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Teaching and Integrating Women's Studies into the Classroom: Perspectives of Elementary Teachers

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Illinois Council of Social Studies

Teaching and Integrating Women's Studies into the Classroom: Perspectives of Elementary Teachers

Cover Page Footnote

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Lucey: Women's Studies in the Classroom

Teaching and Integrating Women's Studies into the Classroom:
Perspectives of Elementary Teachers

This paper describes the combined results of two surveys that interpreted elementary teachers' perspectives of women's studies, art education, and use of primary sources in their classrooms. The respondents completed the surveys as part of their registration for either of two workshops. The professional development experiences provided instruction about these areas and facilitated their development of classroom lessons.

While the purpose of social studies learning arguably relates to the development of citizens for participation in (democratic) society, the narratives classrooms present offer subtle messages about existent power structures and the contexts for their biases. In the spring of 2020, the NCSS Board of Directors issued a position statement that advocated for coverage of women in social studies curricula. Among other expectations, this document called for the reframing of perspectives of women in curricula and challenging the dominant misogynistic narrative.

This paper contributes to the body of literature that describes the elementary classroom conditions that influence attitudes of their students. The survey findings presented herein inform the community about teacher perceptions of content, instruction, and resources. Yet they also inform about the need for greater depth of research into women's studies and the orientation children's learning about societal power dynamics and their places within them.

Literature

Women's Studies

In the spring of 2020, during the onset of the current pandemic, historian Joanne Freeman initiated a series of weekly podcasts called "History Matters (and so Does Coffee)". Her August 13, 2020 episode - *Attack of the Amazon Women: Fears of Women and Political Power, 1789 Edition* - described the struggles for power during and after the American Revolution. At issue was the assumption of power by men after the calls for women to support the fight for rights during the revolution. This episode (along with the June 4, 2020 episode, "*Nobody but a Regular Woman*": *Women and Resistance*)

illuminates an aspects of American history largely untold in the elementary classroom. Young children receive a selective account of history designed to indoctrinate them into a patriarchal-rooted system of power.

For some time, the neglect of the social and political accomplishments of women has been commonplace in social education and the social studies education communities. As Crocco (2018a) observed, "Rather than challenging male dominance and male-tilted curriculum, women sometimes collude in or at least accept their absence from the social studies curriculum as well as power and leadership in society." (p.10).

This system would appear to result from a purposeful disconnect between school teachings and holistic patterns of knowledge. Nearly 20 years ago, Woysner (2002) noted that

National and state curriculum frameworks, textbooks, and supplementary teaching materials privilege political history; thus, women's history must be wedged into this template. ...thus, women's history overwhelmingly emphasized in the school curriculum is the suffrage movement, since it has to do with women's fight for enfranchisement and formal political participation. ...Finally, this narrow understanding of politics and what it means to be political exists in empirical research as it shapes the questions that researchers ask about the effects and outcomes of inclusive curricula and, subsequently, limits possible findings. (p. 362).

The importance of young children learning about women's social engagement and accomplishments would be difficult to understate. Women's studies represent an essential curricular focus to provide both young girls and boys the acceptability and desirability of women's "involvement in voluntary organizations, the abolition and antilynching movements, varied labor movements, the worldwide peace movement, and other reform movements; and about progress in advancing international human rights agreements." (Hahn et al., 2007, p. 336). In brief, offering young girls broad visions of acceptable social roles to guide their development and teaching young boys the

appropriateness of encouraging these pursuits. As Schmeichel (2015) put it “...the purpose of promoting attention to women in curriculum is not simply to make sure women are included by to drag gender issues, experiences, and beliefs into broader social studies conversations about life in the present and the past.” (p. 14).

More than inadequate coverage of women exists in social studies learning. The substance of the matter represents a systematic problem of thinking well entrenched into the social psyche of women as second-class elements of a patriarchal society. Indeed, Schmiechel’s (2015) findings of shallow lesson plan content, emphasizing women heroes or role models, illustrate the resistance of the social educators to creating learning opportunities that challenge this dominant male narrative. Few of her analyzed lessons critically examined the patriarchal and sexist nature of social structures or sought solutions to the conditions that oppressed.

Crocco (2018) pointed out that the association of schooling with citizenship prompts a distinction between school and academic history. She described this distinction as “purposeful” (p. 338) and influenced by (1) the emphasis on standards and testing and (2) changing demographics, and (3) transition to federal control. This deliberate selectivity and manipulation of historical facts to accomplish a patriotic (patriarchal) purpose by limiting the information with which citizens can realize their rights to affect system challenges. Crocco (2018a) noted graduate students’ views of the term “feminism” as being emasculating and the belief in the women’s movement as “...made enough progress that women could “have it all.” (p. 8)

Formal social studies curricula tend to exclude or limit coverage of women. For example, Olivo (2012) observed that secondary American Government textbooks tended to limit women portrayals to those fitting accounts of predominate patriarchal narratives. Engebretson’s (2014) review of curricular standards from the National Council for the Social Studies revealed coverage of gender that affirmed the traditional biases. Crocco (2018) noted “The nation’s curriculum reflections a national sense of

self...through the narratives circulated in school, popular culture, and other vehicles that socialize youth to the “origins stories” of their society.” (p. 340).

Bohan (2017) observed that despite the decreased emphasis on social studies in elementary classrooms, recent literature offers ideas for curricular integration of women and gender studies. In addition to the themed issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner* that Bohan cites, one may find two examples for accomplishing such processes. First, Keefer and Bousalis (2015) use structural violence pedagogy to teach about women’s rights and water access. In another example, Whitford (2021) described the successes of using literature to engage students in conversations about historical women who pursued occupations and social roles traditionally held by men.

An emphasis on teaching about women through the pursuit of biographical research potentially decontextualizes women’s experiences from the historical narratives in which they occur, thus marginalizing their importance. Other approaches to teaching about women offer potential to empower learners by informing about the broader social visions that inform women’s stories.

Art for Learning and Expression

The use of art offers potential to both inform about content and provide an opportunity for student expression. For some time, studies have associated the arts with children’s academic, emotional, and social development (Deasey, 2002). Cornett (2003) touted the benefits of using the arts in teaching and learning by relating them to Erickson’s, Piaget’s, Vygotsky’s developmental theories. Shapiro (2006) pointed out that in environments that consider emotional displays unprofessional; art represents a vehicle for personal expression and relieve tension.

The social studies provides opportunities to use art as a vehicle to inform students about social relationships, such as how manipulation of currency served as a tool for social protest. As Max Haiven (2018) explains, “around the turn of the century, suffragettes, often frozen out of the mainstream

debate and discourse on account of their gender and (at that time) radical politics, engraved “Votes for Women” on English currency and passed it back into circulation. (p. 76).

Discipline-based Art Education (DBAE) represents one strategy for integrating the arts into social studies learning. Blending aesthetics, art history, art criticism and art production, DBAE offer students opportunities to engage in the art experience while motivating their creative expression about the learned topics (Reynolds et al., 1991). Scholarship demonstrates successes using DBAE to teach social studies concepts ranging from economics (Laney & Mosely, 1999) to history (Laney, 2007) and has been indicated as being influential in affecting preservice teachers’ views about social justice (Lucey & Laney, 2012; Lucey & Henning, 2021). Through the Library of Congress’s *Teaching with Primary Sources* program, educators have access to many artworks that may contribute to the development of these learning opportunities.

The following research questions guided this study.

R1: How do elementary teachers perceive implantation of women’s studies in their classrooms?

R2: Do elementary teachers agree that school curricula provide enough attention to women’s studies?

R3: Do elementary teachers value the use of art and of primary sources as instructional tools?

Method

This study Interpreted results of a research survey that measured attitudes towards women’s studies. The research administered the survey online as part of the workshop registration process.

Sample

Respondents were predominately-white females who taught grades 4, 5, and 6, and possessing between 9-20 years of service. The pre-workshop surveys yielded 27 responses of which 24 completed all analyzed survey items.

Instrument and Procedure

The online survey was administered as part of the registration for two workshops that prepared teachers in the areas of women's studies, discipline-based art-education, and the Library of Congress's Primary Sources website. The survey contained three sections: enrollee perceptions of women's studies, art education, and teaching with primary sources. Each section contained an open response item and various (women's studies 8; art education, 7; Primary Sources, 7) attitudinal response items. The response items contained a six level Likert-style response scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

The instrument providing the basis data collection was the *Teaching with Primary Sources Survey*, thoroughly described in Lucey (2021). The researcher administered the online survey as part of the registration associated with two professional development workshops. Registrants had the option not to complete the survey if they chose to do so.

Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Descriptive analysis interpreted the central tendencies, dispersions, and normalcies of responses to each item. Inferential analysis tested for the presence of significant differences in responses to one item that concerned the attention to women's studies in elementary schooling.

The survey provided the following three open-response prompts, one concerning women's studies, another concerning art education, and the other concerning teaching with primary sources.

What are your thoughts about engaging your students in women's studies in your classroom?

What curriculum and instruction approaches would you employ? What role-models would you feature?

What are your thoughts about using art as a tool for your students' social studies learning? What art-based curriculum and instruction approaches would you employ? What strategies do you favor?

What are your thoughts about using primary sources for social studies teaching? What primary sources do you employ? How do you select them?

The researcher used open coding to determine the presence of any themes and then repeated the process to confirm findings. He then grouped cases into these themes and determined frequencies of their appearances.

Results

The presentation of results involves three sections. Each section answers one of the study research questions. The first section describes perceptions of women's studies implementation. The second section concerns perceptions of teaching women's studies. The last section concerns art education and teaching with primary sources.

Implementation of Women's Studies

Participants responded to a survey item that concerned whether women's studies receive an appropriate amount of focus in elementary classrooms. On average, respondents disagreed with the statement. Table 1 contains the statistics associated with this item.

Table 1 (n = 24)

Perception of Women's Studies Coverage in K-8 Social Studies Education.

Item	μ	SD	Skew
2. I believe that women's studies receive the proper amount of attention in K-8 social studies education.	1.83	0.64	0.14

Patterns of Difference

The researcher conducted one-factor analyses of variance (ANOVA) to determine the presence of significant differences among the respondents, based on several characteristics. The analysis employed Type II sum of the squares to compensate for the unequal numbers within each category. The

analysis found no significant differences. All respondents perceived women's studies as a relevant part of K-8 social studies learning.

Table 2

Results of One-Factor ANOVA analysis based on presented traits

	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Gender	2.551	.125
Teaching Experience	2.416	.097
Preparations in Women's Studies	0.613	.615
Women's Studies in Elementary Education	0.160	.853
Women's Studies, Culturally Responsive Teaching	0.712	.594

R2: Do elementary teachers agree that school curricula provide enough attention to women's studies?

Although interested in its teaching and aware of its importance to both young girls and boys, respondents indicated that their curricula did not provide girls with sufficient role models or encourage boys in healthy social relationships with girls. They expressed mixed views about whether literacy emphasis to social studies supported or hindered women's studies. Related statistics are provided in

Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics associated with Women's Studies Items ($n = 24$)

Item	μ	SD	Skew
3. I believe that a literacy emphasis on social studies teaching brings the proper attention to women's studies.	3.20	1.41	0.30
4. I feel comfortable in my knowledge of women's studies to teach content in my classroom.	2.96	1.16	0.63
5. I believe the women role models presented in K-8 social studies curricula properly depict women's contributions to society.	2.79	1.10	0.45
6. I believe I have the knowledge to find resources that increase my knowledge relating to women's studies.	3.77	1.36	(0.52)

7. I believe that women's studies would be beneficial to both boys and girls in my classroom.	5.50	1.06	3.55
8. I believe that my curriculum provides girls in my classroom a sufficient variety of women role models to develop healthy social relationships and aspirations.	2.75	1.15	0.35
9. I believe that my school curriculum provides the boys with the social perspectives to encourage healthy relationships with girls and women.	2.67	1.27	0.28

Teaching approaches. The most frequent (eight) approaches to instruction mentioned were the use of reading processes that employ biographies. For example, Rachel mentioned "Biographies of important women in history and their contributions." Susan mentioned facilitating "a women's biography unit during women's history before and thought it gave students a while different viewpoint." Beverly commented a desire for students to "be engaged in the learning of positive role models in history and current events."

Another theme (five mentions) concerned efforts to teach about women through research projects or related activities. For example, Rachel mentioned engaging students in a "research project and living wax museum." George reported an engagement of children in "individual research, as well as guided research." Finally, Yvonne described using "research and non-fiction reports and projects that use technology." Less frequently mentioned strategies consisted of small group and student directed processes (three mentions), production and workshop approaches (two mentions), and active and integrated learning (two mentions).

Role models. Respondents mentioned 26 women who they considered as role models to uphold in the classrooms. The most mentioned role models were Harriet Tubman (six times) and Marie Currie (five times). Respondents also repeatedly mentioned Rosa Parks (four times) and Amelia Earhart (four times) as well as Helen Keller (twice) and Frida Khalo (twice). Twenty role models received individual mention.

Concerning open thoughts about women's studies, the most (six) respondents indicated that women's studies importance lay with teaching about social contributions and aspects of history. Specific historical topics mentioned were women's suffrage and World War II. Discrimination and equality concerns were next most frequent category (three mentions).

R3: To what extent do elementary teachers value the use of art and of primary sources as instructional tools?

Art Education

Respondents agreed that art-based learning was important to social studies learning, that art appreciation was appropriate for elementary children and that art study and creation were appropriate within the same lesson. They were unfamiliar with discipline-based art education, which blended art appreciation and art creation and were neutral about the relationship of an emphasis on literacy and mathematics to appropriate use of art-based learning. The relevant statistics are contained in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics associated with Art Education Items ($n = 24$)

Item	μ	SD	Skew
11. I believe that art-based learning represents an important part of social studies learning.	4.92	1.21	(1.74)
12. I am familiar with the Discipline-based Art Education approach to teaching.	2.04	1.49	2.00
13. I believe that an emphasis on literacy and mathematics allows for an appropriate use of art-based education.	3.33	1.24	0.19
14. I believe that elementary children are too young for art appreciation.	1.29	0.46	0.97
15. I believe that I have sufficient knowledge to research artworks for use in my classroom.	2.83	1.63	0.55
16. Children should study art or create art, but not do both in the same lesson.	1.75	1.03	3.13
17. Art and social studies should be presented as separate subjects.	1.96	1.27	2.04

The most (nine) frequent perspectives of art to teach social studies were expressions of appreciation. Individual mentions of drawing pictures, enrichment, outlet for expression and a lens to other times occurred.

With regard to curricular, ideas, respondents focused on different art forms that they would employ, rather than specific subjects or concepts. They mentioned visual art twice with individual mentioning of photographs, videos, sculptures, and music volunteered.

Concerning instructional strategies, most (6) respondents mentioned the use of activities that involve student creativity or art production. Others mentioned strategies included inquiry, hands-on, music, posters, timelines, and technology. One respondent recognized the importance of art being more than a production component, stating that art should be “not just crafts.”

Primary Sources

Respondents considered primary sources important to social studies teaching and that recognized the importance of the chosen primary sources in communicating lesson objectives. Yet they expressed less agreement in terms of their knowledge and familiarity with primary sources for social studies. The statistics are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics associated with Teaching with Primary Sources Items ($n = 24$)

Item	μ	SD	Skew
20. Primary sources represent important tools for social studies teaching.	5.17	1.01	(1.47)
21. A literary emphasis in social studies discourages the teaching of social themes relevant to primary sources.	2.38	1.05	0.60
22. I know how to locate primary sources for use in social studies lessons.	3.46	1.28	0.10
23. I am familiar with various types of primary sources.	3.33	1.43	0.03
24. I think that the primary sources that we choose for our lessons may affect how our students view the concepts taught.	5.08	1.06	(1.61)

25. I have implemented various types of primary sources in my teaching.	3.75	1.22	(0.10)
26. Social studies lessons that use primary sources should emphasize comprehension of the text employed.	4.54	1.06	(1.07)

The most frequent perspectives of using primary sources social studies celebrated their importance (5). Several respondents mentioned that they did not know or did not use primary sources (3). Finally, individual mentions of drawing pictures, enrichment, outlet for expression and a lens to other times occurred.

Women's Studies, Preparations and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Respondents tended to perceive women's studies as most appropriately taught through a transformative approach to multicultural education. However, they viewed the topic as rarely being a part of their preparations. However, they thought that women's studies should frequently be part of elementary social studies curricula. Table 6 provides the statistics associated with these items.

Table 6

Preparations and Perceived Relationship to Culturally Responsive Teaching

Item	μ	SD	Skew
20. Women's Studies Preparations	2.13	0.85	0.21
21. Women's Studies Elementary Schools	3.96	0.46	(0.18)
22. Women's Studies as CRT	3.08	1.32	(0.17)

Discussion

This study found that respondents agreed there was a need for women's studies in elementary social studies education. They also indicated that curricula were not adequate to support healthy socialization development for young children.

Yet most respondents perceived study of biographies and characters' relevance to "contributions" to history the manner of approaching this area. These responses affirm lamentations in the literature about unidimensional interpretation of history that women support (Crocco, 2018a; Schmeichel, 2015; Wyshner, 2002). Teaching about women's studies represents a deeper and richer process than simply exposing students to historical biographies. It requires an appreciation for the themes of feminism and power to inform how these stories fit within social counter-narratives to challenge the system of patriarchy.

One may explain Crocco's (2018a) concern about patterns of resistance to feminist curricula efforts through James's (2008) findings that elementary teachers largely harbor protectionist attitudes, preferring to insulate their children from controversial matters. Respondents to this survey valued the ideas for increased attention to women's studies; however, unprompted, they failed to volunteer broader conceptions of how women's studies may influence interpretations of the American narrative.

Conclusion

This paper advances knowledge about perspectives of women's studies in elementary classrooms and their applications to teacher education. Women's studies represent an understudied area of teacher education, specifically as it relates to elementary environments. The cultivation of a fully democratic society necessitates a valuing of all voices, past and present, which inform its formation and state. Developing young children who appreciate these perspectives includes the teaching the acceptance of individuals for who they are and the challenging stereotypes that they represent. Whether or how classrooms and their resources portray, present, and value women role models informs both boys and girls about what passes for acceptable communication, treatment, and conduct towards

women. Indeed, the extent to which and the basis that a young citizenry learns to appreciate others informs the nature of the conversations engaged.

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