

From Then to Now: Elementary Students' Perceptions of Gender Equity in History and Today

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Abstract

This study investigates how elementary students think about women's experiences before and after participation in a literacy- and social studies- based intervention. This unit took place over three weeks and utilized critical literacy practices, or the use of literacy activities to support critical thinking about gender equity. Specifically, the study examines student perceptions of women's contributions and rights in history and contemporary society. The findings of this study demonstrate that students' initial perceptions of women's contributions tended to be limited to stereotypical roles centered on caretaking. They also demonstrated a general belief that gender-based inequity has existed only in the past. After participating in the intervention, students were far-more likely to describe women in counterstereotypical roles and to recognize contemporary, on-going inequity. These findings indicate that critical literacy practices may provide important resources for supporting democratic citizenship with young students, as students were more able to identify and critically discuss systems of gender-based oppression and inequity. This study contributes to an understanding of how students think about women's rights and gender equity over time and describes specific activities that can be used to challenge stereotypical views of women's roles and rights and also provides options for further teaching about inequity.

Keywords: Gender Equity, Women's History, Critical Literacy Practices, Democratic Citizenship

Democratic citizenship education must include the education of equality (Ruitenbergh, 2015, p. 1).

Introduction

In the quest to support meaningful democratic citizenship education, it is important to remember that even our youngest students are citizens. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) argues that schools must prepare all students to fight injustices and support the

common good (NCSS, 2013), yet elementary students often receive civic education that highlights personal responsibility without guiding students to consider societal systems of discrimination or inequity (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Arguably, to work toward justice, students must have opportunities to analyze and discuss these systems in order to understand how oppression is upheld over time. It is, after all, difficult for students to fight problems that they do not know exist.

Opportunities to actively learn about and dismantle systemic injustices are currently of great importance, as Todres (2018) argues that the increasingly divisive United States society has a pressing need for education that dismantles oppression and respects human rights. Among these rights are those related to gender. With roots in historical, political, social, and economic discrimination, gender-based inequality continues to be rampant in society and has become the focus of widespread social movements (Langone, 2018; Roy, 2017). These movements highlight the existence and persistence of patriarchy and its detrimental impact on society as a whole (e.g., Crocco, 2018). Elliot (2018) recently argued that although women have made gains in recent decades, these gains continue to be undermined by a societal value for masculinity, saying, “despite these efforts, gender inequality, bias, and violence remain alive and well in schools and in the American culture more broadly” (p. 17). The consequences of this inequality are universal and especially affect traditionally marginalized groups, as women of Color and women in poverty face even greater discrimination than white, middle class women (Butler, 2004).

In the face of gender-based injustices, engaging even the youngest students in civic education that amplifies women’s experiences and directly challenges gender inequity is critical. Unfortunately, however, while classroom materials and teacher instruction have tremendous potential to influence student perceptions of the social world (Gee & Gee, 2005), few resources for teaching about women’s history and rights from a social justice lens exist. This study therefore seeks to investigate how teachers may integrate civic education through social studies and literacy activities that help students think critically about women’s roles, contributions, and rights. The goal of this project was to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive women’s roles and contributions before and after participation in a two week literacy-based intervention?
2. How do students perceive gender inequity before and after participation in a two week literacy-based intervention?

First, I present a theoretical framework and review of the literature on the representation of women in social studies classrooms, student thinking about women's rights and societal progress, social studies and literacy integration, and the importance of discussing gender equity in elementary classrooms. This is followed by a description of the intervention, including an overview of each lesson. Next, I discuss the findings based on student interviews and classroom discussion, and then situate them in the relevant literature. Finally, limitations, implications, and ideas for how to adapt or expand the lesson activities are provided.

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in the belief that democratic citizens must investigate systems of oppression in order to work toward justice (Westheimer & Kane, 2004). Students must learn to critically analyze how societies support, or fail to support, human rights in order to make informed civic decisions and pursue social action (NCSS, 2013). This study especially relates democratic citizenship education to feminist theories intended to support gender equity in classrooms. Although several feminist theories exist (Schmeichel, 2015), in this study I refer to the assertion that feminism, both theoretically and politically, supports human rights for all people regardless of gender and thus seeks to improve society as a whole (Digiovanni & Liston, 2005).

Feminist pedagogy may have the potential to work toward gender equity in classrooms (Martin, Nickels, & Sharp-Grier, 2017). As defined by Mayberry (1998), feminist pedagogy can be thought of as teaching strategies that engage students in thinking critically about social structures and power dynamics in order to work toward social change. Although research about its use in elementary education is sparse, Digiovanni and Liston (2005) argue that elementary classrooms are ideal places to implement feminist pedagogy, stating that:

Although elementary school children may not eliminate racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination in the world, they may learn ways to behave that makes the perpetuation of these cycles of prejudice less tenable in the larger society.

Indeed, adults can learn greater tolerance and acceptance while observing children enacting principles of equity in their work and play. (p. 128)

In fact, feminist pedagogy may be especially vital in elementary education, where dichotomous presentations of gender often reinforce established, problematic views of norms and

roles (List, 2018; Lorber & Farrell, 1991). Arguably, a disruption of the practices that construct and reify gender norms has the potential to influence this distribution of power and privilege.

Lastly, this study draws from theories of critical literacy which affirm the use of literacy activities to support students in thinking critically about the social and political world (Bishop, 2014). Although critical literacy practices have taken many forms (Luke, 2012), they often consist of engaging students in discussions, texts, and writing activities that are intended to help uncover systems of oppression. This study uses such activities to support students in analyzing gender-based inequity.

Literature Review

This study expands on literature regarding civic education and gender equity in elementary social studies and literacy education. While the concept of inequity is complex, for the purposes of this study, I am defining equity as occurring when all individuals have access to the resources and opportunities needed to best succeed (Malisch et al., 2020). Below I describe research about the representation of women and women's rights in elementary curriculum materials, the use of literacy and social studies materials to challenge gender stereotypes, and the importance of addressing gender-based inequity with young students.

Representation of Women in Elementary Social Studies Classrooms

Social studies education should provide ideal opportunities to support democratic citizenship education by critically examining women's rights. NCSS argues for the "location, development, and promotion of curricular materials that demonstrate inclusive perspectives concerning all women as foundational contributors to society" while encouraging teachers to help students understand systematic sexism and fight injustice (Lucey, Crocco, Cruz, & Libresco, n.d., p. 1). Unfortunately, research indicates that time devoted to social studies education continues to dwindle in elementary social classrooms (Heafner, 2018), meaning that opportunities to address gender equity through elementary social studies lessons are likely lacking. In addition, when social studies is incorporated in elementary classrooms, the materials may actually reinforce inaccurate views of women's contributions and rights. The texts are largely devoted to men, with women being included significantly less and most often in stereotypical roles (Chick, 2006; Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007) Very few materials distinguish the experiences of women as valuable or worthwhile, and issues around systematic oppression and women's rights are paid little attention (Chu, 2017; Hahn et al., 2007).

This lack of accurate representation has classroom-wide implications, as few elementary teachers feel equipped to conduct activities that promote gender equity. Due to decades of masculinized narratives, many teachers are unaware of important events in women's history, which hinders their ability to teach about women's historical experiences (Crocco, 2018). Arguably this creates a cycle of neglect, as teachers continue to present the male-dominated narrative that they learned as students. Teachers may have limited access to lessons that challenge stereotypical thinking about historical gender roles and may face challenges finding appropriate resources to use (Lucey, 2021).

Unfortunately, this skewed representation of history affects students' learning and perception. Students use classroom curricula to seek an understanding of cultural truths, meaning that inaccurate messages about historical roles are internalized (Crocco, 1997; Henderson et al., 2020). Traditional, masculinized narratives thus instill the belief that women are unimportant and even inferior to men (Ellsworth, Stigall, & Walker, 2019), reifying sexist notions of power and significance. When women are portrayed as passive, supporting players, female students of any age may lose out on meaningful educational experiences, which can negatively impact their self-esteem and hinder them from fully achieving their potential (Sadker & Sadker, 2010).

Women's Rights and the Perception of Progress

While little research exists regarding elementary students' understandings of gender equity, scholars have highlighted the broad assumption that society continues to improve. Cronon (1992) describes a common narration in which "the plot line gradually ascends toward an ending that is more positive...there may be moderate setbacks along the way, but their role is to play foil to the heroes who overcome them" (p. 1354). Santiago (2019) applies this assumption of progress to educational settings, arguing that the notion that society continues to improve is deeply embedded in curricular materials and has the power to distort students' perceptions of history, blurring their understanding of continued discrimination and systematic oppression. When applied to gender, this may promote false notions that gender equity has been reached (Everingham, Stevenson, & Warner-Smith, 2007). Arguably, a belief that gender-based inequity has ceased to exist leaves students less able to identify and fight systems that uphold unequal access to privilege and power. Challenging a perception of progress may therefore be vital in promoting civic education.

Literacy and Social Studies Integration

Challenging both the stereotypical representations of women and the misperception of having reached gender equality in modern society may be vital to helping students uncover injustice. Raday (2012) argues that as sexist, gender-based discrimination continues to persist, the notion that traditional roles should be upheld for men and women must be dismantled by democratic citizens in order to work toward equality. Toward this goal, integrating literacy and social studies instruction may be a promising method. Students spend much of their day engaging in literacy instruction (Jennings & Rentner, 2006), which means that teachers have ample opportunities to promote civic education about women's history through reading and writing activities. As argued by Evans and Davies (2000), "school is a social experience in which social values and attitudes are transmitted, and texts are agents of this transmission" (p. 256).

In a previous study, I demonstrated the potential of critical literacy activities such as interactive read-alouds to challenge stereotypical views about women's history (Whitford, 2020). Students engaged in a series of interactive read-alouds featuring women in history and were subsequently more likely to describe historical women in counterstereotypical ways. While less research exists regarding the potential of literacy activities to specifically teach about women's rights or women's modern roles and contributions, studies demonstrate that books provide unique opportunities to help students think critically about gender more broadly (Pruden & Abad, 2013). Trepanier-Street, Romatowski, and McNair (1990) found that elementary students who read gender atypical stories, or stories in which characters engaged in activities or careers that are counterstereotypical, were more likely to categorize such activities as being appropriate for both boys and girls. Scott and Feldman-Summers (1979) had similar findings with upper elementary students. A more recent study conducted by Karnoil and Gal-Disegni (2009) discovered that first-grade students who read "gender fair" basal readers during small group reading instruction were more likely to rate activities as acceptable for both boys and girls than those who read traditional, gender stereotyped basal readers. In addition, Nhundu (2007) found that 4th-7th grade girls in Zimbabwe were more likely to express interest in counterstereotypical career paths after exposure to biographies about women in those careers. Chick (2002) argues that picture books featuring strong female characters have the potential to encourage a more equitable view of gender roles in students, while Woyshner (2002) describes the value of teaching visual literacy skills to help students challenge stereotypes. This critical examination of

gender through literacy is vital in even the earliest grades (Levy, 2016) and supports not only citizenship skills, but also literacy skills, content knowledge, and student motivation to learn (Guthrie et. al, 2007).

The Importance of Addressing Gender Injustices in Elementary Classrooms

Some teachers find raising issues of gender inequity controversial and even intimidating; however, their inclusion in classrooms is essential (Butler-Wall, Cosier, & Harper, 2016). Discussing controversial issues with young students is not only possible, it is vital to their development as active and engaged citizens (Shear, Tschida, Bellows, Saylor, & Buchanan, 2017). Including issues of equity may be more necessary than ever. Unpacking and addressing human rights with young children has become increasingly important in today's divisive and often contentious political climate, as this practice can develop increased awareness of and respect for the rights of all (Todres, 2018).

Issues of injustice, such as gender inequity, may be especially powerful. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argue that a key component of educating students as citizens involves "explicit attention to matters of injustice and to the importance of pursuing social justice" (p. 242). The authors explain that a focus on thinking critically about social issues and inequity is essential to impactful civic education, as are opportunities to analyze power structures and become more deeply aware of oppression (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004). Research indicates that discussions about injustice also improve students' civic knowledge, moral reasoning, and feelings of civic competence (Schuitema, Radstake, Van de Pol, & Veugelers, 2018).

Such education is beneficial to even the youngest students. Due to elementary students' natural curiosity and sense of fairness, addressing issues of injustice allows for meaningful learning experiences for young children (Halvorsen, Santiago, Castro, & Whitford, 2018; Paley, 1992). Thus, if literacy and social studies education have the potential to guide students to think critically about gender injustice, practice-based methods for doing so become vital.

While studies demonstrate the importance of providing civic education about gender equity with young students, more research is needed to determine how to challenge traditional, limiting views regarding women's societal roles and rights, both in history and today. This study intertwines research regarding the use of social studies and literacy education to provide easily accessible tools for teachers seeking to promote gender equity.

Method

Participants in this study engaged in a three-week, twice weekly curriculum, delivered virtually, focused on challenging historical and modern gender stereotypes. Within this curriculum, elementary-aged students spent three sessions focusing on women's history and gender-based discrimination over a two-week period. Pre- and post-interviews and classroom discussions were used to answer the research questions:

1. How do students perceive women's roles and contributions before and after participation in a six-lesson literacy-based intervention?
2. How do students perceive gender inequity before and after participation in a six-lesson literacy-based intervention?

Site Selection and Participants

While originally intended to take place in a classroom setting, this study was conducted over Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, participants joined from various locations in the United States and Canada. It is important to note that the intervention was modified to fit the online environment. Thus, implementing the unit in a classroom setting may afford both advantages and challenges that were not present in this study. These participants included 18 second- and third-grade students whose parents responded to a recruitment flyer. This flyer was posted on social media pages dedicated to educational resources for families. Participants ranged in age from six to nine years old and had varying levels of experiences with online learning. As shown in Table 1, participants were relatively diverse in terms of gender and race. Prior to the study, IRB approval was sought and approved in order to ensure safe and positive experiences for the participants involved in the study. In accordance with IRB, each parent/guardian who expressed interest received a consent form that described the intervention, including the lesson topics, texts, and interview procedure. Any child whose parents/guardians signed and returned the consent form were included in the study.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Sex	n	Race	n
Female	9	American Indian/Alaskan Native	1
Male	7	Asian	2
Did not report	2	Hispanic or Latinx	1
		Multiracial	1
		White	8
		Did not report	5

The Intervention

The intervention took place over three 30-minute class sessions across a two-week period. To best allow each participant the chance to engage in the activities, the students were divided into three small groups to participate in these sessions. Below, I briefly describe each lesson in further detail.

Interactive Read-aloud: Miss Mary Reporting

The intervention began with an interactive read-aloud, or a read-aloud that incorporates purposeful interaction between teachers and students (Barrentine, 1996), of *Miss Mary Reporting: The True Story of Sportswriter Mary Garber* (Macy, 2016). Interactive read-alouds are valuable tools for introducing new content as they provide visual and auditory information, increase reading comprehension and subject area knowledge, and allow teachers to identify and correct misperceptions throughout the text (Alleman & Brophy, 2010; Strachan, 2015; Wiseman, 2011). This text describes the life of Garber, who broke barriers by becoming a female sports reporter in the 1940s. The text uses colorful images and quotes from those who knew Garber to provide the story of her childhood, the discrimination she faced as a woman in a male-dominated field, and her eventual advocacy for civil rights. Prior to introducing the text, I provided the focus question: Did men and women receive equal treatment in the past? The students used hand signals to provide their initial thoughts, giving a thumbs up if they felt that men and women had been treated the same in the past and a thumbs down if they believed that men and women were treated differently.

During the text, I stopped at four strategic points to ask students what they noticed and how the text made them feel. Each stopping point highlighted the sexism Garber faced at different points in her life. Table 2 lists the page numbers and accompanying text excerpts of these stopping points. I also paused as needed to answer questions and provide historical context.

Table 2

Interactive read-aloud stopping points

Stopping Point	Text Excerpt
p. 5	Mrs. Garber (Mary Garber's mother) believed that a girl ought to behave like a girl.
p. 9	[Despite wanting to write about sports, Mary was hired as a society reporter]. Society reporters wrote parties and other social events. They had to describe the glamorous clothing people wore. This was not Mary's cup of tea at all.
p. 21	Even after she was allowed in [the press box], Mary had to wear the official football writer's press badge, which proclaimed, "Press Box. Women and Children Not Admitted.
p. 23	Locker rooms posed another problem. After the game, male reporters headed into the teams' locker rooms to interview players while they were changing into their street clothes, but Mary had to wait outside. By the time the players came out to talk to her, the male reporters had rushed back to write their stories. The players also wanted to go home, making it hard for Mary to get quotes. A few skipped out on her all together.
p. 25	Sometimes being a female sports reporter brought unusual requests. For example, a high school basketball coach once asked Mary to sew up a tear in a young man's uniform.

At the end of the read-aloud, I asked students to reflect individually on the focus question. Specifically, I asked them to consider how their thinking about whether men and

women have been treated equally in the past has (or has not) changed. Students were then asked to draw a conclusion and use hand signals to answer the focus question once more.

Adding a Modern Perspective

In the following lesson, I asked the students to reflect on the interactive read-aloud text (Macy, 2016), discussing what parts of the text stood out to them, how the text made them feel, and what conclusions they had drawn. I then presented the students with a new focus question: Do men and women receive equal treatment today? Again, students signaled their initial answer to this question.

To explore this question, the students read the transcripts of a video from the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2020) titled *On Equal Pay Day, Celebrate Women Who Know Their Worth*. Prior to reading, I defined "gender pay gap" as a term to describe women being paid less than men because of gender bias (Learning for Justice, n.d.) and explained that Equal Pay Day was developed to highlight the differences in how men and women are paid (Thompson, 2018). The video, like *Miss Mary Reporting* (Macy, 2016), is centered largely on women in sports. Specifically, this video describes the differences in pay between men and women's sports teams and the need for equal compensation. I paired these two texts because *Miss Mary Reporting* (Macy, 2016) is focused wholly on discrimination in the past while this video provides an argument for continued, present-day inequity, specifically ongoing wage discrimination (Graf, Brown, & Patten, 2018). After reading the transcripts, and subsequently viewing the video, I again asked students what they noticed and how the video made them feel. In addition, we discussed what connections they saw between *Miss Mary Reporting: The True Story of Sportswriter Mary Garber* (Macy, 2016) and *On Equal Pay Day, Celebrate Women Who Know Their Worth* (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020). To conclude, the students once again answered the focus question.

Interactive Read-aloud: My Name is Not Isabella

Finally, the students participated in an interactive read-aloud of *My Name is Not Isabella* (Fosberry, 2008), a fictional story in which a young girl dreams about being several powerful historical women such as Rosa Parks and Marie Curie. This text was chosen to begin to illuminate the depth and breadth of women's historical contributions. For this read-aloud, I stopped after the introduction of each historical figure in order to provide context and elicit prior

knowledge. At the end of the text, I asked each student to share something they noticed during the book, something that surprised them, and how the book made them feel.

Data Sources

Data included student interviews and classroom discussion. In all, data included a total of 17 hours of recordings and over 100 pages of transcription.

Student Interviews

Prior to beginning the course, students participated in individual interviews via Zoom. Each interview lasted no more than 25 minutes. As part of the interview, students answered the following questions:

1. Who are some people you think are important in the world?
2. What important things do women do in the world?
3. What important things do men do in the world?
4. Do you think that men and women can do the same things?
 1. Today
 2. In the past
5. Do you think that men and women are treated the same way?
 1. Today
 2. In the past

After completion of the intervention, students were asked the same questions during post-interviews. The first three questions were intended to target students thinking about men and women's roles and contributions, while the last two questions were intended to elicit students' perceptions of gender equity. The interviews sought to examine student thinking both before and after the implementation of the unit in order to assess possible shifts in perception. All interview data were recorded and transcribed.

Classroom Observation

Throughout the intervention, the students were asked to answer focus questions. These questions were asked both before and after lesson activities in order to assess any shifts in student thinking. As described above, the two focus questions were:

1. Did men and women receive equal treatment in the past?
2. Do men and women receive equal treatment today?

In addition to the students' answers to the focus questions, all student discussions were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using a modification of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interpretivist process. First, I read the pre-interview transcripts, noting the patterns in responses and creating a list of provisional, descriptive codes. After rereading to refine the provisional codes into patterns codes, I developed a matrix that listed each code. Next, I read the transcripts a third time to add responses from the interviews onto the matrix. This process was repeated with the classroom discussion and post-interview transcripts. I then compared pre-interview, classroom discussion, and post-interview findings within the matrix, assessing where shifts in perceptions did and did not occur. In addition, the number of times students identified men or women as having made important contributions were tallied. I then calculated the percentage of student answers naming men and compared this number to the percentage of student answers naming women.

Findings

Analysis of the pre- and post-interviews, supported by classroom discussion data, indicated that students began to complicate their preconceptions regarding women's societal roles and gender equity. While their pre-interview answers tended show a limited view of women's historical roles, their post-interview answers demonstrated a new awareness of women's contributions. In addition, students tended to articulate new understandings about modern-day discrimination and inequity faced by women. Here, I examine each finding in more detail.

Student Perceptions of Women's Active Roles in History

Below I discuss the findings to Research Question 1: How do students' perceive women's roles and contributions before and after participation in a literacy-based intervention?

After engaging in the intervention, students were more likely to identify women's historical contributions as important and active than they were in the pre-interviews. During the pre-interviews, when asked who was important in history and in modern society the majority of students named male historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, and Martin Luther King Jr. The students identified only two historical women, Ruby Bridges and Viola Desmond. While some students did identify their female family members as being important, in

total only 30% of the student answers included women in any way. Interestingly, only female students provided answers that identified women.

In post-interviews, however, both male and female students were far more likely to identify women as important figures. Although student answers continued to include several male figures, mostly presidents, they also named several women from the read-aloud. These historical figures include Sally Ride, Rosa Parks, and Annie Oakley. Each of these women were described in the text *My Name is Not Isabella* (Fosberry, 2008), meaning that the students had recently learned about their historical contributions and may have been excited to share their new knowledge. In addition, some students introduced women who were not discussed as a class such as Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In all, 56% of those identified as making important contributions in post-interviews were women. Of the students to name women in their answers, 57% were girls and 43% were boys.

Students also shifted their descriptions of women's roles from pre- to post-interviews. After participating in the intervention students were far more likely to challenge stereotypical views of women's roles and contributions. Specifically, students were more likely to consider women's activism and to make explicit references to gender equity. When asked about women's contributions to society during the pre-interviews, the majority of student's either chose not to answer or focused on women as wives and mothers. Several students referenced cleaning, cooking, and caretaking. One student, Grace, stated, "I don't know. The only thing I could think of is only men. Because they work. And women clean," while Dani added, "women be nice to people." Only two children mentioned women having careers, with Nick positing, "Maybe work at jobs and help people out?"

In post-interviews, however, fewer student answers were limited to women's caretaking roles. Instead, they most often described women as activists and were far more likely to reference women's rights. This was true of all students, with little gendered difference between answers. Addison proclaimed that women, "stand up for what's right," while Kayla described women as being "hard-working and sturdy people [who] don't give up easily." Elaborating on this theme, James explained that women "helped other people and other men to recognize that women should have the rights, that they could do the same things as them." These quotes may demonstrate a new awareness of women's contributions beyond caregiving or household roles.

In addition, analysis of post-interview data indicates that students were more likely to specifically connect women's contributions to gender equity in the post-interviews. The students voiced this connection most often when asked what contributions men and women make to the world. Many students specifically pointed out that men and women are equally capable with statements such as, "I think that [men and women] can *both* do the important things" and, "Men can do policeman stuff and be governors...and women can do the same things!" Evan especially highlighted this theme by stating, "[Women] can do everything that men do, and [men and women] both help women get equal rights." These answers indicate that students may be further considering gender equity more deeply after engaging with lessons about women's active roles in society and gender-based discrimination. In addition to recognizing women's important and complex roles in society, the students purposefully acknowledged their potential as equal to that of men. This may be due to a new recognition of the ways women have faced discrimination, as students seemed to challenge ideas of inequity by stressing that women have equal potential and deserve equal rights.

Interestingly, one student indicated an awareness of women's lack of representation in history in her post-interview. When asked to name an important historical figure, Leanna thought for a moment before reflecting, "It's hard to think of a woman, because mostly we know males." Although the question did not ask the participant to specifically name a woman, she demonstrated a desire to discuss women's history but also acknowledged a need for more teaching on this subject.

Student Perceptions of Historical and Modern Inequity

Here I describe findings for Research Question 2: How do students' perceive gender inequity before and after participation in a literacy-based intervention? Overall, students' post-interviews show an increased awareness of gender inequity. The students were more likely to acknowledge and provide nuanced explanations of historical and modern inequity after engaging in texts and discussions that highlighted examples of injustice in the past and present. Using knowledge gained from these opportunities to think critically about discrimination, students were able to demonstrate new understandings about gender discrimination.

Prior to taking part in the intervention, students tended to describe a narrative of progress (Santiago, 2019) in which society has reached gender equality. While most students acknowledged that men and women had not always had equal rights, few could provide

examples of how men and women were treated differently. In addition, most students expressed a belief that while men and women had been treated differently in the past, they are now treated with complete equality. When asked if men and women have been treated equally over time, Jordan explained, “[Men and women] used to get treated differently but now they get treated the same.” Kayla expounded on the topic of inequity, saying, “This is something that doesn't happen now. Like, it's still not happening anymore.” Many students answered with emphasis, demonstrating a certainty that society now provides men and women with the same rights and privileges. In response to the question of whether men and women are treated the same, Keegan exclaimed, “Well not back then but yeah, right now. Gosh!” Interestingly, Alex expanded their thoughts to encompass both gender and race, stating, “Yes. No matter what color they are. They always get treated the same way.”

Of those who did recognize unequal treatment in modern society, most did not attribute inequity specifically to gender. When asked for examples of how men and women might be treated differently, students either indicated that they did not know or attributed unequal treatment to outside factors. For example, Michael stated that “some people are mean, and some people are nice. So, people don't always get treated the same way.”

Evidence that students' perceptions about women's rights shifted was present both during and after participation in the intervention. This was especially apparent in their responses to the focus questions. When asked if men and women were treated equally in the past, most students initially demonstrated some awareness of historical discrimination, with 68% of the students answering that women had been treated differently. However, only 29% of students believed that inequity continues to exist. After completing the intervention, students were far more likely to acknowledge both past and present inequity with 94% of students asserting that men and women had unequal rights in the past and 89% of students indicating that men and women continue to be treated differently today. Again, this theme was consistent across both male and female participants. Dani explained the changes in her thinking by saying, “Women sometimes get treated badly, and men get treated better because some jobs men usually get to do but girls want to do it too! And you should always let people get a chance to do it, not just boys. Girls should get to do it too.” Bradley stated, “I changed my mind because girls and boys aren't being given the same money.” In addition, the students began to express emotional reactions to their new awareness. Students described feeling sad, mad, and even “creepy” about the ways women

continue to be treated differently than men. Keegan expressed frustration, proclaiming, “The only other thing I’m interested in is how and why did people start saying stereotypes in the first place! I believe they knew it was wrong, but they just kept on doing it...they are wrong, it’s making women more sad.” Such answers indicate that an increased awareness of gender-based discrimination may have triggered students natural sense of fairness (Paley, 1992) and caused them to begin questioning the roots of gender-based injustice. Arguably, these empathetic reactions provide a foundation for social action.

Students continued to demonstrate increased awareness of gender inequity in their post-interviews, which took place two weeks after the intervention activity. Students demonstrated this increased awareness in two ways. First, students provided more complete examples of inequity. In the pre-interviews, most students did not provide examples at all, either stating that men and women had been treated the same or that they did not know how men and women were treated differently. In post-interviews, however, students were able to illustrate more complex thinking about unequal treatment, both historical and modern. Answers such as “[women] couldn't have certain jobs and they have to stay with their kids” and “[women] don't get paid the same as men for doing the same job” were common. Jordan expanded on these themes, proclaiming, “Women didn't get to be in what men did. They didn't get to vote, they didn't get to be astronauts, and everything else. Not even sportswriters...They also got paid less for working. And the boys got all the credits for their discoveries.” These answers demonstrated an important, increased awareness of the existence of gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Interestingly, while most post-interview answers referenced the specific examples of job discrimination and unequal pay discussed in class, students also included examples of discrimination that were not addressed within the intervention, mostly in relation to voting rights or attire, such as “the girls had to wear dresses in the past and boys had to wear pants.”

In addition to providing more complete descriptions of gender-based inequity, students were far more likely to challenge the narrative of progress after completing the intervention. While most students had previously stated that discrimination took place only in the past, their post-interview answers demonstrated an increased awareness of present day inequity. Students were far more likely to state that unequal treatment still exists. When asked if men and women get treated the same today, answers such as, “I think that actually, they don't. Men get treated better than women” and, “Better than before but still not great...boys sometimes still get paid

more” were prevalent. Several students provided further detail, which can be seen in the examples below:

Yes, some people believe that men can do better than women. And also for another example, let's say the two men and women were working together. They were doing the same jobs and they still didn't even get paid equally. The men got paid \$5, no, he got paid \$10 more than the woman. That's what happens today. Men get paid better than women.
- Lillian, age 8

In the past, women didn't have rights...Now they have some rights but sometimes people still think that they shouldn't have rights and treat them differently. – Grace, age 8

Although answers were centered on gender, the primary focus on the intervention, one student, Parker, also demonstrated a new awareness of the intersectionality of inequity, positing, “I think no, to past and present. Well, some anyways for present. Because if it's like a white woman and a Black man then they would, I think, they would get treated differently.” The concept of intersectionality was not addressed in pre-interviews, but appeared to be a new consideration after engagement in the intervention.

Discussion

Overall, this study demonstrates the potential of integrated social studies and literacy practices to help young students think critically about the presence and persistence of gender-based inequity. In today’s society, addressing issues of oppression and promoting human rights for all is a necessary component of civic education (Todres, 2018). To this end, challenging traditional, stereotypical notions of societal roles and supporting an increased awareness of inequity is vital (Raday, 2012). By engaging in critical literacy practices intended to help students analyze gender roles and discrimination, it appears that students were able to become better aware of the presence of injustices and thus more prepared to act as informed democratic citizens (NCSS, 2013).

Situating the Findings in the Literature

This study both supports and builds on previous research regarding the representation of women in social studies materials, the assumption of social progress, and the use of critical literacy instruction to challenge gender-based stereotypes in elementary students. In addition, this study adds to our understanding of how literacy and social studies integration can be used to

promote civic education by challenging stereotypes about the nature of women's contributions and women's rights.

This study supports the conclusions of my previous study in which students became more likely to describe women's active historical roles after participation in a series of interactive read-alouds (Whitford, in press). In much the same way, students expressed a more complex view of women's roles and contributions after engaging in the literacy-based intervention. This study builds on these previous findings by demonstrating that literacy activities can also challenge traditional thinking about women's rights and about the contributions of women in today's society. This study also helped confirm previous findings demonstrating that engaging with counterstereotypical imagery through literacy can challenge gender stereotypes in young students (Karnoil & Gal-Disegni, 2009; Nhundu, 2007; Pruden & Abad, 2013; Scott & Feldman-Summers, 1979; Trepanier-Street, Romatowski, & McNair, 1990). Each text in the intervention showed women in trailblazing roles that could be described as stereotypically masculine. Although students initially tended to describe traditional views of women's roles, they began considering women's contributions in careers and towards equity after participating in the intervention. Interestingly, while most of the students discussed women who were included in the texts, some referenced women not introduced in class. This finding suggests that amplifying women's experiences through literacy and social studies may help students begin to make connections to other significant women in history that they may have learned about in other social studies classes.

This study also builds on literature regarding the narrative of progress (Santiago, 2019). As the research illustrates, students often believe that society continuously improves, leaving discrimination and oppression in the past in favor of a happy ending (Cronon, 1992; Everingham, Stevenson, & Warner-Smith, 2007; Santiago, 2019). Findings confirmed this research, with students nearly universally acknowledging only past inequity in their pre-interview. This study builds on this literature, however, by demonstrating that this false belief can be challenged through literacy and social studies instruction. After engaging with texts that connected past with present inequity, students were far more likely to complicate the idea that sexism is a historical problem. In addition, students were more able to provide examples and specific descriptions of both past and gender discrimination. This deeper awareness of discrimination begets important opportunities to think critically about social systems and sets a foundation for challenging

injustice (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Schuitema et al., 2018). Arguably, understanding that inequity continues today is a vital component of civic education, as it is difficult for students to fight against problems that they do not realize exist.

It is important to note that this intervention serves as a starting point for discussing women's history and rights. While students were better able to acknowledge and give specific examples of inequity after completing the intervention, most students did not demonstrate an understanding of systemic sexism or how society upholds inequity and tended to discuss discrimination in concrete, rather than abstract, terms. When providing examples of discrimination, the students often used the pronoun "they" to describe the offenders, as though inequity is caused by groups of bad people rather than being deeply imbedded in society. Further instruction is needed for students to understand the interplay of systemic oppression, power, and privilege that allows inequity to persist at a societal level. In addition, while some students began to naturally grapple with the relationship between gender and race, most students did not transfer their newly developed awareness about inequity to issues of race. It is clear that explicit instruction on intersectionality is necessary moving forward. While this could be implemented in many ways, similar critical literacy activities may be useful moving forward. In the same way this intervention paired texts from different time periods to highlight discrimination over time, teachers may pair texts that describe the experiences of women of different racial backgrounds during similar time periods to help students analyze how race and gender impact access to power and privilege.

Extension Activities: Moving Forward

The activities described in this article are intended to serve as a starting point in teaching about gender equity, meaning that teachers may wish to continue engaging students in texts that empower women and highlight women's ongoing fight for equity. Toward this goal, the NCSS Notable Trade Books for Young People lists (NCSS, 2020) provide valuable resources. Within NCSS's lists of justice-themed trade books are several texts that could be used for further investigation. Appendix A provides a list of texts featured on the NCSS Notable Trade Books lists that highlight diverse groups of women whose activism, ingenuity, and persistence impacted the world.

In addition, the intervention is applicable to issues beyond gender. Teachers may be interested in using the format of this intervention to explore topics such as race, gender identity,

socioeconomic status, or sexuality. Teachers can do this by pairing texts that delve into these issues in historical and contemporary times, then using the same discussion methods described in this article. For example, teachers may connect the issues of race in the past and present by pairing a book about the Civil Rights movement such *Only Passing Through: The Story of Sojourner Truth* (Rockwell, 2002) with a text about contemporary racism such as *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice* (Celano, Collins, & Hazzard, 2018). By connecting past and present oppression, teachers can help students better understand how racism persists in modern society and begin to think critically about how they can take action against racial violence and discrimination. Utilizing the lesson formats described above may therefore provide teachers tools to help students begin to understand and work for the rights of all individuals, which are core responsibilities of democratic citizens (NCSS, 2013; Ruitenburg, 2015).

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

This study has four significant limitations. First, the study does not examine any long-term effects of participating in the intervention. The students spent a total of three class sessions engaging in the intervention, and their post interviews took place only two weeks later. A longer term study is needed to understand if students' new understandings will last over time. In addition, it is possible that a longer intervention may provide opportunities for students to engage more deeply with the content. With a longer intervention period, future researchers may also better investigate how students can best understand inequity as systemic and deeply rooted in society. Second, the study utilizes a small sample size that includes only students whose parents purposefully sought an opportunity for their children to learn about women's history and rights. This may denote an openness to learning about gender equity that supported the students' learning. Therefore, these findings cannot be generalized to other settings. Future studies may include larger groups of students and/or traditional classroom settings to investigate if similar findings occur in other educational settings. Third, this study used an online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the lessons emphasized interaction, future in-person studies may better implement active, hands-on, collaborative approaches to the intervention. Finally, and most importantly, while students were given opportunities to make connections between gender and race, the intervention did not explicitly delve into intersectionality to the extent that this issue deserves. Future studies should build on this intervention to prioritize intersectionality. By

using critical literacy practices such as interactive read-alouds and text-pairing, teachers can engage students in analyzing how women's experiences and rights have differed based on race in history and in contemporary society. Such activities would allow researchers to examine how elementary students understand the complexities of identity and how identities intersect to create various degrees of access to privilege and power.

Conclusion

If students are to fight the systems of sexism, discrimination, and oppression that continue to exist in the United States today, they must be aware of their existence. They must be given the tools to see beyond traditional, limiting views of women and to understand that equal rights continue to be a worthwhile goal. In this article, I described an intervention aimed at complicating young children's stereotypical views of women's contributions and rights. The goal of this intervention was to help students understand both the many ways women continue to shape society and the persistence of gender-based inequity. Through participation in this intervention, students appeared to become more aware of women's active, multi-dimensional roles in society. They also showed an increased understanding of the ways inequity exists in contemporary times. In the United States' increasingly complex and contentious society, this study seeks to provide students a foundation on which they can build their own actions toward equity. This intervention has the potential to provide not only a promising introduction to these topics but also a format that can be used to address the many types of discrimination faced today. By including students as citizens in the battle against this discrimination, we engage them in actualizing the democratic value of equality that is expressed in the foundational documents of the United States.

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Dr. Whitford would like to gratefully acknowledge funding from Michigan State University's College of Education.

Appendix A

Suggested NCSS Texts for Extension Activities

Title and Author	Description
<p><i>Brazen: Rebel Ladies Who Rocked the World</i> by Pénélope Bagieu</p>	<p>From dancer Josephine Baker, who fought for the French resistance, to Syrian activist aristocrat Naziq Al-Abid, this engaging graphic novel features a range of female historical figures who have shaped global society. Includes 30 More Rebel Ladies Who Rocked The World.</p>
<p><i>History vs Women: The Defiant Lives that They Don't Want You to Know</i> by Anita Sarkeesian and Ebony Adams</p>	<p>A thoughtful collection of women's biographies, spanning centuries and the globe. Includes "Ruthless Villains" to "recognize that women are fully human and are ... capable of the heights of heroism ... or the depths of wickedness."</p>
<p><i>Shaking Things Up: 14 Young Women Who Changed the World</i> by Susan Hood</p>	<p>Readers are introduced to 14 persistent young women who accomplished great things in smart, daring, caring, or defiant ways. Poems and illustrations are as unique as the young women they portray.</p>
<p><i>What Would She Do?: 25 True Stories of Trailblazing Rebel Women</i> by Kay Woodward.</p>	<p>What can we learn from incredible women throughout history? This informational biography not only shares the stories of 25 trailblazing women, such as Marie Curie, Malala Yousafzai, and Frida Kahlo, but also</p>

helps young readers think, "What would she do?"

Women Who Dared: 52 Stories of Fearless Daredevils, Adventurers, and Rebels by Linda Skeers. Illustrated by Livi Gosling.

Women: adventurers, daredevils, and rebels! This new compilation of brief biographies features women throughout history (some are known and some not) who have risked their lives for adventure.
