

“Women Are as Important as Men”: Third Graders Investigate Diverse Women in U.S. History

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“It’s in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
the palm of my hand,
The need of my care,
‘Cause I’m a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That’s me.”

—Maya Angelou, *Phenomenal Woman:
Four Poems Celebrating Women*

When the United States was founded in 1776 and for decades after, many Americans—African Americans, Native Americans, women, and poor white men—did not enjoy the full rights and privileges of citizenship. Society generally considered these groups to be inferior to white, male property owners, as could be seen in the laws and mores of that time.

Despite the expansion of rights enshrined in Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, these historically oppressed groups continue to experience devaluation today. For example, systems that favor domination by men, and that trivialize women’s agency (especially for women of color), are evidenced by the undervaluation of the contributions of women in history as it is taught in schools and colleges.¹

Young children’s self-identification and self-identity are essentially a set of conscious and unconscious beliefs built from experiences.² Students’ self-image, and their understanding of society, can change when they research how women contributed to our nation and to our daily lives. Such lessons can render these historical figures accessible and relevant.

We created a lesson based on inquiry activities as described in the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*,³ introducing students to a compelling question: “Why do we celebrate Women’s History Month?” We, along with many other educators, believe that delegating women’s stories to one month, and hearing the same women’s stories every year in classrooms, are inadequate opportunities for K-6 students to build comprehensive experiences.

Children typically propose solutions to compelling questions based on their experiences. Rich social studies, therefore, offers students opening points to investigate those questions through disciplinary means.⁴ Consequently, inquiry encounters for our third graders required disciplinary context and devoting time in the classroom to investigate and construct new knowledge about a diverse set of women in American history. The lesson described below featured women who are mostly unknown and understudied. We hope it is part of a trend to enrich K-6 social studies and to bring inquiry methods into our teaching.

In too many schools, K-6 social studies students may only learn about icons such as Rosa Parks and U.S. first ladies. Teaching Tolerance Director Maureen Costello voiced concerns that many students’ knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement (a pivotal event in history) boiled down to two people and four words: Rosa Parks, Dr. King and “I have a dream.”⁵ Peter Dreier, author and professor at Occidental College, explains, “Rosa Parks was strong, resilient, and brilliant - the real Rosa Parks is more interesting than the legend . . . Parks did not single-handedly ‘spark’ the bus boycott. She was part of a network of organizations and activists (including many women) who had the leadership capacity and resources—telephone lists, mimeograph machines, access to teachers, clergy, and others—to act strategically.”⁶

Costello argues that highlighting a few noteworthy women in March (or Black people in February or Latinos in October) can lead students to think that the exception proves the rule: “These dozen or so ladies really stood out, but the rest? Forgettable.”⁷

Teachers are not to blame, nor do we believe they intentionally leave lesser-known, diverse women’s stories hidden. Studies large and small have found that many curriculum standards and resources are, generally, inadequate. We reviewed Alabama’s current curriculum standards for K-6th grades social studies (updated online in 2017), and we report here the ratio of women, as opposed to men, mentioned as examples.⁸ The ratio in the standards for kindergarten is 0 women to 4 men; grade one (4/4); grade two (4/7); grade three (0/0); grade four (5/28);

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grade five (1/22), and grade six (11/48).

Larger studies of curriculum standards⁹ and of textbooks¹⁰ note the poor representation of women. Also focusing on gender representation, Woynshner¹¹ used close readings of women's images to raise students' awareness of women in history. Activities in which students examine and critique images served as a start for more enriched, gender-equitable social studies curricula.

As Brugar, et al. commented, the main issue is not about counting numbers; this is not a competition. Instead, numbers represent missed opportunities for women, in past and contemporary life, to be recognized. Also, these numbers reveal how young people are taught to view gender in many of today's classrooms. Intentional efforts to bring women's studies directly into K-6 classes continue to be necessary. Our inquiry lesson represents an explicit attempt to infuse women into the third grade curriculum.

As Faye, the third grade teacher in our collaborative group explains, "I reflected on former experiences, in which a previous group of third-grade students compiled lists of 'the greatest figures in U.S. history.' Overwhelmingly, their lists were made up of the names of white men. Exceptions to this were Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Coretta Scott King, and Rosa Parks. Considering that our school is exurban to a large urban city, it is critical that students acknowledge the significance of our geographical area in a larger historical context." At a minimum, students should realize the importance of notable local figures including Helen Keller and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, both from Alabama.

Two lesson goals guided this project: (a) to acquaint students with diverse women's stories and inspire curiosity about others, and (b) to focus on U.S. women only, as this was a starting point and first formal C3 Inquiry activity for these particular third graders. National standards reinforced the lesson's structure, which emphasized in-depth research about women.

Social studies curriculum standards and major concepts guided students' learning: Learners will understand: ● **CULTURE**: that people from other cultures develop different values and ways of interpreting experience. Culture, in this sense, refers to how genders and women from diverse cultures develop and interpret experiences. ● **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**: that key people, events, and places are associated with the history of the community, nation, and world, and that we can learn our personal past and the past of communities, nations, and the world by means of stories, biographies, interviews, and original sources, ● **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**: that individuals bring specific abilities, interests, and talents in working with others to make decisions and solve problems, and ● **INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**: that characteristics distinguish individuals. (See note 11 for additional curriculum

standards and guidelines, including IDM).¹²

The following are concepts to discuss with students related to this lesson's context: *achievement, contemporary, contribution, extraordinary, icon, iconic, media, notable vs. celebrity, phenomena v. celebrity, remarkable, taking initiative, and Women's History Month.*

We summarize a lesson we created in a **sidebar** and describe it in more detail below, telling how the lesson proceeded and how it links to the C3 Framework. Examples of student handouts for the lesson and the biographies of two phenomenal women comprise the **PULLOUT** in this issue of *SSYL*. Please contact author Janie Hubbard for additional lesson materials such as rubrics, PowerPoint slides, and resources for teachers and students.

A Narrative Description of the C3 Inquiry Lesson

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries. The C3 Framework encourages the use of compelling and supporting questions, which can be generated by students or teachers. To help students begin to consider questions, Faye created anchor charts reflecting the teacher-generated compelling question and three supporting questions. She first read the compelling question: "Why do we have Women's History Month?" and asked students for their thoughts (hypotheses). Several students quickly raised their hands and expressed ideas, which were basic, but true, "So we can learn about women" and "Because we learn about men during all the other months." Next, to access prior knowledge, Faye asked students to list women they learned about in school, and the teacher recorded responses on chart paper: Rosa Parks, Michelle Obama, and Harriet Tubman.

To further assess students' prior knowledge and introduce unfamiliar faces, Faye presented a series of diverse women's photographs using PowerPoint. Working in groups of two-to-three, students tried to identify women in the photos, with the teacher's assurance that it was fine if they did not know the person, "This is not a test." The women, not often studied in K-6 classrooms, included Mary McLeod Bethune (African American Educator), Julia Butterfly Hill (American Environmentalist), Maria Tall Chief (Native American prima ballerina), Judge Sonia Sotomayor (Latina American U.S. Supreme Court justice), Maya Lin (Asian American monument architect), and Anousheh Ansari (daughter of Iranian immigrants - first female commercial spaceflight participant).

See the PULLOUT, P1 for the entire list. The last image was that of Oprah Winfrey. As expected, practically all students identified her, but the others in this set of images were unknown. Faye describes students' further discussion. "Although students had not correctly identified many women during the slideshow, they nonetheless examined each slide and attempted to apply what they knew from context ("She must be a judge because she's wearing a robe." Or "She is a dancer!"). They openly



Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial in Washington, DC, sculpted by Robert Berks (Carol M. Highsmith/Library of Congress). The daughter of former slaves, Bethune (1875–1955) became one of the most important black educators, civil and women’s rights leaders, and government officials of the twentieth century. The college she founded set educational standards for today’s black colleges, and her role as an advisor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave African Americans an advocate in government.

debated the identification of Tall Chief and Lin, as I encouraged them to compare their ideas. The students’ unfiltered responses indicated they were eager to learn about more diverse historical figures, and they were proud that they knew at least one of the women.”

When looking at a larger set of photos, students were only able to initially name three women they had learned about in school (Parks, Obama, and Tubman) and one woman who they knew, most likely through media presence (Winfrey). When Faye identified each woman after this slideshow, students explained that they had heard the names of some of these women mentioned in lessons, but had not seen their images. They said that Parks, Obama, Tubman, and Winfrey were mentioned in their homes or places of worship, or both, as well as in classes. Students also discussed which of the figures they wanted to learn more about

These results speak to the importance of (1) showing images of persons studied in the curriculum, and (2) representing exemplary people who reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the students in our classrooms. Students need to experience learning centered on them, their families, their cultures, and interests. These findings also show the need to expose students

to diverse figures throughout the elementary curriculum, rather than only selecting from the historical figures we learned about when we were children. The eagerness with which students engaged in this learning solidified the need to continue examining not only historical females in history, but also women of various ages, ethnicities, and beliefs. Such opportunities allow all students to become better able to evaluate their prior beliefs as they encounter others who may differ substantially from them in multiple ways including socially, economically, politically, and religiously.

Dimension 2: Applying Discipline Tools and Concepts; and Dimension 3: Gathering and Evaluating Sources. We created guiding questions 2 and 3 to help students consider on whom to focus their research and where to find information, while being mindful that not all sources are relevant to their task. Faye read question 2 aloud, “How can I locate phenomenal women to research?” A whole-class discussion followed, and students’ suggestions included using Google search on iPads, trade books, asking an adult, and using Quick Response (QR) codes located in the school’s hallway. (In honor of Women’s History Month, school personnel had previously arranged

Women's History QR codes in the hallway, although third graders had not yet explored them.) Again, Faye read aloud the third supporting question, "How can I know when a woman in history or contemporary life is phenomenal?" After learning about the concept "contemporary," students revealed their thinking concerning the question: "A lot of people know who she is." "People talk about her even when she isn't around." "There are movies and books about her." "Other people try to act like her."

This part of the lesson reused the PowerPoint presentation. Directions were as follows: Choose at least one phenomenal woman listed on the next PowerPoint slides or talk with your teacher about someone else you wish to research. Write a short biography for each phenomenal woman you select. Faye defined "biography" for students, and each student received a template to organize their notes. The biography activity required students to include a visual with the final product (drawing portraits by hand or computer). Students presented their biographies to the class, while also discussing and comparing the women's various accomplishments. Rather than merely memorizing facts, students engaged in historical sense-making, using the biography as an entryway into the larger issues of history.¹³

The research process of locating reliable sources and gathering information occurred over two days. Students used research sites such as www.biography.com and www.historynet.com

Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

Presentations offer students opportunities to represent, and communicate their ideas to audiences. Choices included (a) PowerPoint slide for a class-made presentation, (b) regular paper-size pages for a class-made book, (c) large paper (12x17 inches) pages for a class-made "Big Book," (d) poster (after teacher teaches mini-lesson or workshop about visual literacy), (e) bulletin board, (f) webpages for a class-made website, (g) Prezi, (h) class-created timeline mural, and (i) Google Slides. In this particular third grade class, students discussed options and decided to prepare video presentations using the digital learning app www.seesaw.com.

For the second time, students discussed women they learned about in school. Faye charted student responses beside the original list (Tubman, Parks, Obama) completed during the lesson's first part. Students now knew about many historical figures from among those on the list (PULLOUT, P1).

To help students reflect on what they learned during the lesson and possibly reach further conclusions concerning Women's History Month, Faye engaged students in a whole class discussion prompted by open-ended questions. Questions with examples of students' responses are below:

1. *Why do you think there are so many women, who made history, you may not have heard about?*

Students: "People don't think women are as important as men" "We have to learn about too many people, so a lot of women get left out."

2. *What is Women's History Month? Do we need it? Why or why not?*

Students: "Right now when we learn about women." "It's when we have to learn about all of the important women."

3. *How do you think women's history looks in other parts of the world?*

Students: "It's the same as it is here." "I found some women I couldn't report on because they weren't from the United States." "There are probably women all around the world that we don't learn about."

The Women's National Hall of Fame recognizes women with online biographies, recorded oral histories, and awards. See: <https://www.womenofthehall.org/women-of-the-hall>. As an extension activity, and to help young students take informed action, they could interview "phenomenal women" in their own lives, e.g., family member, neighbor, friend.¹⁴ Then, they could use the real-life biographies to create their own Women's Hall of Fame, displayed in school hallway, local public library, or on a school website.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This was an introductory C3 inquiry lesson for Faye's third grade students. Our original goals were to (a) acquaint students with diverse women's stories and inspire their curiosity about others, (b) create conditions for third graders to conclude, for themselves, that women's contributions and achievements are too numerous and diverse to learn in one month, and therefore their own learning opportunities are incomplete. (We focused on United States women only, as this was a starting point for these particular third graders' in-depth research about women.)

While students were introduced to diverse women, some wanted to stick with the familiar (Clinton and Obama), and only one woman's name was selected from the list of 23 (PULLOUT, P1) suggested, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. We might say that students' curiosity to learn about women from other cultures is not, yet, piqued as much as we would like. The demographics of this classroom parallel those of the school and the larger community. Most students identify as white, while there are some African American and Asian students, and a growing number of Latino/as. In the list of historical figures, it was important that students were able to see diverse women with whom they could connect through common features. Whether

Compelling Question: *Why do we celebrate Women's History Month?*

Staging the Question: Create an anchor chart with the compelling question written on it. Ask students to think for themselves and respond to the question (hypothesize) about why we celebrate Women's History Month.

Supporting Questions

1. What does the word "phenomenal" mean?
2. How can I know when a woman in history or contemporary life is "phenomenal"?

Research Skills Question

How can I locate phenomenal women to research?

Formative Performance Tasks

1. To assess students' prior knowledge, ask students to write the names of women they have previously learned about in school.
2. To further assess that knowledge and to introduce unfamiliar historical figures, project a series of images of ethnically diverse women: Mary McLeod Bethune (African American Educator), Julia Butterfly Hill (American Environmentalist), Maria Tall Chief (Native American prima ballerina), Sonia Sotomayor (Latina American U.S. supreme court judge), Maya Lin (Asian American monument architect), and Anousheh Ansari (daughter of Iranian immigrants and the first female commercial spaceflight participant).

Formative Assessments

(Prior Knowledge) (A) During a whole-class discussion, students write the names of women they have learned about previously in school. (B) Students work in groups of two or three to identify six women in the photos.

1. Students discuss the meaning of "phenomenal," in this context.
2. Students discuss and select relevant resources for this particular research.

3. Each student selects a phenomenal woman to research and discuss.
4. Each student writes a biography, which includes a visual.
5. Students present and compare their biographies.

Formative Assessment

(New Knowledge) Students engage in a reflective, whole-class discussion guided by open-ended questions:

1. Why do you think there are so many women, who made history, you may not have heard about?
2. What is Women's History Month? Do we need it? Why or why not?
3. How do you think women's history looks in other parts of the world?

Summative Performance Task

Students learn about diverse women's stories, little-known women's stories, that are related to their lives. They research, on their own, one woman in American history and write a short, illustrated biography about her.

Taking Informed Action

Students use the biographies to create their own Women's Hall of Fame on a website or in paper to display in the school hallway or in a local public library.

Extension: With the teacher's guidance, students could use research and questioning skills to interview phenomenal women in their real lives (e.g., a family member, teacher, school staff member, neighbor, or adult friend). Students organize a ceremony, inducting their interviewees into the Women's Hall of Fame.

that connection was ethnically or interest-related, students indicated they felt drawn to specific personalities because of individual interest.

Before and after this inquiry lesson, we asked students to make lists of the women they learned about in school. When comparing the two lists, it was evident that far more women's names were on the second list, revealing that learning had occurred. Looking back, we think we underestimated the third-graders' decision-making, research, and technological skills. Overall, they were clearly capable of discussing and making collective decisions about how to research and create presentations. When next teaching this lesson (which should probably become a unit of study), we may spend less time on technical skills and more on critical thinking. Generally, students were excited during the lesson and quick to speak and offer ideas.

Conclusion

Today, teachers have access to abundant resources and organizations with year-round missions to write women into history. For example, the National Women's History Project (NWHP) offers resources and encouragement, stating, "Recognizing the dignity and accomplishments of women in our own families and those from other backgrounds leads to higher self-esteem among girls and greater respect among boys and men."¹⁵ Maureen Costello suggests we approach Women's History Month "with the truth: that we've made progress, but injustice still exists."¹⁶ We aim to continue adding to existing conversations and advocate for talking, writing, teaching, and researching about women, year-round, in K-6 schools. ●

Notes

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2. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
3. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
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9. National Women's History Museum (NWHM). "Where are the Women? A Report on the Status of Women in the United States Curricula." (Alexandria, VA: www.WomensHistory.org, 2017), section 2.
10. Kristy Brugar, Anne-lise Halvorsen, and Daisy Hernandez, "Where are the Women? A Classroom Inquiry into Social Studies Textbooks," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 26, no. 3 (January/February 2014): 21–31; Brugar, et al., 2014: 29.
11. Christine Woystner, *Picturing Women: Gender, Images, and Representation in*



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Social Studies, *Social Education* 70, no. 6 (2006): 358–362.

12. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010); other standards aligned in this lesson included: College, Career, & Civic Life (C3) Inquiry Arc – Dimensions 1–4: 1. Developing questions and planning inquires; 2. Applying disciplinary concepts and tools; 3. Evaluating sources and using evidence; and 4. Communicating conclusions and taking informed action. English/Language Arts Common Core State Standards (Grade 3). CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.4: With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3.). CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.7: Conduct short research projects that build knowledge about a topic. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.8: Recall information from experiences or gather information from print and digital sources; take brief notes on sources and sort evidence into provided categories. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.3: Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect; S.G. Grant, J.K Lee, & K. Swan. "Inquiry Design Template (IDM)," <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/inquiry-design-model-template.pdf>.
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