

Where are the Women?

A Classroom Inquiry into Social Studies Textbooks

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Rosa Parks. Harriet Tubman. Susan B. Anthony. These women are featured prominently in social studies textbooks, and they are among the top ten most “famous Americans” cited by American high school students.¹ However, while these women play starring roles in textbooks, how much attention do other women receive? Is there a gender imbalance in how our social studies textbooks present women’s contributions to society and the country? Given that textbooks tend to emphasize events from political and military history, in which women have played less prominent roles than men, is the underrepresentation of women justified? Would elementary students care if there were a gender imbalance in their textbooks?

This article describes a two-day, upper elementary social scientific inquiry lesson in which students investigate the representation of women in their textbooks by critically analyzing them. In the lesson, students are asked whether they think women and men get equal coverage in their textbook. On Day One of the lesson, they pose hypotheses about their question; collect and analyze data; and answer the question of gender representation with data from their social studies textbook. Day Two, the students take civic action by writing a persuasive essay to the textbook publisher concerning the coverage of women in their textbook. In so doing, the lesson reflects the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts persuasive writing standard (Grade 4, No. 1: Write an opinion piece on a text or topics supporting a point of view with reasons and information).² The lesson requires students to use a variety of skills: conducting inquiry, reading for comprehension, reading for information, analyzing data, and persuasive writing, as they explore the question, “Where are the women?”

Designing the Lesson

In designing the lesson, we drew on two areas of research: social

scientific investigation and gender representation in textbooks. Inquiry and social scientific investigation are instructional approaches that require students to use critical thinking skills to explore problems or questions by systematically analyzing data. The importance of inquiry is reflected in the National Council

for the Social Studies’ College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. These standards are organized around an inquiry arc, in which students develop questions and plan inquiries, apply disciplinary concepts and tools, evaluate sources and draw on evidence, and make their conclusions public and take action.³

History and social studies scholars have found that inquiry is a valuable instructional tool for increasing learning and motivation. For example, in a study of fifth graders, VanSledright found that students who had opportunities to investigate the past were able to critically examine and utilize a variety of sources, demonstrated growth in their ability to analyze, and showed enthusiasm for the subject matter.⁴ Jennings and Mills conducted a longitudinal study of inquiry in a public elementary school in which they found that the use of inquiry supported meaningful learning experiences and engaged learners.⁵

We also build on the scholarship about how social studies textbooks present women. Various studies have shown that women are severely under-represented in U.S. history and social studies textbooks. In response to this neglect, Woyshtner offers ways in which teachers can facilitate a critical examination of how women are featured in textbooks to raise students’ awareness of gender equity.⁶ The lesson in our study also focuses on gender equity but in a different way—by having students examine the number of women in their textbook compared to men. In an examination of gender representation in three American history textbooks (one book at each level: elementary, middle, and high



school), Kay Chick found significantly more men than women represented in both images and content.⁷

There has been some progress over time; contemporary textbooks' attention to women has vastly improved. In his analysis of textbooks in the twentieth century, Zimmerman found that, while the dominant message of "American exceptionalism" persists in U.S. social studies textbooks, more women, as well as people of color, are now included in the national narrative. Textbooks have become more integrated, highlighting the impact of people who had been previously excluded (e.g., Cesar Chavez, Sojourner Truth, and Pocahontas).⁸ However, while progress has been made, women are still minor actors in most textbooks. When students study textbook accounts of the past to try to make sense of what, when, and how events happened and who was involved, their perceptions may be affected by these representations. Thus, "history" is not simply what happened in the past but also the dialogue among historians about why and how events unfolded. By having students analyze their textbook's attention to women in this lesson, students joined this dialogue.

Whom Do You Think Of?

Sunshine Hernandez field-tested the first day of this lesson with her fourth graders. We were somewhat surprised, as well as impressed, by students' interest in the inquiry, their indignation by what they found, and their commitment to do something about it. We present a description of Day One of the lesson plan in action to provide readers an insider's perspective on how one teacher effectively enacted the lesson plan.

During the second week of the school year, Sunshine opened this lesson by asking her fourth graders a simple question, "I am curious; when you think of famous people in history, whom do you think of?" Her students sat silent for a few moments, so she said, "I think of Abe Lincoln. I am going to start a list of the famous people we think of," as she wrote Lincoln on a piece of paper displayed by the document camera. Sunshine's example got the ball rolling, and students began to share examples of their famous people. Their list included the "usual suspects:" Rosa Parks, George Washington, President Obama, and Ben Franklin⁹ as well as some not so "usual suspects": Johnny Appleseed, Gustave Eiffel, Elvis Presley, Roald Dahl, and Johnny Cash. Sunshine welcomed all responses but did not add the latter three to the list because the class decided these three people would not be in a history textbook—a decision that reflects their already well-developed notions about what should and should not be included in history textbooks.

Sunshine asked her students to review the list with their tablemates and discuss what they noticed. Then, in the large group discussion, students shared that they are all famous; all

of them, except President Obama, have passed away; and some of them were heroes and presidents. Sunshine then posed the following question: "I could take Rosa Parks and put her in one group, and I could put everybody else in another group. What are my groups based on?" When the students identified gender as the basis for the classification, Sunshine asked whether there were more people in the male or female categories.

Expanding the List

Sunshine said, "Rosa Parks is the only woman on our list of famous people. Hmm. She cannot be the only famous woman. Where else can we find famous women?" A few students pointed toward a stack of history books sitting on a table in the back of the room. Sunshine affirmed their idea, and asked the students what part of the book would be most helpful in locating the women in their textbooks. Students suggested the index and back of the book. Sunshine then guided students to an understanding that places and names would have capital letters. If students weren't sure whether they had found the name of a person, or were unsure as to the gender of that name, she advised them to locate the point in the text clarifying the matter. Students did so with the name "Brigham Young," as they were unfamiliar with the founder of the Mormon religion. They found the line in the text verifying that Brigham was male.

Sunshine assigned pairs of students one or two letters of the alphabet (e.g., the letter "S" might turn up "Smith" and "Sullivan") to investigate. Each pair of students recorded their findings (of numbers of men and women mentioned in a book) on a table. When time permitted, students also noted the kind of coverage (i.e., how much text, whether there was a picture, how the women were dressed, and so forth) that each individual received.

For example, students recorded that there was a picture of Abigail Adams and that, in the running text, she was described as the wife of John Adams. Sunshine circulated among the partners, helping them with the task and asked various questions, such as, "How many men have you found? Did you find the same number of women? How do you know whether this person is a man or a woman? Who are you learning about?"

When the students completed their inquiries, Sunshine brought the class back together and asked each pair to report its findings to the class while she recorded the information on the board. About halfway through the alphabet, one student announced that the column in which women were tallied had a lot of zeros. The class collectively gasped and, as a result, several students tried to explain the findings, hypothesizing that men are more popular and that there were simply more men than women in the world.



This last point prompted Sunshine to ask her class, “Do you think there are more men in the world? Is that true in our classroom?” Sunshine conducted a quick survey of the gender balance in her classroom, asking how many students, total, are in the class (24), and then having the boys stand up and the girls remain seated. The class counted 13 boys and 11 girls. She recorded this information to be used (later in the lesson) to test the hypothesis that there are more men than women. The students continued to share their findings, which she added to the class findings table. When all of the data were collected, Sunshine modeled a quick math computation lesson, adding the numbers in each column. On the basis of the data collected by students, she calculated that 61 men and 7 women were mentioned in the index of the textbook. She observed, “Wow, that seems like a lot, but I want to know if the proportion is the same or different from that in our class. It might be helpful to look at the percentages to compare. We will learn more about percentages this year.” She divided 61 by 68, calculating that 0.897, or 90 percent, of the entries were men; she then divided 7 by 68, calculating that 10 percent of the entries were women.

“Let’s check to see whether the proportions in the book and in our class are the same. We have 24 students—13 boys and 11 girls.” After calculating the proportions, she reported, “54 percent boys and 46 percent girls. Why are our book and our class different?”

Classroom Discussion

Students discussed possible explanations for why there were more men than women included in their textbook. One student asserted that men were simply more popular than women. Another student offered that men were doing important things like fighting in the Civil War. Sunshine responded to this explanation by agreeing that men fought in the Civil War. She then asked, “While the men were fighting, what were the women doing?” Several students responded that women were at home, watching the children and protecting their houses, while the

men were at war. Sunshine then asked, “In our textbooks, do we read about what people do at home?” Several students shook their heads, and she continued: “Usually we read about things that are happening away from people’s homes.” She explained, “Women, especially a long time ago were not politicians, war leaders, business leaders like men. So, it might make sense that there are more men than women in our book.” Antebellum America was an interesting time and place because many women were indeed stepping into the limelight of the public debate over the abolition of slavery (such as Susan B. Anthony and Sojourner Truth). During the war, a few women did take up arms (such as Harriet Tubman, who co-conducted raids on Southern plantations) or serve as spies (such as Mary Bowser, a maid in Jefferson Davis’s household).¹⁰

Sunshine asked students how they felt when all the zeros were being recorded. Students shared feelings of sadness and anger. “Well if we are mad or sad, what can we do?” Sunshine asked. Students made several suggestions, and they “added women into the text” by writing information on small pieces of paper and taping them to the appropriate textbook chapters (calling this method the “improve-a-text strategy”¹¹), using other sources when learning about history (See text below for a selection of NCSS Notable Trade Books focused on women’s history), and sending a letter to the publisher. Sunshine applauded her students for their suggestions and asked, “If we wrote a note, what would our letter say?” to which her students simply stated, “Put more women in the book.”

Possible Extensions

After this student’s comment, Sunshine wrapped up the lesson due to time constraints. Here, we describe several ways the lesson could be further developed. First, as we mentioned earlier, this lesson is a two-day lesson; on Day Two, students write a persuasive letter to the publishers in which they share findings from their inquiry and make recommendations, which integrates literacy with social studies and provides students an

Books about Historical Women,

Selections from the NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Book Lists (2009–2013)

Laurie Halse Anderson, illustrated by Matt Faulkner. *Independent Dames: What You Never Knew about the Women and Girls of the American Revolution*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.

Sue Macy, illustrated by Matt Collins. *Basketball Belles: How Two Teams and One Scrappy Player Put Women’s Hoops on the Map*. New York: Holiday House, 2011.

Sue Macy. *Wheels of Change: How Women Rode the Bicycle to Freedom (With a Few Flat Tires along the Way)*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Children’s Books, 2011.

Marilyn Nelson, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. *Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World*. New York: Dial, 2009.

Anita Silvey. *I’ll Pass for Your Comrade: Women Soldiers in the Civil War*. New York: Clarion, 2008.

Tanya Lee Stone. *Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream*. New York: Candlewick, 2009.

Jonah Winter, illustrated by Susan Guevara. *Wild Women of the Wild West*. New York: Holiday House, 2011.

opportunity to take civic action.

Second, the teacher could develop students' understanding about the reasons for the gender imbalance in social studies textbooks. The teacher could introduce concepts (such as discrimination, diversity, prejudice, access, and stereotypes) that help explain why some groups (such as women, people of color, as well as the elderly, the disabled, children) have had fewer opportunities to be part of the dominant historical narratives that are typically featured in textbooks. The teacher could also lead students in an inquiry about the kinds of events, movements, and people that are privileged in history and the kinds that are downplayed or ignored. For example, in Sunshine's lesson, students' assumptions that Elvis Presley, Roald Dahl, and Johnny Cash did not belong in a textbook could be explored to help students understand textbooks' neglect of popular culture and social history, which tend to encompass more women and people of color than political and diplomatic history. As Levstik and Barton explain, women "have had only indirect access to politics—and as long as politics remain the focus of history, women will appear only when they influence that predominantly male realm."¹²

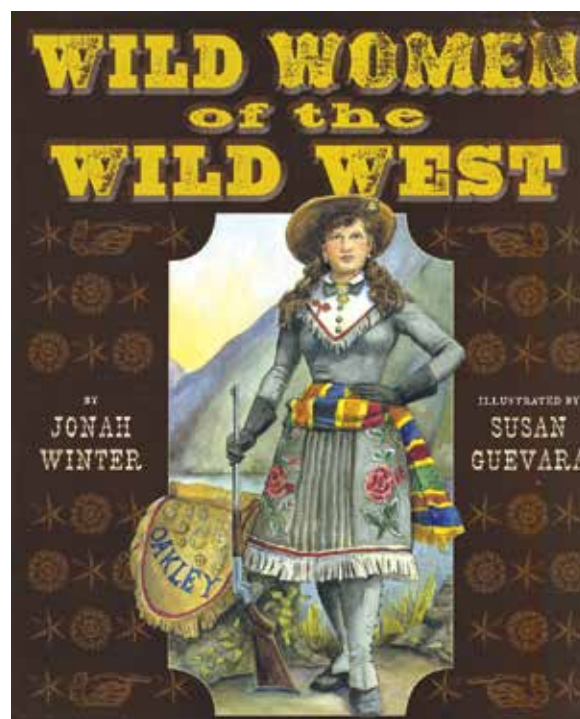
Conclusion

This lesson provides students an opportunity for students to participate authentically in a social scientific inquiry and to use a variety of literacy and social studies skills. The students demonstrated their ability to use text features and to critically analyze the contents of social studies textbook in terms of its attention to gender equality. Students' motivation was high—they demonstrated natural curiosity about the question and frustration with their findings. We hope that this experience will build students' capacities to critically examine other resources. We support students' suggestion to "put more women in the book," and we ask textbook publishers to consider answering these students' call. At the same time, we know that representation is not merely a numbers issue. Rather, it encompasses complex issues of power, opportunity, and access; and the relative importance of political, social, and economic history. We plan to continue conducting important discussions like these with each other and with our students. 🌍

Notes

1. Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano, "Famous Americans": The Changing Pantheon of American Heroes," *Journal of American History* 94 (March 2008): 1186–2012, www.journalofamericanhistory.org/textbooks/2008/wineburg.html.
2. Common Core State Standards and Initiatives: Preparing America's Students for College and Career. "English Language Arts Standards, Writing, Grade 5" (2012), www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/5
3. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013): 17.
4. Bruce A. VanSledright, "Fifth Graders Investigating History in the Classroom: Results from a Researcher-Practitioner Design Experiment," *Elementary School Journal* 103, no. 2 (2002): 131–160.
5. Louise Jennings and Heidi Mills, "Constructing a Discourse of Inquiry: Findings from a Five-Year Ethnography at One Elementary School," *Teachers College Record* 111, no. 7 (2009): 1583–1618.

6. Christine Woynshner, "Picturing Women: Gender, Images, and Representation in Social Studies," *Social Education* 70, no. 6 (2006): 358–362.
7. Kay A. Chick, "Gender Balance in K-12 American History Textbooks," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 1, no. 3 (Winter 2006): 284–290.
8. Jonathon Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
9. Wineburg and Monte-Sano.
10. Thomas B. Allen, *Harriet Tubman, Secret Agent: How Daring Slaves and Free Blacks Spied for the Union During the Civil War* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Children's Books, 2006); Peggy Caravantes, *Petticoat Spies: Six Women Spies of the Civil War* (Greensboro, NC: Morgan Reynolds, 2002).
11. Nell K. Duke, Juliet L. Halladay, and Kathryn L. Roberts, "Reading Informational Text," in *Teaching with the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts: What Educators Need to Know* (Book 1: Grades PreK-2), eds. Lesley M. Morrow, Timothy Shanahan, and Karen K. Wixson, (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), 46–66.
12. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011): 6–7.



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