

Shining Lights

Subject Areas: Social Studies, English/Language Arts, Black History, Ethnic Studies, Women's History

Learning Objectives:

- To recognize an underrepresented historical figure as a culture carrier and a community helper
- To enhance conceptual vocabulary by learning about metaphors and the West African concept of a Griot
- To distinguish between autobiographies and biographies
- To work with primary sources, considering multiple dimensions of expression and cultural heritage (e.g. song-leading and storytelling)
- To recognize oneself as a potential community helper

Necessary Materials:

- Fannie Lou Hamer BrainPOP episode, available for free on the Find Your Voice website
- Fannie Lou Hamer's performance of "[This Little Light of Mine](#)" at Newport Folk Festival in 1966
- Mother Goose Club's version of "[This Little Light of Mine](#)"
- [To Praise Our Bridges](#), Fannie Lou Hamer's autobiography
- Planting Seeds: The Life and Legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer by Maegan Parker Brooks, PhD
- Shining Lights Worksheet
- Background Knowledge: You may wish to enhance/refresh your own knowledge by consulting this [Biographical Sketch of Fannie Lou Hamer](#) before introducing the "Shining Lights" unit.

Instruction Steps:

Anticipatory Set

Step One: To pique student interest, start this lesson with Fannie Lou Hamer's powerful performance of "This Little Light of Mine" at the 1966 Newport Folk Festival. [Here's](#) an audiovisual recording of the song. The [Newport Folk Festival](#) is an annual event, which draws musicians and audiences from across the world. Mrs. Hamer was a featured artist at the 1965 and 1966 events.

Step Two: After the students watch and listen to the song, you can share with your class that the song, "This Little Light of Mine" has a rich history. It was originally

a gospel song that was adapted during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s and most famously sung by the activist, Fannie Lou Hamer. When Mrs. Hamer sang this song, she inspired ordinary people—farmers, maids, teachers, and students—to discover how they could stand up for what they believed was right. Her song's lyrics encouraged audience members to consider how they could let their lights shine. In this way, the light in the song works as a metaphor, representing action and engagement.

Guided Practice

Step Three: You can explain to your students that a metaphor is a language tool that helps carry across meaning from a more concrete object to another more abstract idea. In this case, we don't necessarily know what "action" and "engagement" look like. These ideas are difficult to visualize, but most of us (with the exception of some visually impaired learners) are familiar with light. So imagining the qualities of light help concretize the idea of action and engagement—how light makes us feel, how it spreads, and how it helps us see things more clearly. Beyond the metaphorical message this song carries, when Mrs. Hamer's sang "This Little Light of Mine" people say her voice could be heard all over town! Her powerful voice gave people who had been denied rights for generations the strength to stand up and fight for what they were entitled to as US citizens.

Step Four: You can transition to the idea that just as songs provide strength and direction, so too do words told through the stories of people's lives. Once you have demonstrated Fannie Lou Hamer's cultural significance as a singer, you can enrich knowledge about Mrs. Hamer as a [griot](#) or culture carrier. This concept comes from West Africa, where it is used to describe a person who passes down a group's history through storytelling. You can demonstrate one way Fannie Lou Hamer passed down her culture's history by reading her short autobiography aloud to the class.

Further still, you can spark a discussion with your students about how her autobiography highlights a range of circumstances and conditions related to the struggle for civil rights. You can access her autobiography here: [To Praise Our Bridges](#).

Step Five: To enhance students' vocabularies and understanding of literary genres, you can move from Mrs. Hamer's specific story to the larger sub-genre of nonfiction writing, by defining what autobiographies are and what they seek to accomplish.

To explore the sub-genre of autobiographies, you can explain that autobiographies are accounts of people's lives, told directly by that person, and that these accounts often provide direction for our own lives. Ask students to reflect more deeply on Hamer's *To Praise Our Bridges* by considering: how (in which ways specifically) did Mrs. Hamer let her light shine--even in times of grave darkness?

Step Six: You can then compare autobiographies to biographies by reading Maegan Parker Brooks's biography of Hamer, *Planting Seeds: The Life and Legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer*.

Before you read this book, ask students to be mindful of how the two books--the autobiography Hamer told about her own life and the biography Brooks told about Hamer's life--differ. There are noticeable stylistic differences, so this can be a great point of entry, but encourage your students to dig deeper into how the story differs depending on who is telling it.

Application

Step Seven: Students can then return to their desks and respond in writing or in picture form to the prompts: How can I stand up for what I believe is right? How can I let my light shine? A worksheet template for this reflection can be found below.

Step Eight: Invite students to share their responses with the larger class, before closing the session by singing along with either Mrs. Hamer's or with the Mother Goose [children's version](#) of "This Little Light of Mine."

Assessment of Student Learning: Students will be guided through a series of textual analysis questions as they consider the different forms of cultural heritage transmission: song, autobiography, and biography. Students will also reflect on their own values and potential contributions through the Shining Lights worksheet.

Ideas for Adapting Plan to Various Grade Levels: The "Shining Lights" unit can be adapted to grade levels K-3 by varying its complexity. For instance, for early learners, the lesson plan can exist at the levels of information recall and basic reasoning, wherein students experience Mrs. Hamer's performance and they listen to her autobiography before being asked to describe how she let her light shine. To increase the depth of the plan, even early learners can apply lessons from Mrs. Hamer's life to their own circumstances, considering how they can stand up for what they believe in and how they can let their lights shine. For early learners, this knowledge can be communicated in picture format.

To adapt this lesson plan for more advanced learners, you can ask students to identify themes or patterns in Mrs. Hamer's life that seem similar to our lives today. You could ask learners to consider which actions Mrs. Hamer took during her lifetime that people living today could utilize to bring about social, political, and economic change. Additionally, by encouraging students to reflect, write, and share, the "Shining Lights" unit enables students to hone critical thinking, as well as written and oral presentation skills. Last, by engaging with an audiovisual text (the "This Little Light of Mine" performance) as well as a text that was passed down orally (recorded) and distributed in writing (*To Praise Our Bridges*) students are encouraged to understand Fannie Lou Hamer as an activist as well as an artist, and to appreciate the multiple forms of her artwork.

Find Your Voice Highlights

Drawing inspiration from Hamer's performance of "The Little Light of Mine," in addition to her autobiography and a biography written about her, students will reflect on how they can let their little lights shine in their communities.

Lesson Plan Author: Maegan Parker Brooks, PhD

Brooks is a professor at Willamette University. She earned her PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she wrote a dissertation about Fannie Lou Hamer. Her dissertation became a rhetorical biography of Hamer, [A Voice that Could Stir an Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement](#). Brooks also co-edited the first collection of Hamer's speeches, [The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell it Like It Is](#) (with Davis W. Houck). Her third book, *Fannie Lou Hamer: America's Freedom Fighting Woman*, will join Rowman & Littlefield's Library of African American Biography in February 2021. Brooks is a board member of the Fannie Lou Hamer Statue and Education Fund Committee, a lead researcher for the film *Fannie Lou Hamer's America*, editor of the Find Your Voice K-12 curriculum, and the director of the Find Your Voice: Online Resource for Fannie Lou Hamer Studies website. Brooks has two elementary-aged children and loves volunteering in their classrooms.





This Little Light of Mine Brainstorm

1. How can I stand up for what I believe in?

Example: I believe that all people have something special to contribute to our world.

Your Turn:

2. How can I let my light shine?

Example: I can encourage others to speak up and share their ideas by asking questions and listening carefully to their answers.

Your Turn:
