



WORK IT, GIRL: BLAST OFF INTO SPACE LIKE MAE JEMISON - TEACHERS' GUIDE

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\$15.99 US/\$20.99 CAN

ISBN: 9780711245150

Ages: 8 to 12 (Grades: 3 to 7)

64 Pages

Learning Objective

Early in her life, Mae Jemison was told she might not be able to be what she wanted to be when she grew up. Instead of taking those words to heart, she decided to blaze her own trail—all the way to outer space! No small feat, Mae had to study her hardest and commit to doing whatever was necessary to achieve her dreams. But her work paid off, and now her remarkable accomplishments serve as inspiration for any young student who wants to be something more than what is simply acceptable or expected. Complete with ten key life lessons Mae learned along her journey, this edition of the *Work It, Girl* series is certain to encourage young dreamers to reach for the stars!

Essential Questions in This Unit

1. Why is Mae Jemison famous?
2. What aspects of Mae's childhood encouraged her to pursue her dreams?
3. Why was Mae drawn to the idea of exploring outer space?
4. How did Mae choose between being a doctor, a ballet dancer, and an astronaut?
5. In what ways did Mae help future generations of scientists and astronomers?
6. What personal qualities helped Mae become so successful?





Classroom Discussion Topics

1. When Mae announces to her class that she wants to be a scientist, her teacher doubts her, suggesting that “Maybe [she] could be a nurse?” (p. 12). Ask the students how they think Mae felt hearing that. Have any of them ever felt unsupported by an authority figure, or even a friend? What did they do in that situation? If they could go back in time, what, if anything, would they do differently? Ask the class how these questions and situations tie into the quote on page 13: “Never be limited by other people’s imaginations.”
2. When Mae discovered that she was good at—and loved—dancing, she had to carefully consider what she wanted to pursue professionally: dance or science. Ask the class to discuss what factors she used to make her decision. Have they ever had to solve a big problem or make a big decision? How did they come to an answer?
3. On page 32, the book states, “If you were Black, you had to work extra hard. Though unfair, some of that stigma is still true today.” Ask students what this statement means. Why did Black people have to work harder to achieve the same goals as white people? Do students agree that this “stigma is still true today”?
4. When Mae finally gets an opportunity to be an astronaut in space, she is described as the “first Black woman to go into space.” However, her response to that attitude was, “I wouldn’t have cared less if 2,000 people had gone up before me...I would still have had my hand up, ‘I want to do this.’” (p. 38) Ask the class which they think is more important: doing what no one else has done before, or doing exactly what you want to do. Why?

Student Activities

1. More than anything, Mae wanted to visit outer space. Have the students consider what they'd most like to do, be, or see when they grow up and create a drawing using images of those hopes. Like Mae, they'll have to work hard, so what steps can they take toward making these aspirations happen?
2. Listen to Mae in her own words! PBS.org has a series called *Secret Life of Scientists and Engineers* and features several video clips of Mae on a variety of topics. After reading the book and hearing Mae speak in her own words, what surprises students the most? What new inspiration does watching her speak give the students?
3. Mae always wanted to be an astronaut among the stars. Help inspire your students with the wonders of outer space: The American Museum of Natural History website (amnh.org) features a series called *A Kids Guide to Stargazing*, which offers suggestions and ideas to observe space without even leaving the ground! Following the guidelines, instruct students to make their own observations of the night sky. When the observations are complete, ask students to bring their notes into class and discuss their experiences.
4. When Mae first graduated from medical school, she joined the Peace Corps. The organization's website includes an engaging exercise called Popcorn Generation that teaches children about renewable and nonrenewable resources. Find out more at the website PeaceCorps.gov/educators/resources/popcorn-generation.

