BEYOND THE NORMS: UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING GENDER IN
ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

By

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**ABSTRACT**

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Using a three-article format, this study investigates the potential of integrating social studies instruction with critical literacy practices to challenge and/or expand elementary students' perception of gender. Given that stereotypical gender norms and roles uphold systemic inequity and injustice, challenging these perceptions in elementary classrooms is essential. This dissertation examines how an online instructional unit in social studies and critical literacy practices shapes student thinking about gender norms and roles and women's history and rights and challenges their own implicit beliefs.

To investigate the impact of integrating social studies and critical literacy practices, I designed and field tested a unit intended to help students think critically about gender. Although this study was originally designed for in-person learning, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I taught this unit online to 18 students from across the United States and Canada. This unit included social studies through a focus on history, civics, and justice, and utilized critical literacy practices such as interactive read-alouds, text-pairing, and restorying. Data sources were student pre- and post- interviews, observations of the lessons, and parent surveys. Each study draws from the implementation of this unit in different ways, which I describe below.

The first article focuses on student perceptions of gender norms and roles both before and after participation in the unit plan. This study examines both students' implicit and explicit beliefs about gender, especially gender stereotypes. After engaging in the unit, students demonstrated shifts in their explicit thinking about gender. Specifically, students

were more able to identify gender stereotypes in both texts and reality, describe consequences of stereotypes, and participate in a student-led activism project intended to challenge stereotypes in others. Students also became more likely to share ways in which they personally challenged gender stereotypes through their interests and/or appearances. Students also demonstrated shifts in their implicit thinking during writing activities by creating more complex characters who were less limited by stereotypical gender norms and roles.

The second article investigates the extent to which the unit impacted student perceptions regarding women's history and women's rights. 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 related to careers and activism, and to recognize contemporary, on-going gender inequity. Overall, students were more able to identify and critically discuss systems of gender-based oppression and inequity.

The third article is practitioner-focused and investigates how teachers can pair critical literacy practices to understand and investigate their own implicit gender stereotypes. Specifically, this article provides a description of a lesson that introduces implicit stereotypes through an interactive read-alouds, the allows students to examine and challenge their own thinking through a restorying activity. Results of this study indicate that pairing critical literacy practices can help students better understand implicit stereotypes, reflect on their own implicit stereotypes, and write narratives that challenge implicit stereotypes. This article describes practical ways for teachers to implement paired critical literacy practices in their own classrooms and offers steps for expanding the described lesson to help students investigate implicit thinking about further marginalized identities.

This dissertation is dedication to Jon, Will, Levi, Mom, and Dad.
Your support means everything.

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# INTRODUCTION

Gender-based oppression is pervasive, wide-spread, and deeply ingrained in society (Colley, 2019; Elliot, 2018; Meyer, 2017; Tostivint, 2019). Children often grow up surrounded by rigid, binary ideas of gender (List, 2018) that influence how they see themselves and others positioned within the world (Bigler & Pahlk, 2019; Martin & Ruble, 2004; Street & Dardis, 2018). These ideas develop early and contribute to systemic inequity, bias, and violence faced by women and any individual who does not conform to traditional gender norms and roles (Colley, 2019; Elliot, 2018; Evans & Davies, 2000; Formby, 2015; Gillander Gadin & Stein, 2019; List, 2018). Further, a system of inequity is upheld by the othering of identities that do not align with a straight, cisgendered, masculine societal ideal (Tostivint, 2019). This othering is heightened toward individuals with intersecting marginalized identities (Jiménez, 2021), meaning that individuals face even greater discrimination based on identities such as race, gender identity, language, or class.

Dismantling these ideas (in schools or other spaces) can create an inclusive and empowering environment for students (Ullman, 2017) and engage students in questioning and challenging an unjust system (Digiovanni & Liston, 2005; hooks, 2004; Lather, 1992; Martin, 2003). However, schools often do the opposite: they tend to reinforce stereotypical perceptions of gender (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Baker-Sperry, 2006; List, 2018), and teachers often have limited access to materials that challenge gender norms and roles (Baker-Sperry, & Grauerholz, 2003; Chick, 2006; Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007; Lay et al., 2019; Narahara, 1998; Sleeter & Grant, 2011; Tsao, 2008). For children to develop inclusive ideas about gender, they need, among other things, (1) teachers willing and capable of engaging in education that disrupts (2) curricular and instructional resources to support teachers in doing this work.

Ideally, social studies is the domain that should provide opportunities for students to explore issues of identities and equity. Social studies instruction is charged with providing justice-focused lessons that help students act as young citizens with an active role in working for the common good (Educating for American Democracy, 2021). A vital part of this practice is an understanding of the many identities that shape the experiences of individuals and groups. The National Council for the Social Studies (2017) speaks to the role of social studies in working toward equity, as they recognize the "ongoing challenges of patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, racism, classism, heteronormativity, and cisgenderism, and put our organization squarely on the record in favor of gender equity" (p.1). Ideally, therefore, social studies creates opportunities to investigate each aspect of identity and also how they intersect to create degrees of access to power and privilege.

However, social studies instruction is marginalized in elementary classrooms, as schools tend to prioritize more heavily tested subjects such as literacy and math (Heafner, 2018). In addition, elementary curricula may actually reinforce gender stereotypes (Hahn et al., 2007; Lay et al., 2019). Textbooks focus largely on the experiences and contributions of cisgender white men, largely ignoring the lives of marginalized individuals and groups (Hahn et al., 2007; Sleeter & Grant, 2011). Even supplemental materials such as social studies magazines often fail to portray women in agentic roles (Lay et al., 2019). Such materials position women as inferior to men and effectively silence the experiences of individual who challenge normative gender (Ellsworth, Stigall, & Walker, 2019). Unfortunately, this severe lack of time and resources can hinder teachers who seek to address issues of gender with their students (Lucey, 2021).

Reform regarding teaching gender in the elementary classroom is vitally needed. One approach that has promise is critical literacy practices, or literacy pedagogy that encourages critical thinking and justice (Bishop, 2014). Critical literacy practices can be taken in up in many ways, but are often centered on texts that amplify marginalized perspectives, highlight social, and create opportunities for activism (Behrman, 2006). In this context, teachers can leverage literacy-based activities that utilize read-alouds or creative writing to support critical thinking about identity and justice (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). Thus, these practices have vast potential for addressing issues of gender.

This study works to deconstruct normative, limiting ideas gender as a foundation for future works that more deeply addresses gender identity and intersectionality. It is centered on the implementation of a short, elementary-level unit plan designed to challenge stereotypical ideas about gender and promote gender equity. I conducted this unit virtually over the course of three weeks, utilizing social studies instruction and critical literacy practices. I draw conclusions about this unit based on student pre- and post-interviews, observation, student work, and parent report. Although each article is based on the unit, each analyzes the unit through a different lens, and shares findings and implications for a different audience.

The first article addresses the question: To what extent does a unit focused on gender equity challenge and/or expand lower elementary students' current understandings of gender, specifically gender norms and roles? I focus on how students perceive gender roles and norms both explicitly through how they directly address gender, and implicitly through how they indirectly demonstrate their beliefs about gender. Drawing on student pre- and post-interviews, observation, and parent/guardian survey data, I evaluate shifts in their perceptions throughout the course of the intervention. I found that, on an explicit level, supplementing social studies with

critical literacy practices allowed students to identify and call out gender stereotypes, describe the harmful consequences of stereotypical thinking, and collaborate in student-led activism intended to challenge stereotypes. Students also showed an increased willingness to share their own counterstereotypical traits and interests. On an implicit level, students were less likely to impose stereotypical limitations on their descriptions of male and female characters during writing activities. This study adds to literature regarding the socialization of gender stereotypes and how actively engaging students in critically examining issues of gender can challenge stereotypes at explicit and implicit levels. In addition, the study offers readily accessible tools for teachers who hope to take on this work. I developed this article to meet the requirements of a research-based social studies journal.

While the second article evaluates the impact of the same unit plan, it is different from the first article in its specific focus on gender equity and women's rights, rather than gender stereotypes more broadly. An adaptation of the second article has been accepted in a special issue of *Research Issues in Contemporary Education* focused on teaching civic education in contemporary society. This article seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) How do students perceive women's roles and contributions before and after participation in a three week literacy-based intervention? 2) How do students perceive gender inequity before and after participation in a three week literacy-based intervention? This study is largely focused on the third and final week of the study, in which students engaged in readings about both historical and contemporary gender inequity. Findings are based on interview and observation data. This article demonstrates that engagement in the unit introduced students to women's active and complex historical roles. While pre-interview answers tended to include stereotypical views of women's contributions, post-interview answers indicated an increased

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awareness of women's contributions as important and active. In addition, the study indicated the students became more aware of gender inequity as a contemporary issue. This study adds to understanding of how students view history, especially related to women's history and gender equity.

The third article is designed for a practitioner audience, particularly elementary-level educators who seek to use critical literacy in the teaching of gender. It describes the delivery of a lesson intended to help students understand the concept of implicit thinking and then purposefully examine and challenge their own implicit stereotypes about gender. Specifically, students engaged in an interactive read-aloud of the narrative fiction text *I Love My Purse* (DeMont, 2017). Throughout the text, students made predictions and answered questions intended to help them understand their own assumptions about the characters in the books. We used this read-aloud to differentiate between explicit and implicit thinking. The students then reflected on their own implicit gender stereotypes before writing a narrative fiction story that deliberately challenged those stereotypes. After engaging in the lesson, I found that students showed an increased understanding of implicit stereotypes, an ability to reflect on their own implicit thinking, and an ability to write stories that challenged implicit stereotypes. Thus, I argue that pairing critical literacy practices such as interactive read-alouds and restorying activities may be promising methods to engage students with complex, abstract concepts such as implicit stereotypes and may therefore help students complicate gender norms and roles.

Together, these three articles aim to increase our understanding of how elementary students perceive gender norms and roles and how teachers can challenge and/or expand on these perceptions. These studies seek to provide both theoretical and practical implications

that help us better understand the development and dismantlement of stereotypes in young children and provide easily accessible tools to aid in this dismantlement. Given the potential of stereotypes to impact students and society as a whole, I hope that the findings described in this dissertation will support teachers and students in efforts to challenge stereotypically gendered thinking and a broader system of gender inequity.

Across the nation, elementary students are engaging with classroom materials that uphold stereotypical, limiting notions of gender. They are navigating systems of inequity at the school and societal levels. It is vital to create instruction that allows students to dismantle these binary gendered ideas. The following three articles seek to support this instruction through the integration of social studies instruction with critical literacy practices. The articles describe the impact of this integration on students' explicit and implicit stereotypes and their perceptions of gender equity. In addition, the articles describe implications for research, practice, and curriculum design in the hope of helping educators, along with their students, take important steps forward in the quest to support gender equity.

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**ARTICLE ONE: BEYOND THE NORMS: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESING GENDER STEREOTYPES WITH ELEMENTARY CHILDREN**

"Because they say that girls have to dress like this because you are girls, and boys have to do boy things, but there is actually no such thing as boy things…Now I'm going to scream because it's so crazy!"
- *Evelyn, Age 7*

And scream she did. Through a computer screen miles away, a second grader expressed her frustration at the idea of being limited by gender norms. Throughout society, this frustration is shared widely and highlights the gender-based oppression that has long existed and continues to persist (Colley, 2019). Gender discrimination exists across social, economic, and political spheres, negatively impacting not only females, but also all individuals who challenge traditional, binary gender roles and norms (Meyer, 2017). This discrimination is supported by a value for stereotypical masculinity that continues to undermine efforts to overcome gender-based bias and oppression (Elliot, 2018). This value has come under increased scrutiny, with the term "toxic masculinity" becoming more prevalent in conversations regarding schools and society due to its worrying ties to violence.

Gender-based discrimination is widespread, pervasive, and harmful, and its prevalence upholds a system of inequity that especially impacts women and individuals who do not uphold stereotypical gender norms and roles (Elliot, 2018). This discrimination creates inequitable power dynamics with even young children, who learn as early as preschool that boys have gendered power over girls (Gansen, 2017). The damaging effect of gender discrimination can last over a lifetime, impacting career success and feelings of self-worth (Lu, 2021).

Gender inequity also supports and interacts with other systems of injustice. The intersection of sexism and racism creates greater discrimination against women of Color and upholds injustice on both interactional and systemic levels (Mendez, 2015; Wilmot, Migliarini,

& Ancy Annamma, 2020). Stereotypical portrayals of how gender "should" look are often steeped in a white, heteronormative, cisgender ideal (Tostivint, 2019), and these stereotypes permeate educational settings throughout each grade. Throughout each grade, girls of Color are held to white standards of femininity in behavior and appearance (Carter Andrews, Brown, Castro, & Id-Deen, 2019). In addition, Rahimi and Liston (2009) argue that the interplay of student and teachers' racial and gendered stereotypes allow for the continuation of dangerous sexual harassment and violence. This demonstrates the both the pervasiveness and the harm of intersecting stereotypes.

Children begin to develop gender stereotypes early (Martin & Ruble, 2004), and when educators do not challenge these perceptions within classrooms they can become more deeply ingrained (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Classroom materials and teacher instruction have tremendous potential to influence student perceptions of gender (Gee & Gee, 2005), yet unfortunately in general, few resources for teaching gender from a social justice lens exist. Worse, many texts and resources only reinforce traditional conceptions of gender (Casey, Novick, & Lourenco, 2020; Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007). This lack of resources hinders teachers from examining, challenging, and expanding student perceptions of gender.

In the quest to challenge gender-based stereotypes and discrimination, understanding how students think about gender is vital. Brophy and Alleman (2006) investigated students' perceptions as part of their study regarding how lower elementary (K-3) children think about cultural universals, or basic social aspects of the world such as food, families, and shelter. They found that students' knowledge of the social world is often based on their own daily, limited experiences and may be subject to misperceptions and oversimplifications. Thus, they argued

educators must not make assumptions about students' perceptions. Instead, teachers should investigate students' understandings in order to meaningfully and effectively scaffold learning. According to Brophy and Alleman (2006), examining students' thinking enables teachers to "ask questions, suggest problems, or provide feedback that will be most helpful in enabling students to construct accurate understandings, make connections, and see the need to question invalid assumptions or other misconceptions" (p. 7).

Understanding student thinking about gender is a vital first step in the creation of instruction that challenges gender stereotypes. This study seeks to examine both how students perceive gender and also how integrated social studies and critical literacy pedagogy can challenge and expand those perceptions in order to teach gender equity to young children. Thus, the goal of this study is to answer the question: To what extent does a unit focused on gender equity challenge or expand lower elementary students' current understandings of gender, specifically gender norms and roles?

## Theoretical Framework

This study draws from theories regarding feminist perspectives and the socialization of gender. This study is rooted in the basic assumption that how people think about gender, both explicitly and implicitly, matters. To illustrate, I draw from recent work by Tostivint (2019), who states that the toxicity of gendered thinking is based in "rejection of any perceived opposition to its [cisgender, heteronormative] self" (p. 21). This theory puts the fear of "the other" at the heart of the issue. In other words, upholding traditional gender binaries and stereotypes as the only possible ways of being allows gender-based discrimination and inequity to thrive. Traditional thinking about what is "normal," and therefore acceptable, promotes the idea that anyone acting outside of those binaries and stereotypes must be the other, and must therefore be wrong. In

order to disrupt this binary thinking, this study also draws from research that espouses the importance of "questioning the assumption that there is any "normal" expression of gender" (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). In this way, this study frames ideas of feminism and gender equity as part of "a cooperative effort to improve the quality of life for everyone" (Schacht & Ewing, 1998, p. 1).

**Gender Equity and Feminist Perspectives**

Although many varied forms of feminist theories exist (Schmeichel, 2015), for the purposes of this proposal I refer to the broad definition of feminism put forth by Digiovanni and Liston (2005), who state that "feminism is a theoretical and political position that affirms the basic equality and human dignity of all people" (p. 125). In this sense, feminism acknowledges the role of gender in shaping power and privilege throughout history and thus seeks to challenge inequity moving forward (Lerner, 1986). This study is especially focused on reshaping stereotypical portrayals of gender in education to reveal gender-based inequities and work towards diminishing or eliminating those inequities (Martin, 2003). Weiler (1999) argues that to accomplish this goal, feminist pedagogy must recognize the experience of individuals as a valuable source of knowledge, and as such must create space to explore varied narratives and perspectives. Thus, education must address aspects of identity such as gender, race, class, and sexuality (Woyshner, Watras, & Crocco, 2004).

Importantly, gender equity through this feminist lens is intended to create a more just society for all. Thus, this study seeks to challenge and/or expand student thinking in order to normalize any expression of gender for any person. bell hooks (2004) argues that even men, who often draw the most power in a patriarchal system, suffer abuse at the hand of that same system. When children are raised to belief that their personalities and potential, and access to power in

society must pre-determined by gender, it is not surprising that they "learn self-betrayal early…..asked to give up their true self in order to realize the patriarchal ideal" (hooks, 2004, p. 35). This patriarchal ideal, therefore, limits the identities of even those it serves best.

Arguably this binary and stereotypical thinking about gender reinforces the fear of the other described by Tostivint (2019) through creating and enforcing rigid ideas about "correct" expressions of gender. After all, if there is a correct expression there must be an incorrect expression as well. Challenging this thinking is vital, as Tostivint (2019) argues that "it may be regarded that, the root of all systemic hatred and discrimination, such as sexism, racism, homophobia, amongst others, stems from the cisgender heteronormative male afraid of the other" (p. 21). This argument labels deviation from normative masculinity as "other," effectively sidelining women and any individual who does not conform to stereotypical notions of gender. An expansion of this argument also explains how gender can exacerbate discrimination based on other identities, such as race, language and/or class. Jiménez (2021) describes gender as one component of marginalization, stating that individuals with multiple marginalized identities facing increased oppression. She argues, "Individuals that stray from this presumed norm are, by degrees, marginalized. The greater the degree of difference, the more marginalized a person is" (p. 157).  This study focuses on gender as one degree of marginalization and hopes to serve as a foundation for studies that might use similar formats to address intersectionality of marginalized identities.

**Socialization of Gender**

The importance of challenging notions of correct and incorrect expressions of gender in elementary classrooms stems from the early formation of gender-based stereotypes. Despite the historical (and even contemporary) tendency to conflate sex and gender, it is important to begin

by noting the differences in these terms and why this distinction matters even in the youngest grades. While sex is a term typically used to refer to physical characteristics, gender is influenced by socialization and culture (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). Gender can be considered performative and is often heavily influenced by what children see around them, the expectations of others, and the rewards or consequences of their actions (Street & Dardis, 2018). In fact, a fear of negative consequences can actively impede individuals from challenging stereotypical perceptions of gender (Sheppard & Mayo, 2013). Children's understandings about gender, especially regarding ways they "should" or "should not" act based on their sex, develop at a young age. By the time students enter school they have formed a gendered perception of themselves and have often developed gender stereotypes (Martin & Ruble, 2004). These stereotypes influence students' views of themselves and others, and have the potential to negatively affect their academic outcomes, career goals, and feelings of self-worth (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Unfortunately, these stereotypes also have staying power. Research indicates that gender-based stereotypes have remained remarkably, even surprisingly, stable over the course of the last 30 years, with masculine identities valued as having more agency and effectiveness (Haines, Deaux & Lofaro, 2016).

Several theories exist to explain the development of gendered thinking, including Social Cognitive Theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999) Gender Schema Theory (Martin and Halverson, 1981) and Social Role Theory (Eagly and Wood, 2011). While each theory approaches the construction of gender stereotypes differently, the substantial role of the social environment is a widely accepted and powerful component (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). Scholars argue that children may develop stereotypes through observational learning and social interaction (Olsson & Martiny, 2018), meaning that children acquire attitudes and behaviors by observing

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and interacting within the social world (Bandura, 2008). While explicit messages about gender certainly impact children's perceptions (Wang, Fong, & Meltzoff, 2021), children also internalize more subtle demonstrations of gender such as modelling (Olsson & Martiny, 2018; Shutts, Banaji, & Spelke, 2010). They are also influenced by the rewards and consequences they receive, or see others receive, for behaving in gender stereotypical or counterstereotypical ways. Skinner, Olson, & Meltzoff (2020) argue that observations and interactions can become "generalized social group biases [which] can be rapidly and unintentionally transmitted" (p. 824).

As students enter schools, these gender stereotypes may persist and even grow. Schools have long been considered a source of gendering, with research indicating that school practices often strengthen, rather than challenge, these stereotypical perceptions of gender. (Baker-Sperry, 2006). Mayo (2016) argues that normative gender is woven throughout daily interactions with teacher, peers, and classroom materials. Students are most often presented with content based on heteronormative and cisnormative approaches, which imply value for both heterosexuality and the gender binary as the norm (List, 2018). This content tends to reinforce gender norms, which can be defined as widely accepted social expectations, or unspoken rules for behavior, based on gender (Pearse & Connell, 2016) and gender roles, which refer more specifically to the activities and contributions deemed socially appropriate for individuals based on gender (Olsson & Martiny, 2018).

The repercussions of upholding gendered norms and roles in schools are alarming. In their review of the literature regarding confronting sexism in elementary classrooms, Bigler and Pahlke (2019) argue, "gender stereotypes and prejudices appear to influence nearly all facets of individuals' lives, including their academic, occupational, and leisure interests; relationships

with others; self-esteem; and mental and physical health" (p. 305). Gendered expectations often contribute to verbal and physical bullying among students. Sexual harassment, rooted in notions of gender-based power differences, continues to thrive within schools and society. In fact, Gillander Gadin and Stein (2019)'s case study of a high school sexual harassment case found that schools normalize harassment at an organizational level by trivializing harassment, shifting blame to the victim, and failing to implement consequences. In addition, Evans and Davies (2000) argue that boys who challenge gender norms by behaving in traditionally feminine ways are often given negative labels by their peers and subjected to physical abuse. Formby (2015) cites a growing body of research showing that gender fluid individuals are often faced with bias, systematic oppression, and violence, and calls for a better understanding of school-wide identity-based discrimination. In much the same way as schools normalize sexual harassment (Gillander Gadin & Stein, 2019), Formby argues that schools downplay this discrimination against gender-fluid individuals by treating aggressions as "bullying" without addressing the underlying bias. Thus, through a devotion to binary norms,  schools may actively support and create gender-based harm in a systematic way.

Carter Andrews et al. (2019) highlight how schools contribute to even greater oppression based on the intersection of gender and race. The authors illustrate how Black girls are held up to standards of white femininity and must navigate schooling under the weight of sexism and racism. Their examination of the racialized and gendered school experiences of high school–aged Black girls show that schools uphold systems that devalue the experiences and voices of Black girls. Carter Andrews et al. (2019) call for spaces that "center naming, unpacking, and addressing aspects of oppression that they face within the school context, such as sexism, heterosexism, patriarchy, and homophobia" (p. 2564). These findings build on the scholarship of

Formby (2015) and Gillander Gadin & Stein (2019) by uncovering schools' roles in upholding discrimination and by emphasizing the importance of identifying and challenging each system of oppression.

On a societal scale, Lather (1992) argues for "the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness, skills, and institutions as well as in the distribution of power" (p. 91). Thus, all people are constantly navigating gender-based expectations. These expectations can impact how individuals see themselves, how they are perceived by others, and their access to agency and privilege. Scholars have argued the construction of gender is used as a stratification system in which people are allowed different and unequal rights, therefore, as long as individuals continue to learn and maintain gender norms, an inequitable gender order is maintained (Lorber & Farrell, 1991).

## Literature Review

This study seeks to infuse social studies instruction with critical literacy practices in order to challenge gender stereotypes with elementary students. In this section, I explore existing literature regarding the integration of social studies and critical literacy to teach gender, the need to understand and expand both implicit and explicit thinking about gender, and the importance of addressing issues of gender injustice in elementary classrooms.

### Integrating Social Studies and Critical Literacy to Teach Gender

A focus on civic life makes social studies an ideal venue for disrupting norms and teaching issues of gender. The C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013) argues for the importance of students understanding "the variety of gendered, racialized, or other identities individuals take on over the life course, and identify the social and cultural processes through which those identities are constructed" (p. 79). Thus, social studies offers opportunities to investigate individual aspects

of identities and to further explore how identities intersect. A growing body of research, however, indicates that time devoted to social studies education continues to dwindle in elementary social studies (Heafner, 2018), meaning that opportunities to address gender through elementary social studies lessons are likely lacking.

In addition, research indicates that gender inequity is still prevalent in social studies education. Engebretson (2014) argues that social studies standards fail to encourage a critical examination of gender. Their discourse analysis of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) curriculum standards demonstrates a value for narrow, traditional views of masculinity. Thus, these standards are unlikely to support counterstereotypical narratives or lessons that promote gender equity. This emphasis on traditional masculinity is evident in social studies materials as well. Portrayals of men continue to dominate social studies texts, and these men are rarely shown in nontraditional gender roles (Sleeter & Grant, 2011). While less research exists regarding the representation of individuals who break gender norms, a vast body of research indicates that women are especially underrepresented and misrepresented in social studies texts and supplementary materials such as magazines and journals (Chick, 2006; Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007; Lay et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, the lack of curriculum materials and teacher resources that support the teaching of meaningful women's history affects students' opportunities to learn about gender discrimination and equity. Crocco (1997) argues that a classroom curriculum portrays cultural truths to students, meaning that inaccurate messages about historical roles are internalized. Traditional, masculinized narratives instill the belief that women are unimportant and even inferior to men (Ellsworth, Stigall, & Walker, 2019), reifying sexist notions of power and significance. These notions are harmful to even the youngest students as they may be

internalized, shaping the students' perceptions of history (Brugar, Halvorsen, & Hernandez, 2014) and even their own worth (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). 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).

Supplementing social studies with literacy education may have the potential to shape and challenge the way students think about gender. The NCSS (2017) argues that, "Social studies is integrative by nature. Powerful social studies teaching crosses disciplinary boundaries to address topics in ways that promote social understanding and civic efficacy" (p. 1). In addition, literacy continues to be prioritized in elementary classrooms, and the time students spend interacting with texts influences how they construct meaning about the social world (Jackson, 2007). Thus, class texts can either reinforce or dismantle stereotypes (Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009). Bishop (1990) highlights and expands on the importance of texts with her argument that books must be mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. All children, she asserts, should see themselves reflected in books. They should see characters that look like them and share experiences with them. In this way, the book acts as a mirror and affirms their identities. Books should also serve as windows, allowing students to see and begin to understand the identities of their peers, or sliding glass doors through which children step through to immerse themselves in another's story. However, Bishop illustrates how the lack of diversity in children's books ensures that children of Color often struggle to find their mirrors in books. In addition, students who easily find their mirrors are less able to find windows that help them understand the multicultural reality of the world, which contributes to an inflated and harmful ethnocentrism.

Scholars continue to call for books that provide mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Toliver, 2018), yet current research also confirms a continued lack of diverse representation in classroom texts (Thomas, 2016). This argument can certainly be expanded to include gender, as much of children's literature presents a binary, cisnormative view of gendered identities (Smolkin & Young, 2011). Students whose identities do not align with traditional gender norms may not find their mirrors, nor windows through which others can understand their experiences. In fact, many popularly used books such as fairy tales, picture books, and even Newbery award-winners, tend to reinforce, rather than dismantle, traditional gender roles (Baker-Sperry, & Grauerholz, 2003; Narahara, 1998; Tsao, 2008), and textbooks show a nearly universal gender bias (Blumberg, 2008). Bishop argues that, "when children cannot find themselves reflected in books they read… they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued by the society of which they are a part" (p. 1). Teachers, therefore, must carefully select texts that interact with students' identities in purposeful ways. It is vital that classroom texts affirm each individual while also building awareness, understanding, empathy, and respect for the myriad of experiences and identities of their peers.

### *Critical Literacy Practices*

In seeking to integrate social studies and literacy instruction, teachers may especially draw from critical literacy practices, or practices that leverage literacy education to help students think critically about the social world and to support equity and activism (Bishop, 2014). While critical literacy can be implemented through a wide array of methods, Behrman's (2006) analysis of literature related to critical literacy discovered several themes. These themes included reading texts that provide multiple, and especially marginalized, perspectives, examining books that highlight activism, and creating opportunities for student-led social action. In each case, critical

literacy pushes beyond surface level integration in order to support higher-order thinking skills and reflection. Arguably, this prioritization of justice-focused literacy instruction can provide a platform for teaching about issues of gender.

Research has supported the potential of using classroom texts to challenge gender norms. Scott and Feldman-Summers' (1979) investigations demonstrated this potential. As part of their study, 111 third- and fourth-grade students were split into three groups. One group read eight stories in which the main characters were most often male. Another group read stories with the same plots but main characters that were most often female. The last group's stories featured an equal number of female and male main characters. The authors found that students who read stories featuring female main characters who engaged in traditionally masculine roles were more likely to report that girls could engage in such counterstereotypical activities in reality. Trepanier-Street & Romatowski (1999) expanded Scott and Feldman-Summers' work by including not only texts, but also counterstereotypical guest speakers and art-extensions during which students drew men and women in counterstereotypical careers. After engaging in these read-alouds and activities, students were more likely to rate occupations as acceptable for men and women. A more recent study conducted by Karnoil and Gal-Disegni (2009), one group of first-grade students were provided traditional, gender-stereotyped basal readers for course instruction. A second group was given basal readers deemed gender-fair by the authors based on four dimensions: characters' personality characteristics, occupations, preferred settings, and choice of activities. After using these texts, participants completed a survey in which they classified activities as appropriate for boys, girls, or anyone. The findings showed 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.

More recent scholarship has explored children's interactions with literature that is purposefully manipulated to challenge gender norms. Earles (2017) explored preschool students' relationship with literature by photoshopping a female protagonist into a story about adventure and a male protagonist into a story about love. As students engaged with these stories, she found that students tended to value traditionally masculine storylines while disregarding plots based in traditionally feminine notions of love and nurturing. Interestingly, while the female adventurer was easily accepted by children, the male nurturer was deemed unlikely. Kneeskern and Reeder (2020) recently engaged 29 upper elementary students in reading either a chapter or a full chapter book that had been adapted to place characters in counterstereotypical roles. Students also participated in pre- and post- assessments through which they identified whether a female character or a male character were more likely to take on various activities. The authors found that children were unlikely to demonstrate changes in gender perceptions after reading one chapter, but did provide counterstereotypical answers after reading the full chapter book. In contrast to Earles' findings, they found that the strongest shifts in perceptions came from male students after exposure to counterstereotypical male characters.

Practices that utilize literacy to introduce content knowledge about the social world support not only citizenship skills, but also enhance literacy development. In fact, integrating literacy practices within content area instruction has been shown to increase literacy skills, content knowledge, and student motivation to learn (Guthrie et. al, 2007). Research has long shown the positive effects of integrating science with literacy (Guthrie et. al, 2007; Morrow, Pressley, Smith & Smith, 1997), and more recent studies show that integrating reading and social

studies can also be beneficial to student learning (Halvorsen et. al, 2012; Littlefield, 2011; Vaughn et. al, 2013). One such study completed with middle school students, for example, found that implementing reading instruction into social studies lessons improved both reading comprehension and the knowledge of social studies (Vaughn et. al, 2013). Littlefield (2011) found that literacy and social studies integration increased student motivation to learn when coupled with student choice. Researchers also suggest that integrating social studies and literacy through project-based lessons is an effective and engaging way to improve both student motivation and literacy (Halvorsen et al., 2012). Arguably, therefore, the practice of integrating literacy with content regarding social issues such as gender is beneficial to students in a multitude of ways.

**Explicit and Implicit Thinking About Gender**

While these studies show that there is potential to challenge stereotypical thinking about gender in elementary classrooms, it is imperative to acknowledge the difference between explicit and implicit thinking. For the purposes of this study, I define explicit thinking as being conscious and controlled (Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini & Stathi, 2012). This thinking takes place at the surface level and is more likely to be influenced by social desirability. In contrast, implicit thinking is less conscious, less controllable, and less susceptible to concerns about social desirability. Because implicit thinking takes place at a deeper level and can be considered automatic, it can affect student behavior and relationships in a myriad of subtle but powerful ways (Vezzali et al., 2012). Thus, it is important to consider what conscious, controlled perceptions of gender students might hold, but to investigate the deeper, automatic perceptions as well.

Several studies illustrate the importance of both explicit and implicit thinking (Latu et al., 2011; Reuben, Sapienza & Zingales, 2014; Rudman & Glick, 2001). One important point that arises throughout the literature is that while both types of thinking can drive behavior, they may not always match (Latu et al., 2011). Because explicit thinking is more likely to be controlled by social desirability, measuring only explicit thinking may not provide an accurate understanding of individuals' deeper, automatic, and thus potentially more influential beliefs. In a study that investigated how individuals view successful managers Latu et al. (2011) found differences between explicit and implicit thinking about female managers, with implicit views more often being negative. The authors also found that it was implicit thinking that predicted hypothetical workplace outcomes, meaning that male managers may be more likely to receive rewards because of automatic and deeply held stereotypes. Arguably, this divergence between explicit and implicit thinking is important to understanding systematic discrimination, as the implicit bias creates inequitable access to success while the more neutral explicit thinking may lead people not to see the bias in place. After all, in this study explicit thinking tended to be more inclusive and less stereotypical, but it was implicit thinking that predicted levels of workplace recognition. While there is a strong body research around implicit and explicit thinking in adults (Ebert, Steffens, & Kroth, 2014; Heilman, 2001; Reuben, Sapienza & Zingales, 2014; Rudman & Glick, 2001), less research exists to explore implicit and explicit thinking in elementary students. One such study investigated implicit stereotypes regarding math and science,  247 children ranging from ages six to ten, children at each age level demonstrated an implicit belief that "math is for boys . . . suggesting that the math–gender stereotype is acquired early and influences emerging math self-concepts prior to ages at which there are actual differences in math achievement" (Cvencek, Meltzoff, & Greenwald, 2011, p. 766).

However, studies indicate that implicit stereotypes can potentially be changed. Promising findings from Blair, Ma, and Lenton (2001) indicate that implicit thinking is malleable and can be influenced through use of mental imagery that is counterstereotypical, or explicitly pushes back on commonly held stereotypes. In addition, Rudman, Ashmore, and Gary (2001) found that education that specifically addresses diversity has the potential to reduce both explicit and implicit prejudice, while a study by Dasgupta and Asgari (2004) indicates that deliberate exposure to counterstereotypic women lessened implicit bias about women in leadership roles. However, little work has addressed what explicit and implicit stereotypes may exist with young students beyond the boundaries of math and science achievement, and little research exists about challenging implicit stereotypes in elementary classrooms.

**Addressing Gender Injustice in Elementary Classrooms**

Elementary teachers may feel intimidated by the task of challenging gender norms and roles,  as stakeholders often flag gender issues as controversial for young students (Ullman, 2017). The inclusion of such issues, however, are vital (Butler-Wall, Cosier, & Harper, 2016). Teaching about controversial issues can create meaningful learning experiences that engage students and informed and active citizens (Halvorsen, Santiago, Castro, & Whitford, 2018; Paley, 1992; Shear, Tschida, Bellows, Saylor, & Buchanan, 2017) . In addition, gender-diverse students report feeling better supported in classrooms that explicitly complicate stereotypes and teach for gender inclusivity (Ullman, 2017).

While addressing issues of gender in classrooms is important, doing so present challenges. List (2018) argues that "teachers and scholars need to remember that one can, and often should, rail against the hegemonic patriarchy. We can scream about feminism, equality, toxic masculinity, and gender binaries, but they would be fighting against a flood of historical

propaganda" (p. 120). Arguably, then, it is vital for research to aid teachers in this fight in a practice-based way. Thus, this study looks for awareness of non-binary gender in rural elementary students but also acknowledges that students may not yet have had opportunities to learn about the complexities of gender identification within their school settings (Reed, 2010; Yeo, 1999). This study, therefore, strongly focuses on investigating, expanding, and challenging how students currently think about masculine and feminine norms and roles, especially in terms of appearance, behavior, and contributions to or place in society.

While gender discrimination is a systemic issue that impacts societies and schools on a broad scale, exploring student thinking in order to create classroom lessons about equity may be a promising place to begin to challenge stereotypes and bias. Although most empirical research focuses on the influence of environment on the child, it is widely accepted that the relationship between the child and their environment is reciprocal, with children having the power to influence families, peers, and communities (Davidov, Knafo-Noam, Serbin, & Moss, 2015). In fact, Pedraza and Perry (2020) administered surveys to intended to assess the bidirectional influence of parents and children on each other's political beliefs. These surveys, provided to over 10,000 participants, asked participants to rank the influence of their parents and their children on their own political and social beliefs. They found that students have a strong perceived influence on parents' political values, and that parents may be especially influenced by knowledge and attitudes students attain through schooling. Digiovanni and Liston (2005) highlight the potential of children to promote equity, arguing 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).

By understanding how students currently perceive gender and using this knowledge to create lessons that purposefully challenge stereotypical thinking, teachers may be able to support greater acceptance in children, which may in turn allow children to inspire others as well. This study, therefore, is driven by a commitment to understand, challenge, and expand student thinking about gender in order to support learning that is rooted in justice and equity.

Although research has demonstrated a strong gender bias in classroom texts and the potential of using counterstereotypical texts to challenge traditional notions of gender, little research has examined the use of actively involving students in critical literacy practices to examine the presence and impact of gender stereotypes and bias together. In addition, while studies have demonstrated the early formation and strengthening of gender stereotypes, there is little work describing the potential to challenge perceptions of gender in elementary-aged students on both explicit and implicit levels by allowing students opportunities to indirectly demonstrate their notions of gender in authentic contexts, such as narrative writing. This study seeks to build on and extend previous literature by examining elementary students' conceptions regarding gender, implementing a unit for literacy instruction that focuses on gender equity and justice, and then reassessing students' perceptions of gender.

**Method**

This study was guided by the following research question: To what extent does a unit focused on gender equity challenge or expand students' current understandings of gender, specifically gender norms and roles?

To explore this question, I designed and implemented a three-week unit plan designed to help students think critically about gender norms and roles. This unit plan integrated social studies standards from the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013) and the Learning for Justice Anti-Bias Standards (Learning for Justice, 2016) with the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts (National Governors Association, 2010). See Appendix A for a list of standards. Before and after the unit, each student participated in interviews intended to elicit both explicit and implicit perceptions of gender. Below, I describe the unit in further detail.

**Participants and Site Selection**

While this study was initially designed to be conducted in classrooms, due to the COVID- 19 pandemic I taught the unit virtually, over Zoom. I recruited participants through a recruitment flyer posted on two education-themed social media pages. This recruitment strategy yielded  18 students from the United States and Canada. The participants were relatively diverse in terms of sex, race, and experience with online learning. See Table 1.1 for student demographics.

**Table 1.1.**

*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 |

**Table 1 (cont'd)**

| | |
|---|---|
| White | 8 |
| Did not report | 5 |

In order to provide a small class size, which I felt would allow for more interaction and opportunities to engage in discussion, I placed the participants into three small groups of 4-8 children per group. I sorted these groups based on parent/guardian time preferences.

**IRB Approval Process**

This study received IRB approval prior to the beginning of the recruitment stage. It is important to discuss the approval process, as it illustrates the institutional concerns about studying gender with young children. The study went through several rounds of review for over a month, yet very few changes were made to the study design itself. Instead, most revisions required a defense of my interest in studying gender issues with elementary students. In fact, the study was placed in committee review solely because an IRB reviewer felt that the decision to expose students to issues of gender was too controversial to be made by one reviewer. IRB Reviewers were especially concerned about *Sparkle Boy* (Newman, 2017), a narrative text in which a young boy dresses in traditionally feminine attire. The IRB committee wondered what might happen if reading the text caused male students to begin wearing dresses. In addition, reviewers posited that students participating in the study might become curious about "a thing" and subsequently google these things. In this case, they argued, students are likely to "come across undesirable materials." The IRB comments also appeared to conflate gender expression with sex and sexuality, asking for research that showed that elementary students are mature

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enough for exposure to those concepts. These are only a few examples of the concerns that appeared to be related directly to the word gender, and demonstrate the controversial connotation and misinformation that has been attached to this word. These revisions impacted the scope of this study. For example, concerns about using the word gender with students necessitated the use of binary terms (boy/girl, man/women etc.). Challenges to the appropriateness of texts restrained the use of those that more specifically represented nonbinary gender.

I deeply appreciate a focus on children's safety and well-being. I respect any effort to protect students and am grateful for efforts in this direction. However, I think that it is important to acknowledge the tension between protecting and othering. By categorizing gender expression as controversial or inappropriate, we risk categorizing the very real identities of children the same way. We may "protect" students from issues of gender norms at the expense of those who challenge them, which is in opposition to the Belmont Report's (1979) call for practices that create no harm. Thus, this study frames an exploration of gender stereotypes as a foundation for future works that more deeply engages with gender identity.

**Researcher Positionality**

My motivation for designing this unit comes from my experiences as an elementary teacher in a high-poverty rural area where access to curricula that challenged stereotypes was severely limited. Our history texts portrayed generations of stereotypically masculine white men and respun stories of oppression into stories of progress and success. Women were quite literally marginalized, placed in the margins of the pages with lone captions dedicated to their roles. Here again the degrees of marginalization were present, as women of Color were portrayed even less than white women. Individuals who challenged gender stereotypes were also largely missing from the pages. I noticed that our reading curricula also did little to engage students in thinking

critically about gender. In this context, it became difficult to complicate gender norms and roles. It was not uncommon to hear sexist remarks or to witness verbal and physical aggression against students who did not conform to traditional, binary ideas of gender, which speaks to the need for lessons that dismantle gender stereotypes.

As a parent of two young boys, this work also extends from my ever-evolving quest to raise children whose identities are not limited by rigid gender binaries, and who will actively involve themselves in challenging those binaries and gender injustice more broadly. As a researcher, I have worked to continue to develop my understanding of gender, curriculum, and student thinking in order to support teachers in promoting gender equity. As a white, cisgender women, I understand that I experience gender inequity in ways that are unexacerbated by the intersection of other marginalized identities. I frame this work around exploring and challenging one degree of marginalization in ways that I hope will provide a foundation that can be easily adapted and expanded to promote equity more broadly and address intersectionality. As a teacher, I often felt that I was working without tools, trying to dismantle big issues with small hands. The goal of this study, therefore, is to help develop easily accessible tools for teaching about gender in elementary classrooms.

**Unit Design**

In order to support the teaching of gender in elementary classrooms, I developed a unit based on social studies instruction integrated with critical literacy practices. The unit was built on the following big ideas:

1. Gender discrimination and stereotypes exist today.

2. We can help challenge stereotypical thinking about gender roles and norms.

Each week, we built toward these big ideas by investigating the definition and consequences of stereotypes, the differences between what we called on top (explicit) and deep down (implicit) stereotypes, the relationship between stereotypes and discrimination, and how all citizens can fight stereotypes. Each small group met twice per week for 30 minutes each over three weeks. Overall, I met with each group for a total of three hours. See Appendix B for an overview of the big ideas, essential questions and lesson activities.

We began each week with an interactive read-aloud based on the essential questions, then dug deeper through writing activities. Throughout these lessons, we engaged in several strategies recognized as supporting critical literacy practice, including interactive read-alouds, text-pairing, re-storying, and student-led social action.

### Interactive Read-Alouds

Reading activities such as interactive read-alouds provide a strong platform for critical literacy as they allow teachers the freedom to select texts that complicate gender stereotypes and provide valuable opportunities to enhance literacy skills and content knowledge (Strachan, 2015). Interactive read-alouds can be defined as any read-aloud that incorporates purposeful interaction between teachers and students (Barrentine, 1996), and can be conducted in many ways. Most interactive read-alouds, however, are focused on a central topic and include deliberate stopping points during which teachers ask questions and make connections related to that topic (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004). Such 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).

Students engaged in at least one interactive read-aloud each week. Each text was chosen to align with the essential question of the week and to purposefully challenge gender stereotypes, defined for the purposes of this study as the societal expectation for people to behave a certain way based on their gender, or a belief that all members of a gendered group should behave in certain, prescribed ways (Learning for Justice, n.d.).Throughout each text, I would stop in pre-planned places to highlight key points in the text, provide context, or ask students to make personal connections to the story.

### Re-Storying

Re-storying can also be used in many important ways to support critical literacy. Broadly, re-storying is the act of re-thinking, breaking down, and reconstructing narratives or stories to provide new perspectives (Robson, 2020). In practice, restorying can be taken up in many ways. Often, restorying includes examining an existing narrative and choosing one element, such as the main character's identity, the setting, or the plot, to change. Re-storying can be used to amplify marginalized histories (Pal & Singh, 2019), to showcase acts or resistance and social action (Broad, 2020), or to help students connect to texts in culturally relevant ways (Thomas, 2019). For the purpose of this study, the students engaged in re-storying by analyzing and reframing texts in ways that challenged gender stereotypes.

During the first and second week, students worked on re-storying tasks. First, students critically analyzed the story of Snow White, discussing where they noticed stereotypical portrayals of gender. They then chose elements of the story, such as characters, setting, and important plot points, to rewrite the fairy tale in a way that challenged norms. Second, the students reflected on their own writing to identify any implicit stereotypes. They then re-wrote their story in a way that challenged those stereotypes. Specifically, the students chose a name for

a character, then took a moment to describe how they thought that character might look or act. We used this description to reflect on what traits they automatically (implicitly) associate with gender. The students then chose one assumption about their character to change and wrote a story featuring that reimagined character.

*Text-Pairing*

Text-pairing is a critical literacy practice that has vast potential to help students think critically about social issues such as gender (Demoiny & Ferraras-Stone, 2018). Text-pairing occurs when teachers purposefully engage students in two texts that present different but related material. Through text-pairing, teachers can provide varied perspectives (Clarke & Whitney, 2009), texts in multiple languages (Soltero-González et al., 2106), fiction and non-fiction texts (Ward, Schell, Brown, & Thomason, 2019) and different formats such as traditional and graphic novels (Roberts, 2012). Text-pairing allows students to question and analyze materials, form new ideas about content, and develop critical literacy skills (Behrman, 2006).

When presented with narratives that challenge students' initial perceptions, text-pairing may help students restructure their thinking about history and the social world (Clarke & Whitney, 2009). In the third week, students engaged in such text paring in order to understand the persistence of gender discrimination over time. Specifically, we paired a text about historical gender-based discrimination with a text regarding modern day oppression, specifically discrimination in the work force and the gender pay gap (Learning for Justice, n.d.). The students analyzed the connections between historical and modern discrimination and discussed the how stereotypes contribute to present-day inequity.

**Data Sources**

There were four data sources: student pre- and post-interviews, student work, classroom discussions, and a parent/guardian survey and e-mails from parents. This study draws from theory that emphasizes the value of students' experiences (Weiler, 1999) and perceptions (Brophy & Alleman, 2006), and thus utilizes qualitative methods intended to center the voices of students. The data collected were used to examine the students' perceptions of gender roles and norms both before and after participation in the unit.

*Student Interviews*

Student pre- and post-interviews were conducted to develop understandings about students' perceptions of gender. Questions and activities targeted how students think about gender roles, men's and women's contributions to history and modern society, both directly and indirectly. See Appendix C for a list of interview questions. First, students engaged in a pre-writing activity in which they created and named three characters, described what the characters wanted to do when they grew up, assigned them characteristics through a word sort activity and summarized a story that included those characters. The word sort activity used characteristics derived from Evan and Davie's (2000) adaptation of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981). The Bem Sex Role Inventory provides terms that can be considered stereotypically masculine, feminine, and neutral. This list of terms was shortened and adapted for use in Evan and Davie's textbook analysis in which they observed the roles and characteristics of characters included in reading textbooks. Taken together, these terms allowed me to analyze how students described their characters in relation to traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. Then, students then listened to and reacted to stories in which the lead characters challenged gender norms. The books were selected to mirror each other in content from pre- to post-interview. *Sparkle Boy* (Newman, 2017), read during pre-interviews, and *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*

(Baldacchino, 2014), read during post-interviews, both feature a male protagonist who dresses in traditionally feminine attire. *Sleeping Bobby* (Osbourne & Osbourne, 2005) and *My Name is Not Isabella* (Fosberry, 2008) both feature female characters in counterstereotypical, agentic roles. Last, the students answered open-ended questions about who they find important in society, men's and women's societal contributions, and gender equity over time.

### Student Work

Interview data were supplemented by all student work collected during the course of the unit. I collected collaborative and individual narrative writings and student-led activism projects that included a script for a YouTube video, posters, and a children's book. Students completed these activities using online formats such as Google Docs and/or through writing on paper and submitting the article via scan or photograph.

### Classroom Discussion

Each lesson was recorded and transcribed to capture students' expressed views about gender at each point of the study. Overall, each group participated in six half-hour class sessions. In total, therefore, I transcribed a total of nine hours of classroom activities and discussion.

### Parent/Guardian Survey and Email

I included two forms of data intended to investigate parent/guardian perspectives. With parent/guardian permission, I collected any emails that provided information about their child(ren)'s experiences throughout the intervention. I also provided parents/guardians with a survey to complete at the end of the study. This survey was designed to elicit information regarding their own thoughts about the intervention and any examples of how their child(ren) discussed and/or applied concepts from the course outside of class hours. See Appendix D for a list of survey questions.

**Data Analysis**

  I analyzed data using an adaptation of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interpretivist process. I transcribed the interviews and classroom discussions. I then read the transcripts and the students' classroom work in order to note themes, and create provisional codes. I refined the provisional codes into patterns codes and created a matrix that lists each code. For example, one broad, provisional code I developed from the interview themes is Direct Reference to Stereotypes, which included any student quote that specifically discussed stereotypes by name. From this code, I created more specific codes such as Identified in Action to describe moments in which students named a stereotyped in a text or conversation without being asked or prompted. I also created codes to examine when students defined stereotypes or described consequences of stereotypes. See Table 1.2 for examples of codes used in this study.

**Table 1.2.**

*Sample Codes Related to Stereotypes*

| Coded Student Responses Related to Stereotypes | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Description | Example |
| Identified in Action | Student identifies/names a stereotype without being asked or prompted | When she just said that, it was a stereotype. |
| Provided example | Student provides specific example of a stereotype that aligns with the definition: an expectation of | Stereotypes can hurt people really really really bad- Here's |

|  | specific behavior based on gender | an example: Only girls use makeup! Boys don't use those! But that's a stereotype! |
|---|---|---|

**Table 2 (cont'd)**

| Describes impact with consequence | Students describes impact of stereotypes. Answer is not limited to stereotypes being bad to include a specific consequence | Stereotypes are really bad and they can hurt people really much |
|---|---|---|

On the matrix, I included columns for before, during, and after implementation of the unit. I added responses from class sessions, student work interviews onto the matrix, and compared answers across columns to identify any shifts in perceptions. In all, I had about 17 hours of recordings and over 100 pages of transcription.

## Findings

Below I discuss the findings for my research question: To what extent does a unit focused on gender equity challenge or expand students' current understandings of gender, specifically gender norms and roles? The findings are organized into the following themes: (1) shifts in students' explicit thinking; (2) shifts in students' implicit thinking; and (3) limitations of implicit and explicit shifts in thinking.

**Shifts in Students' Explicit Thinking**

Students demonstrated shifts in explicit thinking, or how they directly discussed gender, through identifying and challenging stereotypes. These shifts were apparent throughout the course of the intervention and during post-interviews and were fairly consistent across students' gender, race, and nationality.

***Pre-Interviews***

During pre-interviews, students showed little awareness of stereotypes. Although students were aware that the course would focus on gender, they did not directly identify or discuss gender stereotypes in their responses. In response to the read-alouds, the students tended to discuss the plot and story elements without connecting explicitly to gender, even when gender was the primary focus of the text. For example, when asked what they noticed about *Sparkle Boy* (Newman, 2017), several students discussed plot points directly related to gender, such as a female character telling her little brother that he cannot dress in her sparkly clothes and jewelry because he's a boy, by either simply retelling the plot or by stating that the sister didn't want to share her possessions. In addition, several students expressed surprise at the characters counterstereotypical choices. One student noted, "He became... so he was a boy. But he liked girl things! I was surprised that he wanted to like girl things," while another said, "I was surprised that that boys could wear sparkling things too." While several children expressed general empathy for the male character who experienced discrimination, only two students specifically addressed gender. When asked how the book made them feel, one child said, "Happy that boys can do awesome things like dress up like that." Another noted, "Like it was teaching me that people that boys can wear skirts and polish and necklaces and bracelets." The remainder of the responses tended to focus instead on other characters being "mean" or "nice" to the male character.

*Post-Interviews*

**Identifying and Challenge Stereotypes in Texts.** During post-interviews students, however, students were far more likely to name stereotypes while reading or when responding to the texts. During pre-interviews, no students specifically identified gender stereotypes. In post-interviews, the 18 participants directly identified stereotypes in the texts 27 times. Many students identified these stereotypes as they heard them in the story. For example, while reading *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, one student waved her arms and yelled, "Alert, stereotypes! Alert! Alert!" whenever the title character was scorned for wearing stereotypically feminine attire. Another student stopped the story to remark, "There's a stereotype! I heard two of them. I heard two stereotypes in that." In each case, students stopped the story at a point that did depict stereotypes and/or gender-based bias.

Students also referenced stereotypes when reflecting on the texts. When asked what they noticed about *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress,* one student commented, "They said boys don't wear dresses. It reminded me of stereotypes and how [a character] was being biased, and other people were too." Another sighed and remarked, "That was full of stereotypes!" Several students were also able to expand their answer to include examples of stereotypes, specifically discussing the title character's choice to wear a dress but also expanding their thoughts to include additional examples. For example, one child stated, "There was three stereotypes. And any kind of boy, any kind, could wear makeup and dresses and earrings," while another mentioned that boys can carry purses and that girls can be astronauts.

It was also common for students to describe the harmful consequences of stereotypes. Many children noted that the stereotypes held by other characters made Morris, the title

character, feel sad, and most students also explicitly described stereotypes as being wrong or hurtful as can be seen below:

> "I think what I noticed is that at first he is not treated very well, because people think that boys can't wear dresses and boys, um astronauts don't wear dresses."

> "I was sad because at first there were a lot of stereotypes, and they wouldn't let him wear that dress. But then happy because Eli and the other guy realized that stereotypes are wrong."

> "It actually surprised me that at first they had a gender stereotype against them. And then they're like, Why? Why did we even do that?...It actually surprised me about that, because stereotypes are wrong."

As shown by the quotations above, students did tend to categorize actions or ways of thinking in very dichotomous ways, such good or bad, right or wrong. While the material stressed that stereotypical thinking was often inaccurate and could contribute to biased actions, the students tended to condense or simplify this message.

The students' reactions to the story also tended to illuminate a personal, emotional reaction to the use of stereotypes, with many students demonstrating empathy toward the characters who challenge stereotypical norms. Students overwhelmingly reported feeling sad when the characters experienced bias. Answers such as "I felt bad but then happy... Sad because you shouldn't even be stereotyped over a dress, then happy because eventually they learned that it's okay [for a boy to wear a dress]" were common. One striking comment indicated that students may have been thinking critically about their own future behavior. When reflecting on how some characters treated others poorly for breaking gender norms, one student mused, "this book made me feel like I'm not gonna be like any of those kids." This child emphasized not wanting to emulate the characters who mistreated their peers, and went on to connect this text to the book *I Love My Purse* in which characters also used stereotypes in limiting ways.

Students were also more likely to explicitly challenge stereotypes while writing their own stories. During post-interviews, the students often pointed out how their characters were challenging their notions of stereotypical gendered behavior. One student described her character's appearance, stating, "She's not too much of a stereotype. And that's okay. She's showing people that girls don't have to do, well, girl things and actually there's no such thing as girl things." Another student described their character's career by saying, "She wants to be, I think, an engineer. That's not a stereotype. And he wants to be like a nurse and a girl could be a doctor too!" By describing the counterstereotypical aspects of their characters, each student highlighted a purposeful decision to challenge stereotypes in their writing.

### *Noticing and Thinking Critically About Stereotypes in Reality*

According to students' parents/guardians, students were also more likely to challenge stereotypes in reality following the intervention. Through the completion of a survey taken at the end of the unit, parents/guardians reported that children became increasingly able to identify and critically discuss stereotypes in reality during and after participation in the unit. One parent described her daughter's reaction to viewing a television show in which a character described a task as being a "man's job." According to the parent, the child immediately initiated a conversation in which she identified the character's thinking as stereotypical and asserted that men and women were equally capable of achievement. In addition, a parent illustrated the shifts in her child's perceptions by sharing anecdotes both prior to and after participation in the study. According to the parent, prior to the course the child shared with her that he liked the color pink but also asked her to keep this preference a secret, as he considered pink to be a "girl" color. After beginning the intervention, however, his parent noted, "Calvin likes to talk with you and I

can see the changes in him. He told me boys could wear necklaces and it's not a rule necklaces are for girls only. He made himself a LEGO dragon stone necklace."

Some parents/guardians noticed an increased complexity to their children's thinking. According to several parents/guardians, their children began to question gender norms after engaging in the intervention. One parent reported, "I was totally amazed by the level of complex thinking my daughter was demonstrating about gender and stereotypes when she shared ideas from the class with me or applied them to real-world situations." This statement seems to demonstrate that students carried the ideas from the unit beyond our class sessions into authentic scenarios.

In addition, throughout the unit, students became increasingly likely to self-report examples of how they challenged stereotypes in reality. While students did not demonstrate an understanding of stereotypes in pre-interviews and were not likely to share examples in the early class sessions, as the intervention progressed it became common for them to discuss stereotypes and bias they noticed outside of class time. The majority of examples were taken from television and movies, but students also discussed conversations in which they had engaged with family and friends. For example, one child described how she supported a male friend who was teased for wearing nail polish, and another recounted a lively conversation about a movie character who was told to "act like a lady." One child whose sister also participated in the study shared that "once before my brother weared a dress and [my sister] said a stereotype that boys can't wear dresses. But now she understands!"

Overall, both parent/guardian and student reports suggest that students' ability to explicitly name and question stereotypes extended beyond the confines of our virtual classroom space. The extension of this ability suggests that students' understanding of gender stereotypes

was not limited to a more controlled setting where students were directly focused on gender, but rather transferred into students' more complex realities.

***Examining Stereotypes Through Activism***

Last, participants explicitly challenged stereotypes through engagement in student-led activism projects intended to challenge gender stereotypes in others. Through these projects, students developed a children's book, a script for a YouTube video, and a letter-writing and poster campaign that each described and decried the harmful consequences of stereotypes. These projects indicated that students were able to accurately identify and provide examples of stereotypes. Examples regarding appearances were especially common, such as "a stereotype is like saying boys don't wear purses or makeup, but that's not true and it can hurt people!" Students also included examples of gender stereotypes regarding interests and aspirations, such as, "Boys and girls can do the same thing if they want to do that because their dreams are big! For example, some girls like architecture and some boys like baking. Some girls can love the piano and boys can love dancing and ballet." Another group specifically targeted stereotypes about toys and colors, arguing, "Girls can play with trucks and they can also ride a skateboard if they want. Boys can also like pink and girls can also like blue."

In addition to being able to define stereotypes, students also explicitly described their negative consequences and took an unequivocal stand against them. When given total freedom to construct their project, each group chose a different medium (i.e. book, video, letter/poster campaign) but held a similar goal: to raise awareness of the harm caused by stereotypes. Each project included several statements intended to directly spotlight the damage caused by stereotypes. While planning their YouTube video, one group decided to juxtapose images of themselves engaging in counterstereotypical activities with the words "You should talk to other

people and tell them that they should not say the stereotypes they are saying . . . Stereotypes are wrong! If you are using stereotypes, that's being biased." Specifically, these images included a male participant holding rainbow colored balloons, a female participant skateboarding, and another female participant composing background music and acting as a conductor. Another group wrote letters and posters imploring, "Stereotypes are wrong. Stereotypes can hurt people really really really bad! Please spread the word and stop!"

While each group demonstrated and explicit understanding of stereotypes and the consequences of gendered thinking, one group demonstrated a deeper understanding of how gender stereotypes function in society by adding a page to their children's book which read, "Stereotypes can cause a fight because people disagree about whether stereotypes are true or not but we know that stereotypes are not true." This answer may indicate a growing awareness of the insidious presence of stereotypes and their persistence in society. This group also touched briefly on the potential of identity work in fighting stereotypes by adding, " You should fight your stereotypes!"

**Shifts in Students' Implicit Thinking**

Analysis of student pre- and post-interview data indicates that students' implicit thinking also shifted following the unit. For the purposes of this study, implicit thinking refers to how students indirectly demonstrated their thinking about gender. In post-interviews, implicit shifts were especially evident during the writing activity. When given open-ended opportunities to write narrative texts, students tended to ascribe more complex, less stereotypical personality traits to their characters after engaging in the intervention.

Students also shifted in how they indirectly demonstrated their perceptions of gender, especially in their writing. When describing characters during the prewriting activity, students

used a word sort activity to assign personality characteristics. The word sort included traits

adapted from the BEM Sex Role Inventory (1981) and Evans and Davies' (2000) textbook

analysis, which each provide lists of traits that can be considered stereotypically masculine,

feminine, or neutral. Students brainstormed a narrative fiction story that included three

characters. They then assigned the provided traits to each of their characters. They had the

options to use each word once, more than once, or not at all. Prior to the intervention, students

tended to describe their characters in stereotypically gendered ways (BEM, 1981; Evans &

Davies, 2000). See Table 1.3 for a comparison of most used terms from pre- to post-interview.

**Table 1.3.**

*Descriptors Most Often Used to Describe Characters in Pre- and Post-Interviews*

| "Male" | | "Female" | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-Interview | Post-Interview | Pre-Interview | Post-Interview |
| Brave | Smart | Smart | Smart |
| Competitive | Adventurous | Cries Easily | Brave |
| Athletic | Kind | Kind | Kind |
| Adventurous | Sweet | Funny | Sweet |
| Leader | Brave | Doesn't Like to Get Dirty | Takes Good Care of Others |

In the pre-interviews, students most often described characters that they identified as

male with stereotypically masculine traits (BEM, 1981; Evans & Davies, 2000). Specifically,

they described male characters as being brave, competitive, athletic, adventurous, and strong leaders. Characters they identified as female were most often described as smart, crying easily, being kind, and disliking getting dirty or messy. While kindness and intelligence can be considered neutral traits, a tendency towards being emotional and prioritizing one's appearance are often characterized as stereotypically feminine (BEM, 1981; Evans & Davies, 2000).

During post-interviews, however, students were more likely to describe all characters in ways that included traditionally masculine, feminine, and neutral characteristics. They most often described male characters as being smart, adventurous, kind, sweet, and brave while describing female characters as smart, brave, kind, sweet, and as taking good care of others. These descriptions appeared to be more complex and less limited by traditional notions of gender, as each includes stereotypically female (sweet, taking good care of others), stereotypically male (adventurous, brave) and stereotypically neutral (smart, kind) traits.

In addition, many students described a character as having a counterstereotypical appearance. Without directly naming stereotypes or explaining their choices, students were more likely to create male students with traditionally feminine attire such as dresses or hair accessories. Students were also more likely to create feminine characters wearing clothes that were blue or green and, in one case, dirty from her adventures exploring the woods.

**Limitations of Implicit and Explicit Shifts in Thinking**

Within these shifts of perception, however, were two interesting themes. First, students were more likely to challenge stereotypes for female characters than for male characters in their writing. In addition, female participants were slightly more likely to challenge stereotypes than male participants. Second, students' understanding of stereotypes tended to be limited to

interpersonal interactions, rather than to understandings of systemic or structural systems of power and discrimination.

### *Differences in Challenging Implicit Masculine Stereotypes*

While students showed overall shifts in implicit thinking during their pre-writing activities, they were more likely to attribute counter-stereotypical traits to female characters than to male characters. This is especially evident when examining the traits students were *least* likely to attribute to their characters. Specifically, these are the words that students were most hesitate to use to describe male of female characters. See Table 1.4 for a comparison of least used terms from pre- to post-interview.

**Table 1.4.**

*Descriptors Least Often Used to Describe Characters in Pre- and Post-Interviews*

| "Male" | | "Female" | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-Interview | Post-Interview | Pre-Interview | Post-Interview |
| Cries Easily | Cries Easily | Brave | Easily Scared |
| Stylish | Stylish | Leader | Silly |
| Easily Scared | Easily Scared | Competitive | Mean |
| Sweet | Mean | Mean | Cries Easily |

| Funny | Doesn't Like to Get Dirty | Athletic | Doesn't Like to Get Dirty |
|---|---|---|---|

During the pre-interviews, students were least likely to describe their male characters as using the terms cries easily, stylish, easily scared, sweet, and funny. Other than funny, which can be considered neutral, these terms are all stereotypically feminine (Bem, 1981; Evans & Davies, 2000). Although students were more likely to use each of these words to describe male characters in the post-interviews, cries easily, stylish, and funny all continued to be among the least used terms. In addition, students were least likely to describe male characters as mean, a stereotypically neutral characteristic, and as not liking to get dirty, a stereotypically feminine trait. In other words, students continued to display an unwillingness to use several stereotypically feminine descriptors for their male characters, relying more on gender neutral traits to complicate the male characters' portrayal. In contrast, the female characters experienced a strong shift even in the least used terms. In pre-interviews, students were least likely to describe their female characters as brave, a strong leader, competitive, mean, or athletic. Yet in post-interviews, only mean remained among the least used terms. Thus, while descriptions of male characters shifted to take on several neutral and some traditionally female characters, the students provided female characters with a more complete mix of stereotypically masculine, feminine, and neutral traits.

In addition, while shifts in explicit thinking appeared consistent across race and nationality, there were slight gendered differences. Female participants were slightly more likely to challenge stereotypes in their writing than male participants. While the findings indicate an overall shift in how students described their characters, female participants tended to use counterstereotypical traits more often than male participants. Interestingly, this difference only

occurred when considered implicit thinking, as male and female participants were equally likely to explicitly identify and challenge stereotypes.

### *Localized and Reactive Activism*

While students all participated enthusiastically in the social action projects, their ideas about activism around gender tended to be local and reactive. For the purposes of this study, I define "localized" as being centered on a specific interaction, rather than a broader social issue. I define "reactive" as a response to that specific interaction rather than focus on preventing discrimination by dismantling systemic oppression. In other words, their ideas about stereotypes tended to be limited to interpersonal conflict, rather than a widespread systematic issue. One student explained the prevalence of stereotypes in today's society by saying, "Some people still get treated like that. Like, bullies still treat them like that." When explaining the detrimental effects of stereotypes, students tended to explain that stereotypes make individual people feel hurt or sad. For example, one group suggested creating a poster that would read, "Stereotypes are really bad and they can hurt people really much so they don't want to be friends with you anymore," and explained, "I think stereotypes are very bad and can hurt people really bad and other parents will call their parents." Another group suggested kindness and treating others nicely as a remedy for the prevalence of stereotypes. In addition, although two class sessions were focused on systemic inequity and directly explored the gender pay gap as a nationwide issue (NCSS, nd), several students, both male and female, suggested supporting gender equity by giving money to their female relatives. In this way, students demonstrated a desire for fairness but a limited understanding of systemic and structural inequality.

## Discussion

This study was guided by the question: To what extent does a unit focused on gender equity challenge or expand lower elementary students' current understandings of gender, specifically gender norms and roles? I found that critical literacy practices have great potential to expand and shift children's thinking regarding gender, and to help them recognize and challenge gender stereotypes in themselves and others. This study indicates that the use of critical literacy practices may complicate the heavily masculinized narratives that persist in social studies and literacy materials, allowing students to take steps toward identifying and challenging stereotypes in order to begin to work toward justice and equity. It also serves as a foundation for further research regarding the integration of social studies and critical literacy practices to more deeply examine systemic injustice across a variety of identities. Below, I explore the findings in relation to the interaction of critical literacy practice, theory, and existing research.

**Critical Literacy and the Socialization of Gender**

This study is grounded in the theory that gender is an aspect of identity that is constructed over time, with social learning playing a key role. Although theories about the development of gendered thinking vary, the influence of observational learning and social interactions is widely accepted (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Eagly and Wood, 2011; Martin and Halverson, 1981; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002; Olsson & Martiny, 2018). Theories regarding observation learning hold that children form perceptions by observing the world, drawing conclusions based on what they see (Olsson & Martiny, 2018; Shutts, Banaji, & Spelke, 2010). Findings from this study support this argument, joining past research that has shown the power of counterstereotypical imagery: if students learn by observing, then presenting them with counterstereotypical materials should influence their thoughts about gender (e.g., Blair et al., 2001; Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Earles, 2017; Karnoil & Gal-Disegni, 2009; Kneeskern &

Reeder, 2020; Scott & Feldman-Summers, 1979). This study confirmed findings from prior scholarship: students demonstrated shifts in thinking after engaging in texts in which characters opposed traditional notions of gender.

While past research has indicated the power of observational learning, this study is unique in its additional focus on social interaction. Through the use of critical literacy practices such as interactive read-alouds, restorying, text-pairing, and literacy-based activism projects, students engaged beyond the passive role of observation. Students did not only read counterstereotypical texts, they engaged in discussions and shared writing activities. They worked together to think critically about gender and to dig into their new knowledge through socially interactive activities. They also collaborated to read and wrote tests that represented mirrors and windows to their unique identities (Bishop, 1990). The subsequent shifts in their perceptions support studies that position social interaction as a key factor in developing gender stereotypes and demonstrate that such interaction may also be a key factor in dismantling gender stereotypes.

**Integration of Social Studies and Critical Literacy Practices**

Critical literacy also served as a valuable tool for supplementing social justice focused education. Although each student's family voluntarily enrolled them in a course intended to challenge gender stereotypes, which suggests a commitment or openness to gender equity, students' pre-interview answers support research regarding the prevalence and internalization of stereotypes (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Martin & Ruble, 2004; List, 2018; Street & Dardis, 2018).

Prior to the study, while students empathized with characters who experienced gender discrimination, they did not identify stereotypes and often expressed surprise as their counterstereotypical choices. When writing, their characters tended to be limited to traditional

norms and roles. In addition, they did not discuss gender in relation to their own identities, with some parents/guardians reporting that their children felt uncomfortable demonstrating counterstereotypical interests or behaviors.

Following the intervention, there was evidence of changes in students' thinking. After engaging in social education through critical literacy practices students demonstrated a new understanding of gendered experiences and social injustices (NCSS, 2013), as they became more likely to identify and challenge stereotypes during class sessions, post-interviews, and in settings beyond the course, according to their parents/guardians. This growth demonstrates the potential of pairing social studies education, especially in relation to understanding, critiquing, and working for change in society, with critical literacy practices.

Using critical literacy practices requires lessons that go beyond surface level literacy integration, allowing students to investigate marginalized narratives and use reading, writing, and discussion toward activism (Behrman, 2006; Bishop, 2014). In this study, through engaging in literacy activities such as interactive read-alouds, re-storying, and text-pairing, students became increasingly able to identify gender stereotypes, analyze their impact, and begin to engage in activism. These findings confirm the potential of critical literacy practices in teaching for justice (Broad, 2020; Pal & Singh, 2019; Robson, 2020; Thomas, 2019). This study contributes new understandings, however, regarding the use of critical literacy practices to support social studies education with elementary students. Young students were not only capable of engaging in these practices, they developed a new awareness of gender-based injustice and a deepened commitment to gender equity, at least in the short-term.

**Implicit and Explicit Thinking**

In addition, this study supports research regarding the importance of understanding both explicit and implicit thinking (Latu et al., 2011; Reuben, Sapienza & Zingales, 2014; Rudman & Glick, 2001). After engaging in the intervention, students demonstrated shifts in not only how they explicitly discussed gender but also their indirect representations of gender. Students were able to examine their own implicit stereotypes, using a re-storying activity to investigate and complicate their own thinking. This supports Blair, Ma, and Lenton's (2001) assertion that implicit bias is malleable and can be altered through instruction that directly challenges stereotypes and builds on work that demonstrates the potential of instruction that prioritizes diversity and uses counterstereotypical views of women's roles (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001). By measuring the influence of such instruction with young students, this small-scale study demonstrates that elementary students are capable of engaging in critical education about gender, and even may also become, at least in the short term and in a supportive environment, more likely to recognize and call out bias, by discussing and portraying gender in more inclusive ways, and by actively working to dismantle discrimination in an educational setting.

While the impact of integrated social studies and critical literacy practices seems promising, even over a short period of time, this study shows that more work is needed to challenge the masculinized ideal of gender and to help students understand the systematic nature of oppression. Earles (2017) found that students often dismissed counterstereotypical male characters as unrealistic. This study also shows that stereotypes about boys may be more difficult to move. Although there were no differences between how male and female students explicitly discussed gender in post-interviews, both male and female students were still more likely to demonstrate implicitly stereotypical portrayals of male characters than of female characters. In

addition, female students were slightly more likely to indirectly challenge stereotypes in their writing activities. Taken together, this may suggest that stereotypes about masculinity are deeply entrenched in society and in children's literature. Kneeskern and Reeder (2020) did find that a longer intervention allotted different results, with male participants showing the strongest shifts in perceptions. Thus, further opportunities to critically examine and complicate these stereotypes over time may be needed moving forward.

The difference between explicit and implicit thinking about masculine stereotypes also supports the importance of intentionally challenging implicit stereotypes. Research indicates that individuals' explicit thinking may not be the same as their implicit thinking, which allows individuals to express a desire for equity while actually holding stereotypical, limiting views. This study shows that explicit stereotypes may be easier to affect (Vezzali et al., 2012) as students continued to demonstrate gendered differences around implicit, but not explicit, thinking. This again points to a need for further opportunities to address gender.

In addition, students tended to limit gender-based discrimination to interpersonal interaction that may result in hurt feelings and a sense of being treated unfairly. While students were passionate about fighting stereotypes, they tended not to recognize them as a deeply embedded cog in a larger machine of societal oppression. In addition, students' answers were often highly bifurcated, with their analysis of stereotypes often separated into right or wrong, good or bad. These bifurcated answers can be considered oversimplified, as they reduce a complex system of biases into bad behavior. While these findings show that students recognize and are willing to challenge stereotypes, more work is needed to help students understand the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes and their role in sustaining widespread inequity.

**Implications**

This study has implications for classroom practice, teacher education, curriculum design, and research. Ultimately, this research is built on the understanding that the construction of occurs within a system that privileges stereotypical, cisgender masculinity and thus marginalizes any identity that can be seen as "other" (Tostivint, 2019). Thus, dismantling gender stereotypes in order to normalize all expressions of gender is essential for disassembling this unjust system (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Digiovanni and Liston's (2005) approach to feminist theories asserts to dismantle this system is to work for equity. Thus, challenging rigid, dichotomous views of gender is beneficial to society as a whole (Schacht & Ewing, 1998; hooks, 2004). It is vital, if difficult to address issues of gender in classrooms (List, 2018). This study affirms the benefits of challenging stereotypes, as evidenced by students gaining pride and a willingness to share about the ways they challenge stereotypes. In addition, the findings of this study highlight the potential of critical literacy practices in working toward this goal.

In regard to teacher practice and teacher education, the findings support the use of critical literacy practices to supplement social studies instruction intended to challenge gender norms and roles. Research has shown the importance of justice-focused instruction that allows students to grapple with controversial issues (Butler-Wall et al., 2016; Halvorsen et al., 2018; Paley, 1992; Shear et al., 2017), however teachers and pre-service teachers may find addressing issues of gender intimidating or controversial in elementary classrooms (Ullman, 2017). In addition, although integrating social studies and literacy education is a widely supported practice (Alleman & Brophy, 2010; Duke, Halvorsen, Strachan, Kim, & Konstantopoulos, 2021; Halvorsen et al., 2012; Hinde et al., 2007), little research has explored how critical literacy practices can support social studies education, especially regarding gender, with elementary students. Thus, this study seeks to guide teachers and researchers in creating instruction that helps students challenge their

own stereotypes and work toward gender equity through critical literacy practices. By leveraging critical literacy practices such as interactive read-alouds, re-storying, and text-pairing activities, both pre-service and in-service teachers may feel better equipped to teach about issues of gender.

This study also has implications for curriculum design. This unit was created in response to the stereotypical portrayals of gender in social studies materials (Chick, 2006; Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007; Lay et al., 2019; Sleeter & Grant, 2011). Findings indicate that by infusing social studies curriculum with critical literacy practices, curriculum developers may better provide materials that allow students to investigate, understand, and work against injustice. While students tended to frame their understandings of gender discrimination at an individual level, rather than on a systemic or structural level, this study shows that curriculum designed to increase awareness of stereotypes and bias may support students in identifying and beginning to challenge gender norms and roles in both explicit and implicit ways.

Both teachers and curriculum designers may also consider using similar formats to help students understand the role of stereotypes in upholding discrimination based on additional marginalized identities. This study demonstrated that critical literacy practices can be used in elementary classrooms to challenge explicit and implicit stereotypes. It is possible that utilizing similar practices might allow students to consider the role that stereotypes and bias play in discrimination beyond gender and might also provide opportunities for students to examine their own thinking about identities such as race, class, language, or ability and the intersectionality of these identities. Given the degrees of marginalization described by Jiménez (2021), such opportunities are vital to understanding complex experiences of oppression in order to work for justice.

**Limitations**

This study has three limitations. First, while the unit serves as a promising foundation for introducing gender-based injustice, it does not address the intersectionality of identities. Upholding binary, stereotypical notions of gender contributes to discrimination, but the interplay other identities, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity greatly impact the severity of oppression and must be a focus in research and practice. Second, this study was conducted as a voluntary, online extracurricular course taught by a doctoral student studying gender equity. This raises the issue of ecological validity, as my implementation of the study is removed from the complex context of an elementary classroom. Implementation of this unit by an elementary teacher in a physical classroom setting will likely afford both benefits and challenges that may impact the findings. Third, the intervention took place over a short time-period: three weeks. The impact of the study in such a short period is promising, however more research is needed in order to understand how shifts in perception might last over time.

**Future Research**

Future research should expand the foundation of this unit in order to delve more deeply into issues of gender identity and intersectionality, especially intersectionality around gender and race. Using similar critical literacy practices to explore how complex identities experience discrimination based on stereotypes is a vital area of expansion that will benefit both research and practice. In addition, future research may focus on the impact of conducting this study within a classroom setting and over a longer period of time. Researchers may also be interested in how to support teachers who wish to incorporate critical literacy practices to teach about gender in their classroom. Last, future researchers should expand this work to examine whether shifts in perceptions will last over time. In addition, I believe it would be valuable to implement adaptations of the unit described in this study with students of different ages and across different

contexts. Given the role of socialization, it may be interesting to see how the lessons impact perceptions of students in different grade levels and/or different school settings. I would also like to utilize a project-based approach (Halvorsen et al., 2012) to integrating social studies and critical literacy practices in order to address issues of gender in a more student-led, authentic setting.

## Conclusion

Evelyn's scream of frustration at the thought of gender stereotypes that limit individuals to binary, prescriptive norms joins one young voice with many others who continue to protest injustice. Research suggests that societal expectations that position expressions of gender as right or wrong have a long history of harming individuals and society as a whole (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Tostivint, 2019). Elementary students can and should have opportunities to analyze and critique perceptions of gender that uphold inequity. Supporting teachers in providing these opportunities is vital (List, 2018). This study builds on literature regarding the role social interaction in forming gendered perceptions and begins to explore the potential of critical literacy practices to complicate gender stereotypes (Bandura, 2008; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002; Olsson & Martiny, 2018). The study demonstrates that critical literacy practices such as interactive read-alouds, restorying, and text-pairing may form a foundation for challenging both explicit and implicit stereotypes with elementary children. Thus, these practices may offer promising steps toward creating more advanced and inclusive ideas about gender for children to share with the world.

**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A**

Standards Addressed by the Unit Plan

| Learning for Justice Anti-Bias Standards | |
|---|---|
| Kindergarten- Second Grade | Third- Fifth Grade |
| DI.K-2.6. I like being around people who are like me and different from me, and I can be friendly to everyone.<br><br>DI.K-2.9 I know everyone has feelings, and I want to get along with people who are similar to and different from me.<br><br>JU.K-2.11 I know my friends have many identities, but they are always still just themselves<br><br>JU.K-2.13 I know some true stories about how people have been treated badly because of their group identities, and I don't like it.<br><br>AC.K-2.16 I care about those who are treated unfairly | DI.3-5.6 I like knowing people who are like me and different from me, and I treat each person with respect.<br><br>DI.3-5.10 I know that the way groups of people are treated today, and the way they have been treated in the past, is a part of what makes them who they are.<br><br>JU.3-5.12 I know when people are treated unfairly, and I can give examples of prejudice<br><br>JU.3-5.13 I know that words, behaviors, rules and laws that treat people unfairly based on their group identities cause real harm.<br><br>AC.3-5.20 I will work with my friends and family to make our school and community fair for everyone, and we will work hard and cooperate in order to achieve our goals. |

| C3 Framework Standards | |
|---|---|
| Second Grade | Third Grade |
| D2.His.3.K-2. Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped a significant historical change.<br><br>D2.Civ.8.K-2. Describe democratic principles such as equality, fairness, and respect for legitimate authority and rules.<br><br>D2.Civ.10.K-2. Compare their own point of view with others' perspectives.<br><br>D2.Civ.14.K-2. Describe how people have tried to improve their communities over time. | D2.His.3.3-5. Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped significant historical changes and continuities.<br><br>D2.Civ.8.3-5. Identify core civic virtues and democratic principles that guide government, society, and communities<br><br>D2.Civ.10.3-5. Identify the beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and values that underlie their own and others' points of view about civic issues.<br><br>D2.Civ.14.3-5. Illustrate historical and contemporary means of changing society. |
| Common Core English Language Arts Standards | |
| Second Grade | Third Grade |
| CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.3 Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges. | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3 Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how |

| CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.6 Acknowledge differences in the points of view of characters | their actions contribute to the sequence of events |
|---|---|
| CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.6 Identify the main purpose of a text, including what the author wants to answer, explain, or describe | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.6 Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters. |
| CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.3 Write narratives in which they recount a well-elaborated event or short sequence of events, include details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide a sense of closure. | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.6 Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text. |
| CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.1 Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about *grade 2 topics and texts* with peers and adults in small and larger groups. | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. |
| CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2 Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media. | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 3 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.1.D Explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion.<br><br>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.2 Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. |

Unit Overview

| Thinking About Thinking: Students Fighting Stereotypes | |
|---|---|
| **Big Ideas:** | |
| 1. Harmful gender discrimination and stereotypes exist today (Weeks 1-2) | |
| 2. We can help challenge stereotypical thinking about gender roles and norms (Weeks 2-3) | |

| Week | Guiding/Essential Question |
|---|---|
| 1 | What are gender stereotypes? <br><br> Why are they harmful? |
| 2 | What are explicit (On Top) Stereotypes <br><br> What are implicit (Deep Down) Stereotypes |
| 3 | How do stereotypes contribute to discrimination? <br><br> How can I challenge explicit/implicit gender stereotypes <br><br> in others? |
| **Week** | **Brief Description of Activities** |
| 1 | Interactive Read-Aloud: *Pink is For Boys* by Rob Pearlman <br><br> Restorying: Students listened to and critically analyzed the story Snow White, then <br><br> rewrote them in ways that challenged gender stereotypes. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 2 | Interactive Read-Aloud: *I Love My Purse* by Belle DeMont

Fictional Narrative Writing: Students reflected on our own implicit stereotypes, then used an "elements of fiction" graphic organizer to write a story in which the main character challenged that stereotype. |
| 3 | Interactive Read-Aloud: *Miss Mary Reporting* by Sue Macy

Text Pairing Students analyzed examples of past and present gender-based bias to investigate how discrimination persists in present-day

Student-Led Project: Students developed and collaborated on a project intended to combat gender stereotypes |

**Appendix C**

Interview Protocol

| **Pre- and Post- Student Interview Questions** |
| --- |

1. Let's pretend we are writing a story about three characters

   a. What would you name them?

   b. What would this character be like?

   c. What would this character be interested in?

      i. (Questions B & C will be a word sort, with students choosing words to line up under each character)

   d. What might they want to do when they grow up?

   e. If we wrote a story about an adventure, who would you have as the main character? Why?

      i. A family story?

      ii. A story about someone running for president?

      iii. A story about being a nice friend?

2. Give students a copy of *Sparkle Boy* (Pre-Interview)/*Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Post-Interview) (then repeat with *Sleeping Bobby* (Pre-Interview)/*My Name is Not Isabella* (Post-Interview)

   a. Would you please look through this text for a moment? You don't need to read it right now, but look through the pictures and tell me:

      i. What do you notice?

      ii. What surprises you?

      iii. What are your feelings about what you see in this book?

3. I have just a few more questions for you:

    a. Can you tell me some people in the world that you think are really important, or are doing really important things?

        i. In history

        ii. Today

    b. What important things do you think men do in the world?

    c. What important things do you think women do in the world?

    d. Do you think men and women can do the same things?

        i. Have they always been able to do the same things?

    e. Do you think men and women have the same rights?

        i. Have they always had the same rights?

## Appendix D

Parent Survey Questions

| **Parent Survey** |
| --- |
| 1. Have you talked about gender with your child, prior to this course, and if so, in what ways? <br><br> 2. Why did you want to enroll your child in this course? <br><br> 3. What (if any) worries or concerns did you have coming into this course? <br><br> 4. What (if anything) did you learn about your child's thinking/ideas about gender throughout the course of this class? <br><br> 5. What (if any) conversations/observations/comments outside of class time were sparked by this course? <br><br> 6. Were there any books that your child mentioned specifically? <br><br> 7. What do you hope stays with your children after this course? <br><br> 8. What (if any) are some questions or areas you would like to know more about in terms of gender/gender stereotypes, for yourself? For your child? <br><br> 9. Is there anything else you would like me to know? |

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**ARTICLE TWO**: **THE POTENTIAL OF INTERACTIVE READ-ALOUDS TO INTERROGATE STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF GENDER EQUITY AND WOMEN'S HISTORY**

In the quest to support meaningful civic 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 challenge injustice and promote 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 (Busey & Walker, 2017). It is, after all, difficult for students to fight problems that they do not know exist.

Opportunities to actively learn about and dismantle systemic injustice have always been of great importance, with a need for education that dismantles oppression and respects human rights continuing today (Todres, 2018). 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 (Vickery, 2017).

In the face of gender-based injustice, 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 is to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive women's roles and contributions before and after participation in a three week literacy-based intervention?

2. How do students perceive gender inequity before and after participation in a three week literacy-based intervention?

First, I present a theoretical framework and review of the literature. 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, 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 (Salinas, Fránquiz, & Rodríguez, 2016), and draws from theories regarding feminist pedagogy and the importance of understanding students'

perceptions about history and the social world. 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 civic 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). While there are many kinds of feminist pedagogies, for the purposes of this study I draw from Mayberry's (1998) definition, which states that 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 an ideal place to implement feminist pedagogy, as students may learn to behave in ways that challenge the perpetuation of discrimination over time. 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.

An examination of gender inequity must include the amplification of women's voices and experiences, which are largely missing from traditional social studies education (Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007). Educating for American Democracy (EAD) (2021) argues that when students are presented an unchallenged dominant historical narrative at an early age, it

becomes more difficult for them to grapple with understanding hard histories and systemic injustice later in life, as they must make sense of two opposing narratives. Thus, they argue, traditionally marginalized narratives must be amplified with even the youngest students. This is especially true in regard to narratives that have been further marginalized based on intersecting identities. Oppression and inequity experienced by women has not been experienced in one homogenous way, as identities such as race, class, gender identity, and language impact the degree to which individuals experience marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991; Jiménez, 2021). Buchanan and Wiklund (2020) describe this intersectionality as multiple layers of oppression and argue, "Given that individuals are subject to particular stereotypes and victimization consistent with their unique intersected identities, attention to intersectionality is essential." (p. 310). Thus, while this study seeks to address one layer of oppression, it seeks to provide a foundation on which to expand more fully into the identities such as race and gender identity and provides specific suggestions for expanding the intervention described in this article.

This study also draws from an understanding that to best teach about gender inequity, we must understand how students think about gender, specifically women's history and women's rights. Brophy and Alleman (2005) argue that teachers and scholars must not assume that students understand social studies concepts simply because they live in the social world. They warn that while students do interact with many aspects of society on a daily basis, their understandings may be "confined to knowledge about how things are without accompanying understandings about why they got to be that way, how they vary across cultures, or the mechanisms through which they accomplish human purposes" (p. 425). They may, therefore, have ready knowledge about their own experiences without a larger, contextualized understanding of social systems and varied cultural practices. They may not, thus, fully

understand the historical and contemporary pervasiveness of gender-based inequity. Thus, it is vital to probe children's perceptions to understand how students think about social constructs and what misperceptions might be in place in order to scaffold new understandings and complicate misperceptions (Brophy & Alleman, 2006).

## Literature Review

This study is grounded in 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 in the following areas: (1) the representation of women and in elementary social studies curriculum and instruction, (2) women's rights and the perception of progress;  and (3) addressing gender injustice through social studies and critical literacy practices.

### Representation of Women in Elementary Social Studies Curriculum and Instruction

Social studies education should provide ideal opportunities to support civic 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 (Schmeichel, Hawkman, Rodriguez, & Santiago, n.d., p. 1). Unfortunately, research indicates that time devoted to social studies education continues to dwindle in elementary social studies (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 et al., 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 (Hahn et al., 2007; Chu, 2017).

This lack of accurate representation has classroom-wide implications. The C3 Framework calls for all students to know and understand societal constructs in history and contemporary society (NCSS, 2013), yet few elementary teachers may 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, 2008). 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).

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). This narrative of progress is a way of framing United States history as a linear story of continually overcoming adversity, leaving systems of inequity firmly in the past. Santiago (2017) applies this narrative 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 racial discrimination and systematic oppression. During a four week case study of a high school U.S. history class, Santiago observed class session, coded class materials, and interviewed students regarding their understanding of the *Mendez v. Westminster School District* case. She found that although students engaged with several resources regarding the case, they tended to oversimplify and even modify the case to fit within a narrative of progress. An adherence to an oversimplified notion of societal progress rejects the complexity of history in favor of a linear story of success that places oppression firmly in the past (Santiago, 2017; Santiago, 2019).

This narrative progress is widely believed in society, even into adulthood. Onyeador et al. (2020) found that the narrative of racial progress allows white, adult citizens to underestimate past economic inequity and overestimate contemporary economic inequity. The authors divided over 600 participants among two groups, with an experimental group reading articles about the continued economic impact of racism and a control group reading an article about left-

handedness. They found that while participants who read about racism did show a reduced belief in a narrative of progress, they actually achieved this by adjusting their ideas of historical inequity, not contemporary. The authors explained that participants "adjusted their perceptions of racial economic equality in the past, perceiving it as more equal, which allows them to leave their estimates of the current state of racial economic equality unchanged." (p. 761). Taken together, these studies indicate that a belief in continued social progress can impact how people see both the past and the present. While little research exists to investigate the relationship between the narrative of progress and student thinking about gender, it is logical that the notion of perpetual social progress may promote false notions that gender equity has been reached. 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.

**Addressing Gender Injustice Through Social Studies and Critical Literacy Practices**

Challenging both the stereotypical representations of women and the misperception of having reached gender equality in contemporary 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).

Critical literacy practices may provide promising tools for teaching about gender equity with elementary students. While critical literacy practices can be conducted in many ways, this study defines these practices as any literacy activities that support students in thinking critically about the social and political world (Bishop, 2014). These activities are often used to engage students in discussions, texts, and writing activities that are intended to help uncover systems of oppression. 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).

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, 2021). 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 contemporary 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.

Critical literacy practices can also be used to emphasize marginalized narratives, which EAD (2021) has described as an essential part of civic education. Demoiny and Ferraras-Stone (2018) recommend using a text-pairing activity to help students think critically about the dominant historical narrative. They argue that presenting texts that challenge the dominant narrative alongside more traditional classroom texts allows students to explore, rather than ignore, varied perspectives while also reflecting on how marginalized perspectives are othered in curriculum materials. They specifically advocate for using texts that challenge a narrative of social progress and instead allow children to grapple with ongoing, complex oppression (Cronon, 1992; Onyeador et al., 2020; Santiago, 2017). Tschida and Buchanan (2015) describe the use of text sets, or collections of several texts that each explore an overarching topic from different lenses, to support historical analysis and critical thinking. Like Demoiny and Ferraras-Stone (2018), the authors encourage teachers to use texts that complicate traditional historical narratives by providing new  and even conflicting perspectives. They also emphasize the role of using text sets to introduce and explore controversial issues with elementary students.

Using critical literacy theory to emphasize marginalized narratives also creates important opportunities to address intersectionality. Woyshner and Schocker (2015) highlight the need for critical literacy through their analysis of three high school social studies texts. They found that Black women continue to be both under-represented and often essentialized in curriculum materials. They call for schools to help students navigate multiple, intersecting identities, creating space through materials and instruction. Schocker (2014) argues that visual literacy skills can help answer this call, as the use of images in texts may allow students to investigate

and make sense of complexities in history. In addition, Vickery and Salinas (2019) illustrate the value of analyzing texts to critique the portrayal of varied aspects of identity such as race, gender, sexuality and class. Using a case study approach, they examine how two elementary teacher candidates helped students create journey boxes, or boxes of artifacts that counter dominant historical narratives. These artifacts were largely literacy based and often contained primary documents and informational texts. The authors found that engaging in this activity allowed students to examine women's history through an intersectional lens. Taken together, the literature suggests that integrating critical literacy into social studies pedagogy may help amplify women's unique experiences and complicate the traditional portrayal of history. Little research, however, has investigated the impact of this integration on how students perceive women's rights and history. In addition, more research is needed to understand how critical literacy practices can challenge the narrative of progress in elementary social studies contexts.

**The Importance of Addressing Gender Injustice 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 indications 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 (Whitford, 2018; Paley, 1992). Thus, if literacy and social studies education have the potential to guide students to think critically about gender injustice as one layer of oppression (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2020), 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 contemporary 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 discussion were used to answer the research questions:

1. How do students perceive women's roles and contributions before and after participation in a three week literacy-based intervention?

2. How do students perceive gender inequity before and after participation in a three week 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 2.1, participants were relatively diverse in terms of gender and race.

**Table 2.1.**

*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 |

**Table 1 (cont'd)** 5

<div align="center">Did not report</div>

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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.

**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. I chose the texts based on three criteria. First, all texts were engaging (i.e., had captivating illustrations and an interesting storyline) and could easily fit into our 30-minute class sessions while still leaving time for the activities. Second, I attempted to choose texts that represented multiple marginalized identities. *Miss Mary Reporting: The True Story of Sportswriter Mary Garber* (Macy, 2016) features a white protagonist, namely Garber, one of the first female sports reporters in the United States. However, the text illustrates the differences between Garber's experiences with discrimination and the discrimination experienced by Black athletes in the 1940s, providing interesting layers for students to consider. *On Equal Pay Day, Celebrate Women Who Know Their Worth* (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020) and *My Name is Not Isabella* (Fosberry, 2008) are both fairly representative in terms of race, although it's important to note that *My Name is Not Isabella* includes more historical white women than women of Color. This is due to the difficulty I experienced in finding texts that covered multiple historical women in a format that could be read within the required time frame, and speaks to the well-documented need for books that better represent traditionally marginalized groups (Mabbot, 2017). Third, it was important that

the paired-texts, *Miss Mary Reporting* and *On Equal Pay Day,* represented historical and contemporary gender inequity and shared a common theme to help students make firm connections between texts. 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, a white female, who broke barriers by becoming a 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 women 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 reading of 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. Appendix A lists the page numbers and accompanying text excerpts of these stopping points. While the questions remained focused largely on gender, I also made sure to draw attention to the racial discrimination portrayed by the book, especially in

relation to Garber's experiences with discrimination. I also paused as needed to answer questions and provide historical context.

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.

### Text-Pairing: The Gender Pay Gap

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, nd) 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 is an informational resource that 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 text in which a young girl dreams about being several powerful historical women such as Rosa Parks and Marie Curie. The text is a fictional narrative that embeds biographical information about each historical figure throughout the book. 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?

    i. How were they treated the same/differently?

2. Do men and women receive equal treatment today?

    i. How are they treated the same/differently?

In addition to the students' answers to the focus questions, all student discussion was 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. Codes became further refined throughout each reading of the transcripts. For example, during the first read I created a provisional code specific to women's contributions. This code encompassed any student statements regarding women's roles or contributions, or any answers that indicated what the student believed women "do" in the world. This code included a wide range of answers when applied to pre- and post-interview answers. Upon rereading, I created several more specific codes regarding women's contributions based on themes in the student answers. Examples of these codes include household chores/tasks, personal characteristics (such as "be funny"), and social change.

Last, I tallied the number of times students identified men or women as having made important contributions in response to the first interview question (Who are some people you think are important in the world?). 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, indicates that students began to complicate their preconceptions regarding women's societal

roles and gender equity after the intervention. While their pre-interview answers tended to show

a limited view of women's historical roles, it appears that their engagement in critical literacy

activities allowed for 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?

*Identifying Important Women*

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, the first question asked students to name anyone they felt  was important in

history and in contemporary society. In response, the majority of students named male historical

figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, and Martin Luther King Jr. The students

named only two historical women, Ruby Bridges and Viola Desmond. While some students did

list their female family members in response to the question, in total only 30% of the student

answers included women. An important note: only female students named women.

In post-interviews, however, both male and female students were far more likely to

identify women as important figures, and the women they named were expanded. 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. In addition, some students introduced women who were not discussed as a class

such as Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In all, 56% of students' responses to the question about figures

who made important contributions in post-interviews were women. Table 2.2 compares the number of references students made to male and female historical figures from pre-to post-interview. Of the students to name women in their answers during post-interviews, 57% were girls and 43% were boys. Table 2.3 describes the gendered differences in students who named women as important figures from pre- to post- interviews.

**Table 2.2.**

*Students' Pre- and Post- Responses about Important Figures*

| Historical/Contemporary Figure | Pre-Interview | Post Interview |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Percentage Woman | 30% | 56% |
| Percentage Man | 70% | 44% |

**Table 2.3.**

*Gendered Differences in Participants Who Named Women as Important Figures*

| Participants Who Named Women as Important Figures | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Pre-Interview | | Post-Interview | |
| Female | 100% | Female | 57% |
| Male | 0% | Male | 43% |

***Describing Women's Contributions***

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 contribution to society during the pre-interviews, the majority of students either chose not to answer or focused on women as wives and mothers. Several students referenced cleaning, cooking, and caretaking. One student stated, "I don't know. The only thing I could think of is only men. Because they work. And women clean," while another added, "women be nice to people." Only two children mentioned women having careers, with one 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. One student proclaimed that women, "stand up for what's right," while another described women as being "hard-working and sturdy people [who] don't give up easily." Elaborating on this theme, another student 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."

### *Connecting to Gender Equity*

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!" Interestingly,

this child declared that women would engage in police work while continuing to use the term "policeman." One student especially highlighted this theme by stating, "[Women] can do everything that men do, and [men and women] both help women get equal rights."

One student directly indicated an awareness of women's lack of representation in history in her post-interview. When asked to name an important historical figure, she 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, her response demonstrates a need for more teaching on this subject.

**Student Perceptions of Historical and Contemporary 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 contemporary 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 appeared to be better able to demonstrate new understandings about gender discrimination.

*Acknowledging Contemporary Inequity*

Prior to taking part in the intervention, students tended to describe a narrative of progress (Santiago, 2019) in which they described a society that 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, one child explained, "[Men and women] used to get treated differently but now they get treated the same." Another 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, one child exclaimed, "Well not back then but yeah, right now. Gosh!" Interestingly, one student 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 contemporary 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, one male student 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. See Table 2.4 for a comparison of student's answers about inequity from pre- to post- interviews.

**Table 2.4.**

*Students' Awareness of Historical and Contemporary Inequity in Pre- and Post-Interviews*

| Student Answers | Pre-Interview | Post Interview |
|---|---|---|
| Acknowledged Historical Inequity | 68% | 94% |
| Acknowledged Contemporary Inequity | 29% | 89% |

Again, this theme was consistent across both male and female participants. One student explained the changes in her thinking by saying, "Women sometimes get treated badly and men get treated goodly 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." Another child 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. One student 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." This answer also demonstrates a new understanding of stereotypical thinking, as no students used the work stereotype in the pre-interviews. 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.

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 didn't know how men and women were treated differently. Only 14% of student answers contained specific examples of discrimination. In post-interviews, however, students were able to illustrate more complex thinking about unequal treatment, both historical and contemporary. Specifically, 72% of student answers contained specific examples of discrimination. 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. One child 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. 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."

Second, 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.

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

Although answers were centered on gender, the primary focus on the intervention, one student 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 integrating social studies instruction with critical literacy practices to help young students think critically about the presence and persistence of gender-based inequity. 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 may have become better aware of the presence of injustice and thus potentially more prepared to act as informed democratic citizens (EAD, 2021; 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 narrative 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 challenge stereotypical perceptions 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 review). In much the same way, students expressed a more complex view of women's roles and contributions after engaging in critical literacy practices. This study builds on these previous findings by demonstrating that literacy activities may also challenge traditional thinking about women's rights and about the contributions of women in contemporary 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.

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; Onyeador et al., 2020; Santiago, 2019). Findings confirmed this research, with students nearly universally acknowledging only past inequity in their pre-interview. This study pairs research regarding the narrative of progress with research emphasizing the importance of challenging dominant historical narratives through critical literacy activities (Demoiny & Ferraras-Stone, 2018; Woyshner & Schocker, 2015; Tschida & Buchanan, 2015; Vickery & Salinas, 2019). This previous scholarship shows that critical literacy activities allow students to complicate the dominant narrative by grappling with new perspectives and counternarratives. This study indicated that these activities can also allow students to complicate the narrative of progress to better understand ongoing, contemporary gender inequity. After pairing 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 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. The students post-interview descriptions of gender-inequity were descriptive and emphatic, with students showing frustration toward gender-based discrimination. It is possible that these empathetic reactions provide a foundation for social action, as this frustration may inspire students to challenge this discrimination.

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 B 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 historical discrimination such as *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 contemporary 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, 2010; 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 student 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, caution needs to be applied when making claims about the power of this intervention with a broader group of students. 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 and was taught by a graduate student studying elementary students' perception of gender. While the lessons emphasized interaction, future in-person studies led by elementary teachers 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.

## 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 as well as the ways in which curricular materials often perpetuate stereotypes. They must be provided opportunities to develop 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 have, in both past and present,  shapes 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 promise 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.

**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A**

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. |

**Appendix B**

Suggested NCSS Texts for Extension Activities

| Title and Author | Description |
|---|---|
| *Brazen: Rebel Ladies Who Rocked the World* by Pénélope Bagieu | 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. |
| *History vs Women: The Defiant Lives that They Don't Want You to Know* by Anita Sarkeesian and Ebony Adams | 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." |
| *Shaking Things Up: 14 Young Women Who Changed the World* by Susan Hood | 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. |
| *What Would She Do?: 25 True Stories of Trailblazing Rebel Women* by Kay Woodward. | 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 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. |

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**ARTICLE THREE: PAIRING INTERACTIVE READ-ALOUDS AND RESTORYING TO EXAMINE IMPLICIT GENDER STEREOTYPES WITH ELEMENTARY STUDENTS**

"Literacy was always connected to social justice and change for the rights of humanity"

-Dr. Gholdy Muhammad (2020)

Teachers and researchers have long recognized the value of content integrated literacy instruction, and this instruction has gained even more attention in recent years (Duke, 2016). Authentically connecting literacy to subject area knowledge has been shown to support students' literacy development, especially in the areas of vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation (Cabell & Hwang, 2020), creating powerful opportunities for students to grow as readers and writers. Content integrated literacy also allows teachers to purposefully connect literacy to issues of equity and justice. Although a growing body of research supports the importance of content integrated literacy (Cabell & Hwang, 2020), more resources and even specific lesson plans may be needed to support teachers as they seek to connect their literacy instruction to important social issues. This study seeks to provide teachers with a framework for supporting students' understandings of fictional narratives through a lesson focused on dismantling implicit gender stereotypes.

Pairing literacy instruction with opportunities to explore and challenge gender stereotypes may also be an important way to create a classroom culture in which every student feels welcome, valued, and affirmed. Every day, in every interaction, students are forming an understanding of the world around them. Moreover, they are forming an understanding of how they fit in the world (Brophy & Alleman, 2015; Crocco, 1997). It is, therefore, vital for teachers to support the unique identities of their students (Paris, 2012). One way in which teachers may accomplish this goal is through addressing issues of gender. Gender stereotypes are not only

harmful and pervasive, they are often reinforced by classroom curriculum materials (List, 2018).

Dismantling these stereotypes with elementary students is a powerful way of creating a

supportive classroom environment.

Classroom literacy instruction presents important opportunities for affirming each

student, as children draw knowledge of the social world from their engagement in classroom

texts (Laird, 2017; Vasquez, Janks, & Comber, 2019). Due to the influence of these texts on

students' perceptions, literacy instruction has the potential to limit students' identities by

upholding stereotypes, but may also have the potential to support each student by challenging

those stereotypes. The question is, given the documented lack of gender diversity in elementary

reading curriculum materials, how can teachers implement instruction that dismantles, or at least

disrupts, stereotypical thinking about gender?

As a former elementary teacher, I was frustrated by the lack of materials that addressed

gender. This frustration helped inspire this current research project. As a researcher and educator,

I aimed to create and evaluate curriculum that could be easily implemented into elementary

classrooms to help teachers challenge gender stereotypes with young students. This study

focuses on stereotypical gender norms but also seeks to serve as a foundation for future lessons

and future research that explores pedagogy around non-binary gender identities. In this article, I

describe my experiences pairing critical literacy practices, specifically interactive read-alouds

and restorying, to help students understand and think critically about implicit gender stereotypes.

### Gender Stereotypes and Critical Literacy Practices

Research has shown that children develop stereotypes based on gender at a young age,

often categorizing behaviors as "right" or "wrong" based on gender before they even begin

school (Martin & Ruble, 2004; Shannon-Baker, 2020). Elementary curriculum materials tend to

reinforce gender norms by presenting characters in stereotypical ways (Evans & Davies, 2000; List, 2018; Smolkin & Young, 2011). These stereotypes can be extremely harmful, as they present rigid ideas about how gender "should" look. These ideas can limit students' identities as correct or incorrect based on whether they express their identities in traditionally accepted ways (Murphy & Ribarsky, 2013). Stereotypes impact many aspects of children's lives, including how students evaluate themselves and their peers, their choice of friends and activities, and even the content of their reading and writing activities (Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009). In fact, as Bigler and Pahlke (2019) argue, "Gender stereotypes and prejudices appear to influence nearly all facets of individuals' lives, including their academic, occupational, and leisure interests; relationships with others; self-esteem; and mental and physical health" ( p. 305). Given the power of stereotypes to affect even the youngest of students, helping students identify and think critically about gender stereotypes is essential. Classrooms that challenge stereotypes not only create a supportive, inclusive environment (Kilman, 2013), they allow teachers to teach content while also addressing standards that are justice-focused (Learning for Justice, 2016).

In order to challenge gender stereotypes, it's important to understand them on both explicit and implicit levels. Explicit thinking is conscious and controlled. Explicit stereotypes are often visible in how people openly express their beliefs about gender (Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012). Implicit thinking, on the other hand, is automatic and subconscious. Unlike explicit thinking, which can be influenced by social pressure, implicit beliefs are deeply held and less easily swayed (Vezzali et al., 2012). Throughout this study, I utilize these definitions with child-friendly labels to make the concepts more readily accessible for young children. While working with students, I use the terms "On Top" stereotypes for explicit stereotypes and "Deep Down" stereotypes for implicit stereotypes. I chose the label "On Top" to

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describe how explicit thoughts tend to be conscious and easily reached. I chose "Deep Down" to represent how implicit thoughts tend to be help more deeply and may be harder to realize and reflect upon.

While exploring both explicit and implicit thinking is important, it may be especially vital for teachers to challenge implicit stereotypes with their students, as students' natural sense of fairness and justice may mask underlying, unconscious stereotypes. In other words, students may truthfully express a desire for everyone to be themselves and to be treated fairly (explicit) while still holding deeper beliefs about how people should look or act based on gender (implicit) (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016; Latu et al., 2012; Whitford, 2020). Implicit stereotypes can be challenged through purposeful intervention. Researchers have found that using counterstereotypical imagery and highlighting diversity can lessen implicit stereotypes and bias (Blair, Ma, & Lenton, 2001; Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Rudman, Ashmore, and Gary, 2001).

For teachers seeking to challenge implicit stereotypes, using critical literacy practices may be a valuable approach. Broadly, critical literacy practices include literacy instruction that guides students to think critically about the social world (Bishop, 2014). Critical literacy practices are justice- focused and often promote activism (Brownell & Rashid, 2020; Luke, 2018, Vasquez, Janks, & Comber, 2019). In relation to addressing gender, these practices provide excellent opportunities to include counterstereotypical imagery and diverse narratives. Children's books have a profound influence on how students perceive gender (Murphy & Ribarsky, 2013). Books and storytelling tend to reflect cultural truths to students as they navigate and gain understanding of the world around them (Crocco, 1997; Evans & Davies, 2000; Floyd, 2021). Students tend to look to classroom texts to help define what is "normal" or "correct." The lesson

described here, which is part of a larger study utilizing critical literacy theory to teach for gender equity, focuses on pairing two critical literacy practices: Interactive read-alouds and restorying.

**Interactive Read-Alouds and Teaching About Gender**

Interactive read-alouds provide a helpful entry point into critical literacy practices, as they are widely used in elementary classrooms. While interactive read-alouds can be conducted in many ways for a variety of purposes, they can broadly be defined as read-alouds that include purposeful communication between teacher and students. Often, these read-alouds begin by choosing a book to support teaching of a certain topic. Teachers then pre-plan questions and discussions to help students explore the chosen topic. Interactive read-alouds can be a valuable method for challenging gender stereotypes, as teachers have freedom to choose books that emphasize characters in counterstereotypical roles. Trade books such as *Julian is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018), *Sparkle Boy* (Newman, 2017), and *Rosie Revere, Engineer* (Beaty, 2013), among many others, all use engaging text and illustrations to portray main characters who do not align with traditional gender norms. Such books therefore offer a welcome supplement to the classroom curricula. In addition, the interaction between students and teachers creates opportunities for teachers to purposefully highlight, analyze, and discuss not only the portrayal of gender in the text but also students' own reactions to that portrayal. Reflecting on their own perceptions during an interactive read-aloud of the text *I Love My Purse* (DeMont, 2017) serves as the foundation for this lesson.

**Restorying and Teaching About Gender**

Restorying is another critical literacy practice that can be used to challenge gender stereotypes. Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) define restorying as "a process by which people re-shape narratives to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences which are often missing

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or silenced in mainstream texts" (p. 314). Restorying can be thought of as the act of breaking a narrative into its essential elements and then rewriting selected elements to provide new stories and perspectives. Thomas (2019) describes several elements that students may choose to restory, including the setting, the perspective from which the story is told, and the identity of the main characters. Through this practice, students to actively combat the lack of diversity in books by highlighting their own identities and amplifying marginalized experiences (Thomas, 2019; Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). Bishop (1990) has long called for the inclusion of books as windows through which students can understand the experiences of others, mirrors in which they can see themselves reflected in the text, and sliding glass doors that provide transformative experience, yet lack of diverse representation in children's books continues today (Henderson et al., 2020). Restorying provides opportunities for students to see themselves in texts and to examine and better understand the experiences of others. In this way, restorying can be used as an act of resistance; a way to challenge dominant, silencing narratives (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018).

Given the potential of critical literacy practices to challenge gender stereotypes, this article contributes an understanding of how such practices, specifically interactive read-alouds and restorying activities, can be paired to help students understand implicit stereotypes about gender. The goal of this study was to investigate the research question: To what extent can critical literacy practices support students in examining implicit gender stereotypes?

**The Lesson: Pairing Critical Literacy Practices to Investigate Implicit Bias**

I taught this lesson as part of a longer unit intended to challenge gender stereotypes through critical literacy practices. Due to the restrictions put in place by both my Human Research Protection Program by my university and the school districts in which I aimed to do

research caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, I needed to teach the lesson virtually rather than in person. However the lesson can be easily conducted in in-person classrooms. This class was comprised of 18 second- and third-grade students from across the United States and Canada. For three weeks, I met with these students twice a week for 30 minute class sessions, during which we defined gender stereotypes and discussed their impact. Prior to this lesson, we had defined the word stereotypes to mean a widespread expectation for people to behave a certain way based on their gender, or a belief that all members of a gendered group should behave in specific ways (Learning for Justice, n.d.). We had also engaged in an interactive read-aloud of the text *Pink is For Boys* (Pearlman, 2018) and practiced restorying. Specifically, we rewrote fairy tales in ways that challenged gender stereotypes, with students choosing to change different elements of characters, setting, and plot. Having established a foundational understanding of stereotypes, the students were ready to begin examining and challenging their own thinking about gender.

The lesson that is the focus of this article has two parts: First, the students engaged in an interactive read-aloud intended to help them understand the meaning of implicit stereotypes. Second, the students participated in a restorying activity that allowed them to investigate and counteract implicit stereotypes. Below, I describe the lesson and the student responses. I then provide student work as evidence of their learning and describe the benefits of pairing critical literacy practices.

**Lesson Part One: An Interactive Read-Aloud of *I Love My Purse***

This lesson begins with a very common reading strategy: making predictions. I began this lesson by showing the students an isolated picture from the narrative fiction text, *I Love My Purse* by Belle DeMont. In this picture, the main character is shown walking down the street. The character appears to be at ease, taking confident strides and smiling. The character is

wearing bright clothes, including a yellow jacket, maroon pants, blue, flower-shaped sunglasses, and bright red purse. Upon close inspection, readers might notice the character garnering attention from passersby and even a small dog who is looking at the main character. After having students examine the picture carefully, I asked them to make predictions about the plot of the book. I reminded them that a prediction is based on any information that a reader might have, so they should use their thoughts about the image to form their initial predictions. I also reassured them that they would have opportunities to re-evaluate their predictions once we began reading and gained more information.

Hands immediately began to wave, and students reached excitedly for their unmute buttons. The students tended to focus their answers on different elements of the text. Some students focused the character. Sullivan noted, "I think it's going to be about a girl who likes a bunch of different colors and people think she's really crazy and weird." Brady lent his support to this prediction, stating "I agree!" Other students were more likely to focus on the plot and/or the setting. Sam noted, "I think...a person that maybe is at school and she's new and she's going to make new friends." Mara piped in, "Yeah! She could be moving to a new school, new city, new everything and she might be treated differently." Some answers encompassed but each story element. For example, Jordan predicted that, " It will be about a girl that wears sparkly glasses and wears a yellow coat and a red purse and she walks in a town. Maybe she's going to the store."

As I listened to their predictions, I noticed that although each prediction was focused on varied elements of the text, each was built on the same unquestioned assumption, namely that the main character was a girl. Each student specifically named the assumed sex of the character or used feminine pronouns. In actuality, the main character is a boy named Charlie who loves the

purse his grandmother gave him and decides to wear it to school for the first time. His family and friends initially question his decision to wear the purse, but eventually become inspired to embrace their own unique and sometimes gender-defying interests as well.

After listening to students' predictions, I read the first page, which begins with the words, "Every morning Charlie yawned, stretched, then slid his feet into his favorite fuzzy slippers" (DeMont, 2017, p. 1). After perusing his closet, Charlie decides to wear his purse. At the end of this page I stopped and asked students to evaluate their predictions based on any new information provided on the first page. Specifically, I asked what parts of their predictions were correct and whether there were any predictions they wanted to revise. While the students acknowledged that the character was wearing bright colors to school, as they had predicted, they were also quick to point out their surprise. Mara exclaimed, "We all thought it was about a girl! But it's actually about a boy!"

At this realization, I directed the students' attention back to the picture, asking them to reflect on why the class assumed that Charlie was a girl. Overwhelmingly, students cited Charlie's purse, colorful clothing, and flower-shaped glasses. This was a key moment of the lesson, as they had automatically connected brightly colored clothes and accessories with female characters. This provided an ideal opportunity to talk about implicit stereotypes.

I began by defining explicit and implicit thinking, providing alternate, child-friendly labels. Specifically, I defined explicit thinking as "On Top Thinking," explaining that explicit thinking includes conscious beliefs that are at the surface of our minds where we can easily access them. Put simply, they are the thoughts that we know we are thinking (Vezzali et al., 2012). I explained that an explicit stereotype is a belief about how people look or behave (or should look or behave) based on gender. This is different than a generalization, or an

understanding that many members of gendered groups (but not all) may have similar traits, as it attaches an expectation for "appropriate" appearance and behavior (Turner, 2011). As a class we considered examples of explicit stereotypes. Sadie gave the example of someone saying, "You can't wear bow ties, you are a girl! Even though Hermione Granger wears one, so that's not even true!" Brady added, "Or saying boys can't wear earrings." In both scenarios, the students chose an outwardly expressed stereotype. I added that people might also have explicit stereotypes that they think but may not say out loud, as I didn't want students to believe that a stereotype is only explicit when it is spoken and shared with others; in other words, explicit stereotypes can be both thoughts and words.

If explicit stereotypes are "On Top," I explained, implicit stereotypes are "Deep Down." I continued by stating that these stereotypes are the unconscious beliefs about what behavior is "appropriate" based on gender. Again, implicit stereotypes differ from generalizations, in that they may lead individuals to believe that any person who behaves or acts a certain way must belong to a certain gender group (Turner, 2011). I added that implicit stereotypes are automatic, and we can have them without even realizing it (Vezzali et al., 2012). However, if we pay close attention we can figure out our own implicit stereotypes by noticing when we make assumptions or feel certain emotions when we see someone challenging gender stereotypes.

It was also important for students to know that we all have implicit thoughts, and that these thoughts help us navigate our daily lives. I explained that it's important to be aware of our implicit thinking so that we catch ourselves when our thoughts are limiting or harmful (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). I note this here because I wanted the students to be curious about, but not ashamed of, their own thinking so that they may become willing to critically examine their own perceptions in the future without feeling scolded or disparaged.

Last, I asked students to look for examples of both types of stereotypes as we read the rest of the book. Students could signal their observation of a stereotype by placing their hands on top of their heads, at which point we could stop and allow students to describe the stereotypes and whether they believed it was explicit or implicit.

**Lesson Part Two: Restorying Our Own Implicit Stereotypes**

After engaging in the interactive read-aloud and defining On Top (Explicit) and Deep Down (Implicit) stereotypes, the students took part in a writing activity intended to more deeply explore these concepts. To facilitate the writing process, the students had the option to use a graphic organizer with spaces for describing their main character, story setting, and plot, which was divided into beginning, middle, and end. This organizer was familiar to them, as we had used while restorying fairy tales the week before. The goal of this activity was to explore two guiding questions: 1) What are some automatic assumptions that *people* make about gender? 2) What are some automatic assumptions that *you* make about gender?

I began by asking each child to write a name for their main character. I cautioned them to only write a name, going no further with their character descriptions. Once each child had decided on a name, gleefully sharing their choices in excitement as they recorded them, I told them that we were going to try a brand new approach to designing our characters. I asked the students to close their eyes and picture a character based on the name they chose. What does the character look like? What do they enjoy? What is their personality like? Then, the twist. I asked them to critically examine their mental picture to see if they noticed any stereotypes, or characteristics that they automatically associated with their character's gender.

As they reflected on their thinking, I reminded them there is no wrong way of expressing gender and no wrong way of envisioning their character. Rather, it is simply important that we

are aware of our implicit thinking so that we are able to recognize many different expressions of gender. I challenged them to change one aspect of their character in a way that opposed their own implicit thinking about gender. They recorded their new character descriptions, described their settings and began writing their stories. At the end of the class sessions, students had opportunities to share both their original thoughts and also their final stories.

## Findings: What Do Students Take Away From Paired Interactive Read-Alouds and Restorying About Gender?

Pairing critical literacy practices, specifically interactive read-alouds and restorying, allowed students to engage with a complex topic in an exploratory way, and both their verbal responses and completed narratives show a developing understanding of implicit stereotypes. As a whole, the classes appeared to be engaged and interested throughout the lesson and appeared to make growth in their understanding of gender stereotypes. Here, I will focus on the work of one small, focal group of eight students in order to provide a deeper examination of their discussions and classwork. Through teaching this lesson, I found that pairing critical literacy practices appeared to allow students to differentiate between implicit and explicit stereotypes, examine their own perceptions of gender, and write stories that intentionally challenged gender stereotypes.

### Increased Understanding of Implicit Stereotypes

Throughout the lesson, the students showed an overall increasing understanding of stereotypes. During the interactive read-aloud, many students showed this developing understanding by beginning to differentiate between explicit and implicit stereotypes, specifically in relation to how other characters in the text react to Charlie's purse. Many students were quick to point out explicit stereotypes throughout the text. For example, when a character

tells Charlie that he should dress like the rest of the boys, Jason noted that he might have an On Top stereotype about how boys should dress. The students also noted explicit stereotypes when the characters tell Charlie that boys carry around frogs, not purses. Here, Sullivan paused to define explicit stereotypes and classify stereotypical thinking as inaccurate. She exclaimed, "This is a story that people are saying you can't wear that, you can't do this, you can't do that! And then at the end of the story I believe we will correct them all!"

Several students were able to identify implicit stereotypes. This was especially evident when we read about an interesting interaction between Charlie and a crossing guard, during which the crossing guard exclaims, "Hold on, wait a minute! Why are you wearing a purse?" but then compliments Charlie's choice. Although the crossing guard ultimately expresses support for Charlie's counterstereotypical accessory, the students identified implicitly stereotypical thinking, arguing that he wouldn't have stopped to question a female student wearing a purse.

Figure 1 demonstrates one students' new understanding of implicit stereotypes. Although the students were not asked to take notes, Mara chose to record her thoughts throughout the read-aloud. Her notes contain the revised version of her prediction, recorded after reading the first page of the book, important vocabulary from the lesson, and several examples of stereotypes. When I asked Mara to explain her notes to me, she noted that the circled text labeled "Stereotypes" in the bottom left corner included examples of On Top stereotypes such as "telling someone that boys have to wear backpacks, not purses." The circled text in the bottom right hand corner, she went on, contained an example of a Deep Down stereotype. According to her example, a Deep Down stereotype might look like "automatically thinking that when someone is wearing short hair and baseball cap that they are a boy." Interestingly, this is not an example from the read-aloud.

**Figure 1**

*Mara's Notes*
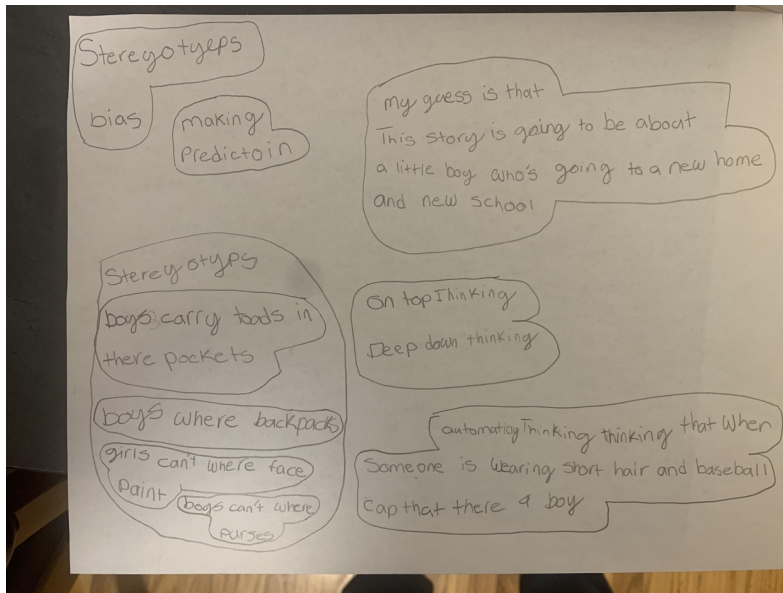


## Opportunities to Reflect on Their Own Thinking

Pairing critical literacy skills also provided opportunities for students to examine their own beliefs about gender. When beginning to plan their narratives, the students immediately grappled with both how they had pictured their character and how they wanted to restory their original ideas to challenge gender stereotypes. Sam explained, "[My character is named] Lilly. What I thought of first was a long haired ballet dancer, tall! So I did the exact opposite of her hair- bald! Lilly is going to break a leg right before the big basketball tournament. So she has to go in a wheelchair and it turns out she's the best basketball player in a wheelchair." Another student, Grace, referred back to her experience with reading *I Love My Purse* (DeMont, 2017). She noted, "I had a Deep Down feeling. In my brain I must have thought [Charlie] was a girl, because then I felt surprised when he was a boy."

An analysis of their own thinking was evident in the narratives students wrote as well. Several students discussed their stories in terms of their own implicitly held beliefs. Sam

restoried her character to make her braver and more adventurous, giving her a career rescuing

tigers. One child, Jordan, took a different approach by beginning with his plot. After deciding he

wanted to write about an excellent marksman, he realized he automatically pictured a boy. Thus,

his final story featured a girl who wins a target shooting competition. An example of a completed

story provides further evidence that students were able to analyze and then challenge their own

thinking. Figure 3 shows a story written by Jesse, who noted that he automatically associates

pink and purple with girls and therefore wrote a story in which a male character wears pink

shorts and a purple mohawk. Interestingly, while the child did not discuss stereotypes about

careers, he did assign his character a potentially counterstereotypical job in a spa.

**Figure 2**

*Jesse's Writing Sample*



Another child, Brady, indirectly challenged binary notions of gender by naming his

character Jenny-Jerry. Although he used she/her pronouns when telling his story, he purposefully

restoried the character's name to be a composite of traditionally male and traditionally female

names. While Brady did not articulate the relationships between implicit stereotypes and the

constructs of binary gender, it's worth noting that after reflecting on his own ideas he chose a name that could not be easily categorized as either female or male.

**Writing Narratives that Challenge Stereotypes**

Other students also showed an ability to write narratives that deliberately challenged gender stereotypes through the interactions of the characters. Figure 2, for example, shows Grace's story, in which a football coach incorrectly assumes that Ronnie, a prospective football player, is a boy. After discovering that the player is a girl, he tells her that girls can't play football. While this story may be less personally connected to the student's own implicit beliefs, it seems to demonstrate an understanding of both automatic, unconscious stereotypes, demonstrated when the coach assumes Ronnie is a boy, and explicit bias, shown when the coach tells Ronnie that girls can't play football.

**Figure 3**

*Grace's Writing Sample*
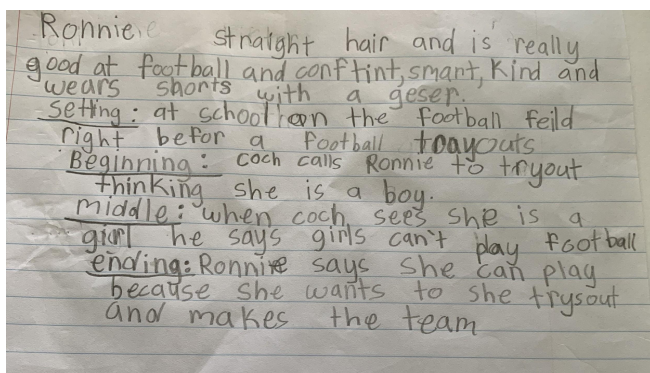


Where Grace's story challenges stereotypes about interests and skills, Jordan chose to disrupt stereotypes about appearances. In his narrative, a female character who is very proud of her mullet, which Jordan considered a masculine hairstyle, goes to a hair salon with her father for a trim. The hairstylists automatically start cutting off the mullet, which upsets the character. In the end, her father stands up for her by telling the stylists that girls can have any hairstyles they

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choose. In both of these stories, students took opportunities to defend counterstereotypical choices through their writing. Such stories were common, with students creating characters that defied traditional stereotypes in appearance and interests. Students even challenged stereotypical personality characteristics by penning adventurous, perseverant girls and nurturing, caring boys. They created complex characters who were less limited by gendered thinking, and they shared their stories with pride.

Overall, it became clear that the use of critical literacy practices is a promising method for challenging explicit and implicit gender stereotypes. In addition, students were highly engaged during the lesson. Several parents reached out to say that their child continued to write far longer than was expected after the class, brimming with excitement to continue their stories. One parent noted that the activity represented a step forward for their child, who was often reluctant to write. It is important to note, however, that more than one lesson will be needed to fully teach about a concept as complex and personal as gender stereotypes. This lesson was taught to students with parent permission via small groups on zoom. Students were able to grapple with the concepts and literacy skills at their own pace and had ample opportunities to ask questions or consider their own thinking. While the lesson is easily transferable to classroom use, students may need more time and instruction to further their understandings of the content in a whole group, in-person setting. In this way, pairing critical literacy activities appears to be a promising step forward into further instruction regarding students' perceptions of gender.

## Classroom Implementation

Although the texts and activities used in this lesson can be adapted for any elementary grade, there are a few components of the lesson that should be included in any variation. First, it is important that the read-aloud utilizes images that directly challenge gender stereotypes.

Research indicates that exposure to counterstereotypical images has the potential to challenge implicit stereotypes about gender (Blair et al., 2001; Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004). Students use books as resources for the world around them (Crocco, 1997), meaning that seeing characters portrayed in counterstereotypical ways can complicate students' preconceived notions about gender and create openings for new ideas and critical conversations about stereotypes. In this lesson, the class focused on an image of a male character with counterstereotypical clothing and accessories, which allowed students to examine their thinking about appearance and gender. However, teachers may choose images that challenge a variety of stereotypes depending on the focus they choose for their lesson. For example, teachers may use images of characters in counterstereotypical careers or hobbies. Using texts that include these images is foundational for this lesson.

Second, it is important to use these images to prompt explicit instruction. During the lesson, teachers must define gender stereotypes and provides opportunities to see and discuss diverse representations of gender expression, as studies have shown that purposefully highlighting diversity can weaken implicit stereotypes and bias (Rudman et al., 2001). In order to counteract implicit stereotypes, students must be aware of the existence and the harmful consequences of bias. Learning about the specific concept of stereotypes while engaging with counterstereotypical imagery provides a foundation for students to critically examine their own perceptions and consider how these perceptions have developed.

Third, teachers should provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own reactions to the texts and ideas about gender in a safe, supportive environment. In order to challenge stereotypical thinking, it is crucial that students recognize their own implicit biases and reflect on where their perceptions may be limiting or even harmful so that they may feel motivated to

dismantle implicit stereotypes (Peterson, Biederman, Andersen, Ditonto, & Roe, 2019). This critical reflection on sensitive issues is best supported by a nurturing environment where students feel safe to explore their thinking (Carter Andrews, Richmond, Warren, Petchauer, & Floden, 2018). Teachers should prioritize ensuring that students are able to discuss their thinking honestly without fear of judgement so that they can accurately and deeply assess their perceptions.

Last, teachers should provide opportunities for students to apply and share their understandings. In this lesson, students used pre-writing strategies to begin fictional narratives that challenged one of their own gender stereotypes. This could be expanded to utilize all stages of the writing process, ending with a polished piece to publish. Students could also use poetry, autobiographical writing, or another format that fits the curriculum and/or students' writing needs. The key is to ensure that students are able to share and discuss their writing and the reasoning behind their counterstereotypical choices. Students learn from social interaction (Bandura, 2008), meaning that they can gain deeper understanding of implicit stereotypes and their own writing through discussion with others. In addition, writing for an audience tends to boost students' writing motivation and skills (Duke, Halvorsen, & Strachan, 2016). Thus, teachers should be sure to culminate their lesson with opportunities for students to engage in writing, sharing, and discussing their new understandings.

## Suggestions for Moving Forward

This lesson serves as a foundation for addressing gender with students, and it is important to consider the many ways teachers can build from this lesson moving forward. Here, I describe a few important areas for expanding this lesson.

First, students should have opportunities to grapple with intersectionality, as discrimination based on gender is exacerbated by the interplay of other marginalized identities (Vickery, 2017). Opportunities to examine the intersection of race and gender may be especially important, as students' descriptions of stereotypes often centered examples of white femininity, especially regarding hairstyles (Carter Andrews, Brown, Castro, & Id-Deen, 2019). It is vital to address gender stereotypes without creating or reinforcing an assumption that all discrimination is experienced the same way.

Second, lessons moving forward may expand more fully into challenging binary notions of gender. This lesson helps students acknowledge how stereotypes impose limitations on individuals' identities. Thus, the lesson provides an opportunity to further break down gender stereotypes in order to help students understand and affirm all expressions of gender and gender identities.

Third, teachers may guide students to more fully explore how gender stereotypes are formed and upheld at a societal level. It's important that students grapple with the complexity of challenging gender stereotypes in a system that often promotes gender norms and roles. Investigating how discrimination functions in a wide-spread, systemic way may help students understand and even perhaps begin to challenge gender injustice.

**Conclusion**

As teachers seek to support their students' unique identities, they may feel limited by the lack of resources for teaching about gender. Research supports the importance of challenging gender norms in elementary classrooms (Bigler & Pahlke, 2019; Murphy & Ribarsky, 2013) while simultaneously illustrating a severe lack of resources for engaging in this work (Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009). Pairing critical literacy practices is one strategy teachers can use to help

students better understand and challenge gender stereotypes. In this study, participating in interactive read-alouds and restorying provided opportunities for students to examine their own gendered thinking and then to actively engage in counteracting implicit stereotypes. These findings serve as a foundation for further research, which may investigate the pairing of other critical literacy practices in order to address issues of gender. In addition, future research should expand more fully into gender identity and intersectionality, especially regarding gender and race. Although this lesson is simply a beginning, it shows the potential of critical literacy theory to begin dismantling stereotypes to support less limited, more inclusive views of the world around them.

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