Social Activist Women:
Choosing to Live by their own Moral Code

Historical women played a key role as social advocates for people and most especially, children of immigrant families. Educators for social justice bring lives and actions of women into the social studies curriculum and instruction to inspire students to become critically questioning citizens who stand up for all citizens in society. Following the societal code of authority is not always the moral and ethical course of action. Social action takes conscientious courage and a strong sense of morality to stand up for the least among us.

Key Words: Women activists, Immigration, Social action, Advocacy, Social studies, Moral code

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Citation for this Article

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Introduction

The United States of America is a nation of immigrants. Many do not have to look too far back in their families to find a generation that immigrated to the United States. In 1882, the United States Congress passed legislation levying a tax on people emigrating from other countries. In 1885, a further legislative act was passed to deny emigration of people for purpose of labor. How interesting it is to consider that all citizens in the United States, with the exception of Native Americans, had ancestors who were immigrants. When it came to accepting others’ immigration to the United States, it seemed that the welcome reception of freedom was no longer extended.

Here are a few women’s short biographies for social studies educators to study and utilize with students. They can be used to enlighten both educators and students about citizens who recognized and provided instruction about equality and the richness of diversity. Social studies educators for social justice can draw implications for classroom practice from the informative wealth within the hidden resources represented by these past women who chose not to live by societal codes.
Fortunately, for Jane Addams, it was an educator at Rockford Seminary for Women, Caroline Potter, who assigned her students, of whom Jane was one, to read a progressive book by Margaret Fuller (1845). This text proved to be an inspiration to Potter, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Emma Lazarus, and Jane Addams, illuminating brilliant minds by offering empowered ideas about what women could achieve in society in the United States (Knight, 2010).


Who were some female critical educators who championed the plight of people of immigrant status? Who were some female social justice activists who spoke out and stood out?

**Margaret Fuller**

As a precocious youngster, Margaret Fuller learned Greek and Latin from her father who was a Congressman from Massachusetts. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Fuller, 1845) was a pioneering text published in 1845 and utilized at Rockford Seminary for Women, in Rockford, Illinois. Rockford was the college which Jane Addams’ father chose for her, rather than allowing her to enroll at her choice of Smith College.

Following Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s study group ideas, Fuller, with other intellectually oriented women, planned discursive events conversing about lofty topics such as their roles in life as women and other transcendental thought (von Mehren, 1994).

Margaret Fuller assisted Ralph Waldo Emerson as editor of *The Dial*, a journal of literary and philosophical articles published in the early 1840s (von Mehren, 1994). Fuller wrote many articles for the journal. Social reform for women primarily was the subject matter with an accompanying logic presented in her published articles.

In the preface of Margaret Fuller’s book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) she intimated what would now be identified as almost a Jungian perspective of how humans embody both feminine and masculine thought combined to equate divine wholeness. She encouraged women to break out of the “trenches that hedge them in” (p. 2). Fuller summoned women to support people in oppressed situations, possibly through public service in the United States Senate. Her vision for women was to be leaders in the new era and harbingers of moral empowerment.

**Jane Addams**

Jane Addams was a progressive social activist, educational leader, and educator of immigrants among her other myriad roles of agency dedicated in service to humanity (Gutek, 2000; Knight, 2010). Jane Addams established the Hull House in Chicago to bring women of varied immigrant nationalities together for intellectual, physical, culinary, language, theatrical, moral, and spiritual development. The Hull House became a multifaceted place for immigrant women to learn how to develop every necessary aspect of their own and children’s education and created a sense of meaning for autonomous lives. Additionally, Addams began the first day care center and nursery school for children of im-

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migrant families at the Hull House. In pursuit of personal identity and social transformation, sociologists, educators, economists, philosophers, and psychologists would visit the Hull House to both lecture and research.

As a progressive, Jane Addams worried about a division taking place in society among ethnic and social class enclaves in the United States. To feel safe, most immigrants and African Americans who migrated north at the turn of the century tended to segregate in neighborhoods with members of their own ethnicities to sustain a sense of community in larger cities. English-speaking Protestants were inclined to isolate themselves from people of immigrant heritage and African Americans. So, ethnic ghettos were, for the most part, self-imposed and socially isolated (Gutek, 2000; Knight, 2010). As Addams sought to educate and empower women and children immigrants, they, in turn, educated and empowered her.

In a broad sense, Jane Addams became involved in issues to stop child labor, redesigning the public school curriculum so that children were able to explore the community and make connections within the social context. The Hull House was home to interethnic and intercultural dialogue. This dialog facilitated relationships, celebrated ecumenical and international values and diversity as well as developed pluralism among women immigrants, the newest citizens in the United States (Gutek, 2000). Jane Addams believed that women had to be wholly prepared and self sufficient for modern life as Americans.

Emma Lazarus

Although, Emma Lazarus’ sonnet (1883) was engraved on the Statue of Liberty a year after the United States Congress passed a levy on people emigrating mostly from Europe, she was most well known as being a Jewish American activist. The sonnet itself mirrored many of her own experiences, although the Lazarus family had been citizens in the United States for generations. Anti-Semitic sentiment was rising at the time and tolerance was waning. Lazarus’ most famous work was scarcely recognized until after she died.

Of Spanish Jewish heritage, Lazarus, a New Yorker, advocated for the redress of the social plight of immigrants partially due to her mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and because of her personal resistance to the social code of the era. Lazarus was an intellectual. By her mid-teens, she was able to speak five languages. Being from a privileged background, Lazarus had influential, progressive mentors in Emerson and Hawthorne, as well as both of their daughters (Merriam, 1998; Schor, 2006).

Because Emma Lazarus was a contemporary of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, as a poet and writer, she mostly was a sympathizer of Jewish themes. She often was compared to being the equivalent, intense scholar and critically, instructive thinker and writer as Margaret Fuller. All of the aforementioned were transcendentalists. Fuller and Lazarus also were feminist activists and writers who eloquently avowed societal equity for every citizen in the United States as morally and ethically just. Lazarus was a woman preoccupied by issues of social justice and she took necessary social action (Schor, 2006). As a portion of her famous poem was placed on The Statue of Liberty greeting all who entered New York harbor, the statue became synonymous with freedom, and she became synonymous with the “mother of” immigrants and “exiles” (Lazarus, 1883).
Clara Breed

Clara E. Breed was the children’s librarian in San Diego at the time of Japanese American internment in 1942. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States issued Executive Act 9066 (Oppenheim, 2006). This Executive Act issued by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt required all people of Japanese ancestry, irrespective of how many generations they had lived in the United States, and whether or not they were legal citizens, to be rounded up and moved into internment camps. Unbelievably, many young men were a part of a segregated forced Japanese American U. S. Army 442nd Regimental Combat Team during WWII as members of their families were interned in camps in the United States.

Anti-Japanese sentiment was at an all time high in 1942. Even though Clara Breed was not a demonstrator, she opposed internment in a different manner. Since she identified with the children as a librarian, it was through books and the written word that she took a stand. Ms. Breed knew her youngsters, who so enjoyed books and reading, would draw comfort if she sent books and letters to them at the camps. Her position at the library could have been in jeopardy, but she put the welfare of the children first. Clara Breed gave the children stamped postcards as they left for the camps and offered written advice through their harrowing experience of being deported from their homes, schools, all that they knew as citizens in the United States (Oppenheim, 2006).

The Japanese American children who so frequently visited the library became her pen pals during their forced encampment. Ms. Breed was a lifeline of courage and love through the common thread of reading and writing who helped youngsters of Japanese American descent from the San Diego area grow up, graduate from college, and pursue their dreams in the United States of America, a country that at one point in their young lives, had denied their citizenship. Without question, her caring documentation through letter writing mattered to the children as citizens. Some children kept in touch through adulthood.

Clara Breed kept all of the postcards and letters sent to her from the children in the internment camps. By reading the letters written back and forth between the children in the camps, Ms. Breed and the lives of children are chronicled over this dismal history in our country with Americans of a particular ethnicity. Readers of Oppenheim’s text (2006) are given a vicarious viewpoint of the camps and how Japanese American children were able to triumph after years of detainment with assistance from one woman who resisted a social norm and became a thoughtful social activist in a down-to-earth way with children through to their adulthood.

Conclusion

Once again, anti-immigration sentiment is on the rise and rearing its ugly head in the U.S.A. Do citizens learn from history? One only has to use a search engine and type in three different words: immigrants, illegal immigrants, and the most objectionable, illegal aliens to get a sense of what some people are thinking. Are social studies educators continuing to follow the same firmly principled, courageous activism as these foremothers? Following the societal code of authority is not always the moral and ethical course. Are educators choosing to follow the acceptable societal codes of exclusion, or do we actively choose and work to extend greetings to people of immigrant status and religious diversity, to breathe free in the United States of America?
References

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Web-Based

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