindergarten. While these young learners have already established various problem-solving skills, and can differentiate solutions, they have not had the opportunity to apply these processes to initiate change in their communities. What’s more, people rarely ask children within this age range to address community issues, so this conceptualization was quite abstract to them.

Our discussion progressed to the topic of self-concept. Girls at this age feel as though they will be able to do, and be, anything they want. When asked to describe themselves, the girls were confident in proclaiming things that they do that they were “good at”—such as science, math, reading, soccer, singing, explaining things, art, taking care of pets, and helping their families. All of these descriptions relate to who the girls are on the outside as opposed to who they are on the inside.

This makes sense developmentally because children in this age range have not yet had many opportunities to examine who they are beyond the sense of self in relation to individual and family roles. Even when examining literary characters, teachers and parents often only concentrate on external descriptions for characters when working with pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children rather than discuss internal characteristics such as courage, perseverance, integrity, empathy, motivation, etc.

The last part of our initial meeting was to have each girl choose a book from among our collection and to ask an adult member of her family to read it aloud over the next few days at home. The purpose for reading was set so that the girls would know what to listen for and discuss with their parents. Each child was also given a book log to complete which asked her to:

1. Describe how the main character in the book demonstrates the responsibilities of citizens,
2. Make a connection between the main character and herself, and
3. Suggest a community action she could take using the work of the main character as inspiration.

Parents were asked to help their daughters complete these papers and were given tip sheets to help generate discussion.

Process and Basic Agenda

At the beginning of each meeting, the girls would show the books that they borrowed and perform a book talk in front of the group. Most girls were eager to share information about their books and completed a picture walk independently.

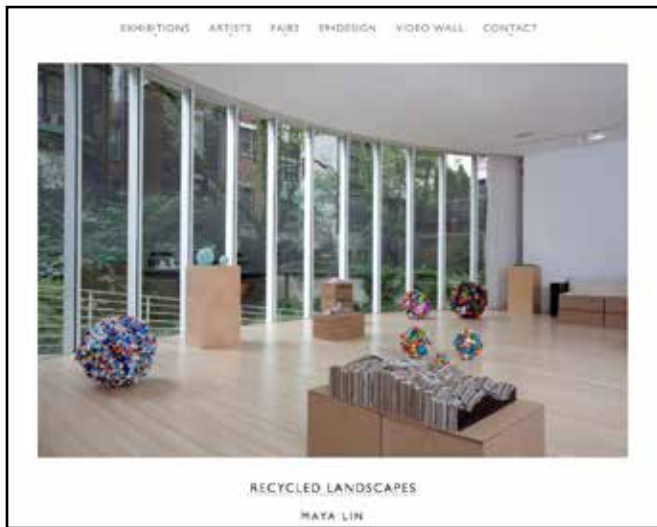


Participants were encouraged to ask questions and make connections to the text. Then they each chose a different book to take home for the following meeting.

Next, the group read stories together related to the individual inquiry project. Using dialogic reading techniques, the girls talked about what they noticed, posed “wonderings” for further inquiry, and synthesized new information. (Dialogic reading techniques allow the child to chronicle the story while actively engaging in guided discourse with a knowledgeable adult.¹⁵) The group then carefully considered the literary elements of the texts, constructed an interactive writing chart¹⁶ related to the woman featured in a book, and determined how this woman exhibited traits and responsibilities of citizens. We explored her contributions to the world and the impact she had. From there, students determined ways they might replicate some aspect of the notable woman’s work locally. To do this, students thought about their community to find a problem or need that they could address as a group and then researched possible solutions. Next, they generated three or four ideas for service action, discussing the options and then voting to arrive at the group’s preferred project. With the help of the teachers, the girls then identified a local woman who could help them carry out their service project. Together with the teacher, the group drafted a letter with their proposal and then set up a meeting with that community leader to implement the service project.

After three months of exploring the Maya Lin inquiry project (as described below), the girls chose their next notable woman, Isatou Ceesay, to study as a group, and the process began again.

When working with pre-kindergarten or kindergarten learners, there are many obstacles that make inquiry projects challenging to accomplish. Initially, we thought that identifying problems would be a difficult procedure for the group; however, once the children understood that by considering the people, materials, and places that they typically encounter throughout their week, they could find plenty of concerns, and this proved to be the most interesting practice. The most challenging aspect of this method proved to be the research required to find information about a need or problem and possible solutions. We wanted this process to be initiated entirely by the children, so the “research” consisted primarily of gathering more reading materials related to the theme and to the problems identified through our initial story. It also involved finding experts to help develop content depending on action courses determined by the group. For example, one small group wanted to teach area children about reusing materials that typically end up in our garbage cans. The activity could help spark imagination and creativity. To do this, the group needed to locate a local artist to assist with this task, as well as to find a place to display the creations they would make.



Maya Lin Project using the Inquiry Design Model

To determine the first Little Leaders investigative topic, the girls considered all of the picture books available to them and took a collective vote. “Maya Lin” was the winning topic. We began with the NCSS Notable Trade Book *Maya Lin: Artist-Architect of Light and Lines, Designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* by J.W. Harvey to build our knowledge about Maya Lin and her continuing impact on the world. Maya Lin is an American architect whose design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. was chosen by a blind jury when she was only 21 years old, causing much controversy,

not only for the unconventional design, but also for her age, gender, and ethnicity.

In order to prepare materials for students to use, we decided to employ the Inquiry Design Model. The resulting inquiry project was both encouraging and inspirational. The girls determined that Maya Lin was a responsible citizen because she used materials she had at home to develop her ideas and designs. Furthermore, her designs let people “think about the past and how to make things better in the future,” according to the students. Also, the girls were intrigued by the monument because “visitors can be sad and happy and quiet thinking about all those people on those stones.”

For the service project, the Little Leaders agreed to use the themes from Maya Lin’s “Recycled Landscapes” art installation for inspiration because they “are not strong enough to build memorials.”

The pieces in “Recycled Landscapes” are constructed from discarded toys and salvaged materials, works that explore our connection to the environment.¹⁷ Through discussion about the sculptures and the environmental impact of discarded plastic and other materials, the young students concluded that the theme of Maya Lin’s work was that people throw too many things away that could be reused, repurposed, or recycled. The primary informed action project the girls decided on was to prepare collection bins and encourage local schools, libraries, and daycare centers to recycle dried-out markers as part of Crayola’s ColorCycle Program¹⁸ which turns any brand marker into fuel.

The next woman that they chose to learn about was Isatou Ceesay from Gambia who found a way to recycle the cheap plastic bags we get when we shop. As we focused on other women who have tackled environmental problems, the girls’ enthusiasm grew for influencing their peers through their service. They were eager to teach reducing, reusing, and recycling lessons at their local libraries and host an art/invention show with the repurposed materials, just as Isatou Ceesay did. As educators, we can’t wait to see the direction the next exploration takes us.

Conclusion

Even though these girls are young, they are fully capable of situating themselves within their community and acting as informed agents of change. The C3 Framework states,

Active and responsible citizens identify and analyze public problems; deliberate with other people about how to define and address issues; take constructive, collaborative action; reflect on their actions; create and sustain groups; and influence institutions both large and small.¹⁹

While the students may not fully comprehend the impact of their community service, their eagerness and willingness to

serve will change our community over time. As the founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman, states, “We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.”⁷²⁰

Our hope is that these small daily differences created by the Little Leaders challenge not only the perceptions of young women’s roles in society, but work towards filling the gaps in knowledge relating to notable women and their contributions. 🌍

Notes

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JESSE A. HAIGHT is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education, Clarion University of Pennsylvania, Clarion, Pennsylvania

VANESSA C. BORYENACE is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Education, Clarion University of Pennsylvania, Clarion, Pennsylvania

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