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## ***Gender and Achievement in Social Studies: Increasing Female Interest and Achievement***

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**A****bstract:** *When a girl fails to be interested in social studies or to perform at her full competency level in the subject area, people often wonder why. Most assume that social studies are just not subjects that girls generally excel in and that it would not be of interest to them unless it only focuses on women's studies. There are two possible reasons that girls underperform in social studies: 1) they are disinterested in the subject matter that is taught; and, 2) the school structure and methods used to teach social studies favor male students and do not tap into topics, domains, and strategies which interest younger females.*

*This paper makes use of scholarly research and contemporary practices in education to explore how educators can increase achievement for both girls as well as boys in social studies classrooms. I propose that we promote gender equity in the social studies and change how it is taught in classrooms to be more gender inclusive. By doing so, educators would be able to include more of the social/emotional domains, which are so important to understanding the social studies as a content area. Single-sex classrooms can be a controversial topic in education today; however, I believe in the context of this discussion, it is important to consider this educational option for teaching social studies as it could enhance and improve the teaching of this very important subject area. In this paper, I elaborate on these ideas and ways to provide more access to both boys and girls so they can meet their full academic potential while feeling comfortable and confident during the process.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Research shows that female students are underperforming in K-12 social studies classrooms (Crocco, 2008; Hayes et al., 2008; Schmeichel, 2015). This literature review is the underpinning of a future study that will use survey methodology to examine gender equity in education, and how the use of single-sex classrooms, changes in pedagogy, and the inclusion of women's history can increase female achievement in the social studies. It reviews the role that society plays and how women are marginalized in the social studies before they even take their first class, leading to a decrease in access and lower achievement. Since this literature review will rely heavily on a feminist view of education, it is important to understand that feminists believe that females live in a male-dominated society, where women are expected to maintain traditional roles. They believe that historically girls have underachieved in various subject areas, and in the past it was unusual for women to choose subjects of study other than those that prepared them for a life of marriage and motherhood. Feminists believe that there is an inherent conflict between the sexes because of how society has short-changed women, and they believe that this imbalance needs to be rectified. This paper uses liberal and socialist feminism to make points about the issues facing students in the classroom today (Bryant, 2015).

Without even giving it a second thought, women are far too often marginalized with regard to their role in education, particularly in the social studies. With examples set forth before them, society often inadvertently sends messages that female students cannot be historians as many of the history teachers and historians are male. Society also tells female students in a subtle manner that they cannot initiate change in society because often men accomplish changes that are important enough to be covered in our social studies textbooks, but females do not. Society often makes females feel that they will never be as successful as men (despite how untrue that statement is) just by the way schools are structured. Generally, women are the teachers and men are the administrators (Maher & Ward, 2002) with 75.9% of teachers being women, and more specifically, 83% of those women teaching at the elementary and middle school level (The Office of Assessment, n.d.). And even though men only make up 24.1% of teachers, they comprise almost 50% of school principals (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). We see gender bias throughout the educational system and by virtue of observation; we continue teaching these biases to our students. Another big problem is in the way we teach and the textbooks we use. If the lives of ordinary women and men are not an integral part of the curriculum, then students will perceive that the lives of those populations must be held at a lower value. If history curriculum does not represent the truths of social history and the lives of women, then students will glean that the care of children, agriculture and the building of societies do not matter (Crocco, 2008). Further, educators have been perpetuating this problem inside the walls of classrooms for years and yet, few seem to care. A team of researchers in 2001 analyzed government and civics textbooks. They examined quotes, graphics and content, finding that 90% of the quotes were from males and 64% of those were European American men. Another study of history textbooks found that European American men who held office received the most attention in textbooks, with Martin Luther King, Jr. being the only exception to that rule. In these studies, women had much less coverage in the textbooks and as such, were seen as a less integral part of history, civics and government (Crocco, 2008).

These studies show exactly where the problems lie and why we should be concerned. It is no wonder that young girls are uninterested and in turn, underperform in the social studies. In a 2007 study of the achievement gap in social studies, researchers found that by fourth grade – the year when students first their the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) social studies test – boys performed better than girls (Chapin, 2006). Girls often begin losing interest at a young age, hence, the social studies achievement gap starts early, despite that in the same NAEP test, and the girls outperformed the boys in reading and literacy skills. If girls are initially demonstrating better skills and scores in the social studies, then one can infer that it is due to what we *don't* teach which is influencing girls' underperformance as they matriculate in school.

This is where we reflect on our problem and ponder, why do boys outperform girls in math and science? This researcher wonders why boys out-interest girls in social studies and as a result, outperform them on Advanced Placement (AP) and other tests. It is important to consider why so few women consider higher education and employment in any of the social studies subject areas. It starts in the schools, where boys and girls perhaps are taught and conditioned to enjoy some subjects more than others and where girls are taught social norms that perpetuate the current, and age-old, status quo of education and employment. My hope is that this future study will both be insightful and educational, and through the research garnered, will help initiate change in the way educators approach social studies education in schools and through their teaching practices.

By way of this research, there are some hoped-for outcomes that are important to note. Teachers and administrators need to make it a priority to teach social studies to all through gender inclusive and equitable

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approaches. It is important that we show young women that they *can* be the change they read about in the history books and that not all of the glory has to go to the men. Men do not always have to be the hero in the story. It would be amazing if more people realized the importance of including women's history in our social studies curriculum. Women have done so much in our world, but in failing to teach about these accomplishments, we seem to be silencing a large segment of the population.

Of equal importance is that educators need to teach boys as well as girls that things and subjects do not have to be gendered or gender-specific. The status quo perpetuation of gender roles over the years does not have to define the next generation of students. Other important outcomes should be increasing achievement for both boys and girls by creating an optimal environment where every student speaks up to work toward equitable civic change. But this can only be done if females feel they are represented in the curriculum. It is important for boys to realize that they can do anything they put their minds to as well, and they should not be limited because some jobs/subjects are "for girls" but if we, as educators, can initiate these kinds of changes, that could result in more students having more positive gender identities and more opportunities in society.

### **1. What makes boys and girls different in the classroom? What causes achievement gaps in various subjects?**

In order to be able to initiate positive change in social studies classrooms, and create an environment where both boys and girls can succeed and thrive, it is important to first understand what makes them different and why they do not, generally, learn the same or show interest in the same types of activities. According to Gurian, Stevens and Daniels (2009), boys and girls' brains are different in almost every possible way. In Lise Eliot (2013) *Single-Sex Education and the Brain*, they contend that brain differences by gender are small in infancy but that differences are drastic and reach their apex during adolescence and into adulthood. These differences affect how students learn. For example, when boys read, they use the left inferior frontal gyrus and girls use the frontal lobe on both sides of their brain. When listening, boys use the left side of their brains and girls use both sides in order to analyze the information they are taking in (Gurian et al., 2009). Boys and girls use the different parts of their brains for different things, this is especially the case when it comes to spatial processing and the sensory system. Because testosterone is the primary fuel for the male brain, boys are generally better able to conduct spatial processing (because testosterone creates denser neural connections to the right side of the brain). This means they have more resources for spatial reasoning, abstract reasoning, etc. Since females have less testosterone, less of their right brain is used for spatial reasoning. Since they have a decrease in spatial reasoning compared to boys, girls develop better literacy skills in order to compensate. This results in the spatial reasoning skills generally being a few years behind in terms of development - until about seven years old - and when such skills are needed, girls tend to struggle. Females tend to have a better sensory system; which means, they can process information through the brain using their senses, more efficiently (Gurian et al., 2009). Maher et al. (2002) note that this is important because it indicates that girls see better, have better hearing, a better sense of smell and can acquire more information through touch. Also, girls have a better ability to identify similarities and differences, a skill that is useful in proofreading. This ability is why girls are usually more willing to check their work (James, 2009).

With such an advantage, one wonders why there are achievement gaps in traditional classroom settings in many subjects? In short, many reasons for achievement gaps have to do with pedagogy and the way certain subjects are taught. When science is taught without the bias that favors boys, girls have an equal chance of discovering a passion for science. In single-sex classrooms, there exists the opportunity for girls to learn that they can become young scientists and mathematicians, that they can be the best in science, the best

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in math, and the best in technology. The single-sex classroom allows teachers to focus on celebrating what girls can do and what girls can become (Maher et al., 2002).

The same can be said about the social studies. If social studies classes were taught without a male bias as is often embedded in the curriculum, girls could start to explore within the context of their own interests and potentially develop a passion for the subject, which would in turn, support them to excel in related fields. Crocco (2008) found that girls generally like to act out what they learn and make skits. However, when faced with the realization that those skits and plays may have to be performed in front of their male classmates, many girls will take a zero on an assignment instead of participating in an activity that they would otherwise enjoy. For this reason, single-sex classrooms could be very beneficial for young girls, especially in middle and high school. Watson, Quatman, and Edler (2002) found that girls educated in single-sex environments reported higher career aspirations and those aspirations remained steady through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, compared to girls in coeducational schools. As for the girls in coeducational schools, their career aspirations showed a major drop off prior to entering the twelfth grade (Watson et al., 2002). However, in the single-sex classroom environment, females maintained their confidence through high school.

When it comes to subject-matter interest, girls are less likely to tell others that they like government, or that it is their favorite subject in school. Rather, unlike their male classmates, they are more likely to state that they trust their government and as a result participate in school government at higher rates (Crocco, 2008). How can girls have so much trust in government, if they dislike studying it so much? The truth is, they do not inherently dislike the subject but rather, it is that the subject, as it is taught in many schools, does not seem have much to offer women. Girls have the capacity and the literary skills to be quite interested in government as a subject, but the way it is taught leaves much to be desired.

## **2. How do we teach boys and girls so that we can close the achievement gap in social studies, while still allowing every student to succeed in the classroom?**

Over the years much research has been done on the roles society and the media play in the lives of individuals. One such study revealed that awareness of the influence society has on what females believe or how they are socialized can do is vast. This can give people confidence or convince people not to try at all. If teachers understand gender differences and how they learn, they can be better prepared to construct lessons that make the material accessible for all of their students (James, 2009). Most girls, and even boys, will not attempt to do something if it does not fit into what they believe is appropriate for their gender. This goes for classroom subjects as well. While boys generally enjoy the details of war and intricacies of battle, girls are usually interested in learning about fairness, social movements, and societies (Maher et al., 2002). With this information in mind, it should be easy to understand how we should teach the social studies to both boys and girls in a way, which demonstrates gender equity.

Although there are always exceptions and not every student will fit the mold exactly or in every way, girls generally learn through a variety of styles, and sometimes how they interact with classroom material can be very different from a boy. Maher and Ward (2002) note that girls connect through relationships, so it is important for them to be able to see how the content that is presented relates to their lives (Maher et al., 2002). It is important for girls to be exposed to female role models in “nontraditional” fields who can help them see what is possible (Maher et al., 2002). They enjoy a wide range of activities, such as: book clubs, creative writing groups, girls-only history projects, acting out scenes, journaling, and celebrating each other’s achievements. James notes further that girls are more likely to pay close attention to what the teacher finds important in order to prepare for the test (James, 2009). Girls are less inclined to use a manipulative (i.e. dice, scales, etc.) to help them learn because they have a lower level of impulsivity than boys do. Therefore,

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in a co-ed classroom, girls are less likely to become involved because the boys are so involved (James, 2009). Girls frequently work better in small groups and even numbers and because they are more relational, odd numbers usually mean that someone will feel left out.

Boys, on the other hand, generally are different and it is important to understand how they learn in order to facilitate their learning in a way that will optimize success. Maher points out that boys often prefer activities that require a lot of movement, and it is important that they drink a lot of water (this will actually help them retain information and focus). They like to learn outside, and competitive activities are great ways to keep boys motivated. Opportunities for discussions and projects that require presentations helps keep boys focused on the content (Maher et al., 2002). It is also important to deliver lessons at a quick pace, include lots of role playing and investigation activities with short- and long-term goals and, provide boys time with partners or in small groups. It is also important for boys to have time for guided writing activities, as they tend to fall behind the girls in their literacy skills. For boys, one must make assignments relevant, and when possible, give them a real authentic audience for their work (Maheret et al., 2002). Also important to note about boys is that they are usually surprised by what they find on tests and often comment that they had never heard or seen that information before. On standardized tests boys can use their systemizing skills to analyze a problem and solve it, which is why they usually do well on those assessment questions (James, 2009).

Understanding the differences that are inherent in boys and girls is an important beginning to understanding how to teach younger children to help them become more successful in social studies classrooms. Since we know they learn differently from one another, it is important that educators provide students with opportunities to develop their own strengths. This can be challenging in co-ed classrooms because resources and time are limited. However, when possible, it is important to provide students with projects and assignments that are gender appropriate that will increase student engagement. But the problem still remains; that even with the best of intentions, that is, great pedagogy and an understanding of how boys and girls learn, girls are simply not as interested as boys in social studies.

### **3. How can we encourage young women to take an interest in the social studies fields?**

It is not a secret that society has a lot to say about what they think a girl should do and/or be. As a result, girls will not do as well in a subject if they believe, or are made to believe, that they will be bad or unsuccessful. If the rule of thumb is that history or geography are ‘boys’ subjects, then girls will assume that they cannot do well and will not try as hard (James, 2009). Also, many girls will not take an interest in a subject area if they cannot put a female face on a related profession. Therefore, if girls rarely see a female face for a specific profession in the media or in books, they are less likely to believe that they can do well in that subject (Maher et al., 2002). Politics is a great example of this. While we are seeing more and more women in politics in the United States, most girls do not consider it a field in which they can achieve. The same could be said for History, Geography, and Economics, and other related disciplines. In order to reverse this thinking girls need role models who are confident, assertive and successful. They need to learn about women who have made social change and who are an integral part of society and history. In addition, boys need to learn about these competent and compelling women in history as well, perhaps even more so than the girls (Maher et al., 2002). Often boys are the ones telling girls that they cannot do something because it is “for boys only” and regretfully, girls listen. It is of equal importance that boys will start to devalue girls because of their inability to see the world from the perspective of the other gender (Maher et al., 2002).

Crocco (2008) states that girls in the United States are more supportive of gender equality than boys, and the same goes for equal rights for women. This means that roughly half the population is unsympathetic

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to equality and rights for women, which has the potential to make it very hard for young girls to begin to value themselves and be able to understand what they can contribute to society, especially in the realm of civic involvement. Schmeichel (2015) notes in her research that in order for gender equality to be taken seriously, there needs to be space in the social studies curriculum to include women. Also, there needs to be an emphasis on how current and past historical, political, economic and societal conditions have been manifested in a way that situates men in a position of power over women and over what is learned in the classroom. Significant changes need to be made to how we teach social studies in order to promote true equality and for that to be modeled in our classrooms.

In the midst of this, there is a mindset that girls who like social studies are less feminine. This makes the subject less appealing to many girls and it is more likely that they will not pick the social studies fields as a career. Many girls feel that they are unwanted in these fields because of the way society still treats women who try to enter into civics-related fields. There are few career fields where women are more marginalized than politics. The way people criticize Hillary Clinton's "power suits" is only one such example. Men in politics do receive criticism for their looks and their style of dress; however, that is rare. Another example is the ridicule of Sara Palin's accent or discourse style, yet, in contrast, if a male candidate has an accent, as does Bill Clinton, then it is considered charming and adds to his charisma. Just recently, according to CNN, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Donald Trump stated, in reference to Carly Fiorina, (the only woman running in the 2015-16 Republican primary), "Look at that face! Would anyone *vote* for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next *President?!*" (Kopan, 2015). Trump has complained that he too has been criticized for this hair, but he has not been so blatant in his criticism to his male counterparts for their appearance. Girls recognize these double standards and observe them, making them less likely to want to enter many civic/social studies fields. The example these "leaders" and the media are setting for young women is appalling.

But these are not the only obstacles our society has to overcome with respect to women in certain fields of study. James (2009) argues that, the problem is access. Women who want to have a family are penalized for the time that takes away from career and educational pursuits. Again, it is fair to mention the 2008 presidential elections. When people realized that Palin had a son with Down's Syndrome, many of her critics suggested that she should be a stay-home mom, taking care of him; however, no one would ever say that about a male candidate and his family. In fact, when John Edwards announced that his then-wife was fighting terminal cancer and he still ran for president, he arguably received more pity than criticism for his decision.

It is no secret that women face a double standard when pursuing careers. They are criticized for not being good wives or mothers, but when they don't work, they are often labeled as *only a housewife*. How are we in society supposed to expect our young female students to make career choices in civics-related fields when this is what females are seeing in the media? Also, women and girls know that they are not held in as high of a regard as their male counterparts when it comes to job status and pay. As more women enter a given career field, the prestige of that field drops, yet the opposite is true if men enter a field that had formally been a female career choice; i.e. nursing. With more men entering nursing as a career, both the salaries and the prestige of that field are rising, especially for men (James, 2009). With all this, it would make sense that girls would do very well in careers in the social studies. They have excellent literacy skills and starting from birth, girls are interested in faces, while boys are interested in objects. This explains why girls tend to be more interpersonal and relational compared to boys (James, 2009). For this reason, one would think girls would be *shoe-ins* for politics and civic duty. Why then do we see so many male faces holding

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important and prestigious roles? One way to rectify these stereotypes in society is to teach civics at an early age, focusing on both female and male role models.

#### **4. How do social studies textbooks and pedagogy hold us back?**

The truth is, one of our biggest problems is the textbooks themselves. The research shows that gender inclusion was not a priority when most states created their curricular frameworks (Crocco, 2008). Albeit that 12 of the 23 total members of the California History-Social Studies Curriculum Framework and Evaluation Criteria Committee were men, the men were professors, consultants or worked for the office of education with only a few being K-12 teachers; while in comparison, the women on the committee were mostly K-12 teachers. This clearly puts the men in a position of authority while sitting at the table. In fact, of the 11 women on the committee, only three were not teachers, they were: a consultant from an unnamed organization, an elementary history-social studies specialist for Los Angeles Unified School District, and a school librarian (California Department of Education, 2015). In a survey of 50 state social studies coordinators, only a few stated that school districts offered women's studies courses (with recent budget cuts, there are likely even fewer) (Crocco, 2008). They also stated that teachers were responsible for adding content on women and gender into the courses they taught. However, if teachers follow the standards and use the textbooks provided, then it is not clear that infusion of women's studies would actually occur. Since most textbooks are gender-blind, many teachers do not have the resources to be able to adequately cover women's history and to be able to adequately include women in the curriculum. Recent research concerning gender and history has shown that a poor picture is painted about women and their place in world history (Crocco, 2008). While many people have been told to believe that we have been making great strides in the past twenty years to include more women's history in our textbooks and in our classrooms, the truth is that progress has been over stated. Gender inclusion in our textbooks has just not happened to an extent that could be described as progress (Crocco, 2008). Even if some of the new textbooks did do a better job, many of the larger school systems use textbooks that are 10-20 years old which would clearly undermine the positive impacts made in gender equity in any recent textbook publishing (Crocco, 2008). Brugar, Halvorsen and Hernandez (2014) states that, "...textbooks tend to emphasize events from political and military history, in which women have played less prominent roles than men.... Women are severely underrepresented in U.S. History and social studies textbooks" (Brugar et al., 2014, p. 28). So even most recently, women are still extremely underrepresented. In Brugar et al.'s (2014) study, 90% of textbook entries were about men.

It is possible that the chief reasons girls do not do as well in the social studies is because they just do not enjoy the subject. We tend to teach social studies war-to-war and battle-to-battle, and many textbooks are laid out as such. This is a facet of social studies that girls are generally not interested in. However, the bulk of social studies content, when taught at the higher levels, is not the wars or the battles, but the how's, why's and social implications behind them which are all themes girls are generally very interested in. However, since most social studies teachers are male (64%, and even higher in high schools, as stated earlier), they tend to teach the class with an unintentional focus on the male domains (James, 2009).

While teaching social studies at Coupeville High School in Coupeville, Washington, every student filled out information cards about themselves to aid in understanding the students better. One girl wrote on her survey, "I like history; I just don't want to learn about War!" This is a perfect example of why girls *zone-out* in social studies courses at a young age. The normal progression of a United States History class is first contact, Revolutionary War, Lewis and Clark/Westward Expansion, War of 1812, Monroe Doctrine, Mexican-American War, Civil War (and *all* the battles), Spanish-American War, Industrialization, uprising in Panama, World War I, Great Depression, World War II, Korean War, Cold War, 1950s, Vietnam/1960s, and The Gulf War/Present (if the class gets that far). It is easy to see why girls just would not be that

interested in what is going on. Although we use wars as mile-markers in history, it is difficult to talk about social implications and other historical events when class time is devoted to exhaustive study of individual battles and conflicts. This is definitely in the male domain of learning, as addressed earlier, and does not leave a lot of time to discuss important achievements of women; therefore, students assume that there are none, or are very few. When it comes to what boys and girls care to learn about in the social studies, there are stark differences.

A study of 432 high school juniors and seniors revealed that differences in gender emerge in the themes students used in their answers. Male students focused on power, control and conflict, while female students focused on individual liberty, equality, social justice, religion and food (Crocco, 2008). This study shows that the domains that interest the different genders are distinct from each other. However, we tend to teach power, conflict and control more than individual liberty, equity, social consequences, religion and food. The only time most students learn about liberty and equity is when classes study the civil rights movement. Also, most teachers try to ‘steer clear’ of religion for fear of what parents and administrators might say if a student senses any bias. It is easy to see why female interest in the social studies wavers. When discussing a unit on the Civil War, one teacher noted that boys preferred the gory details of war, but the girls were much more interested in the anti-slavery and abolitionist movement (Maher et al., 2002).

Since we have this research (i.e. Watson; Crocco; Epstein; Gurian; James; etc.) and information about how girls and boys learn and what they want to learn in social studies, it is important that we apply it to social studies education. Too many teachers are teaching social studies to the boys with the girls *in the class*. This style of instruction creates more disparity between the genders. Teachers need to focus on including more women’s history and need to make sure they cover the areas in which *most* girls have an interest. It is also important for both boys and girls to understand that there is more to social studies than just wars and battles.

In teaching social studies, especially in a coeducational classroom, it is of the utmost importance that we teach the boys as well as the girls that social studies is for everyone and that both boys *and* girls can be successful. Women’s history is everyone’s history just as much as white Anglo-American history is everyone’s history. With that said, history is written, or should be written for the masses. Since we are all part of the human race, all histories matter, weather that be women’s history, African-American history, Early Civilizations, European History; the list could go on an on. As members of a global community that should support equality in education, we need to learn about everyone. The stories of the people who have not been in power are so important to the future of society. Without those voices, we cannot make progress; we cannot empower society to change for the better. All we can do is keep the people who have always been in power, in power. And with that there is no diversity and no perspective. Students need diversity in their education and they need differing viewpoints and experiences. Introducing women’s history into the curriculum is one way to do that, because you introduce the voice of 50% of the world’s population.

Boys tend to object to studying about women’s history unless it is the women’s suffrage movement, which they expect to study and is usually the only women’s history event covered, but they should not be allowed to complain or zone-out when other women-centric topics are introduced. It is also important to note and expect that boys will fight back when learning about women’s history, as they have been conditioned, through society, to believe it is less important. Studies show that teachers who make an effort to call on girls equally in the classroom, or include more curricula based on women, or the female perspective, the boys in the class will rebel (Maher et al., 2002). As it is, the curriculum and social studies texts include many more

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male ‘heroes’ than female ones. Materials used in social studies classrooms focus on male exploits, instead of looking at the female experience (Maher et al., 2002). In one textbook study, European American male office-holders garnered the most attention with Martin Luther King Jr. the only prominent exception to this pattern. Women received significantly less coverage in both civics and history textbooks (Crocco, 2008). Textbooks offer a less than equitable approach to gender in the social studies. In the civics textbooks that were examined, women were discussed 258 times. However, men were discussed 1,899 times. Many of the women mentioned in the text were actually First Ladies, which included Abigail Adams as well as Eleanor Roosevelt. Almost no women of color were present. Also, the civics textbook almost never highlighted women in a political or governmental role. And even more amazing, was that only one discussed how electoral politics has a large disparity in representation between men and women (Crocco, 2008).

The textbooks, even today, are undercutting and devaluing women in history and their plight in our world today. How can young women be expected to take an interest or pursue a career in a field where they are so blatantly shoved to the side? In history and civics, female students have few opportunities to study content that depicts the experience of people like them, women of the past and present (Crocco, 2008). It is probably no surprise, but when we look at economics textbooks, the same problems arise. In looking at 16 introductory textbooks, the average textbook used only 1.2% of its page space to discuss race and gender (14 pages out of 800-1,000). Additionally, stereotypes were perpetuated in both the photos and text examples in the textbook. Gender was also overlooked when addressing income and employment (Crocco, 2008). Less than 11% of images in textbooks were devoted to women (Schmeichel, 2015). We should want to include women’s perspectives in the social studies curriculum because all groups should be represented in history as they are in real life. Women comprise 50 percent of the world’s population; therefore, they should make up 50 percent of gender representations in history textbooks.

But it is not just the textbooks that are doing young women a disservice when it comes to social studies. When considering gender dynamics within the classroom, we can see that it *is* possible to improve girls’ interest in the social studies. Still, it is clear that gender will be a salient factor for all grade levels, if something is not done to correct the disparity (Crocco, 2008). This is apparent in how classrooms are managed as well. In one classroom studied, boys held all of the major roles and in another, only the most recently certified teachers had content knowledge which would allow them to teach about women’s history with any sort of confidence (Crocco, 2008). In the classroom we see many examples of gender bias. Walk into any social studies classroom and you will probably see many pictures of historical male figures and in most classrooms you will be hard-pressed to find any depictions of female contributors to history. Even with biased textbooks and insufficiently trained teachers, it is still possible to use what is known about teaching girls to make social studies interesting to them. Rosser (1995) notes that girls tend to tune out when class discussion is about using bombs, trajectories, or other military terms to solve a problem. In contrast, they are extremely focused when that same problem is discussed in the social context, with the end of helping other people. If more teachers start tapping in to the maternal instinct, to help others, that most girls have, they may find a way to teach within the confines of some terribly biased textbooks. Even so, there is another hurdle for educators to jump over; there are still people (and teachers) who believe that teaching the female perspective is unimportant and that topics other than gender would be a better use of class time. This view operated under the assumption that women’s battles have already been won. However, if students can be taught that the situation for women worldwide is a fragile one, marred with uncertainty and that the situation for women is heavily marginalized, then we will have a knowledgeable citizenry that can engage in discussion about gender and sexuality in the modern world (Crocco, 2008).

Even though the United States touts equality, other countries are much closer to gender equity in terms of social studies education. An analysis of research in Amsterdam showed that students who learned about history in a women's history class learned more about women than students in traditional history classes. They found that this contributed to the young women having a more positive gender identity; however, the young men stated that they preferred the traditional history class (Epstein & Shiller, 2010). In short, boys want to learn about boys and girls want to learn about girls. However, this does not necessarily mean that we should give them what they want. Like all good parents and educators, we should focus on giving them what they *need*. What students need is a good balance of *both* genders in their studies. Then students can develop a real historical perspective that fairly addresses both genders throughout the curriculum, and thus, learn to have compassion for each other and benefit from positive gender identities.

In addition to women not getting much attention in social studies textbooks, Feminism gets little, and arguably no attention in these texts either. However, "Feminism would seem to be an ideal partner to such a field as social studies and its interdisciplinary concern for the examination of culture, society, and power now and in the past" (Schmeichel, 2015, p. 3). Also, by not including the feminist worldview in our curriculum, we are producing "...problematic assumptions about the world around us ...and a traditional status quo social studies in which women are marginalized or absent contributes to problematic assumptions about women" (Schmeichel, 2015, p. 3). When textbooks do address women, they portray them as "passive bystanders in the world's events" (Schmeichel, 2015, p. 10). The young women in classrooms see this in curricula, even if it is subconsciously.

### **5. Would single-sex classrooms help boys and girls increase their achievements in social studies?**

Single-sex classrooms are a topic of controversy in education today. However, I believe in the context of this discussion, it is important that we look at this as an educational option for the social studies as well as other subjects. After considering how girls and boys learn differently and how they have major differences in the way they are made and the way in which they process information, there is a natural progression toward single-sex classrooms. It makes much more sense to take advantage of those differences rather than try to mitigate them and pretend that they are not there. We spend too much time trying to develop lessons that will work for every student (even knowing this can never truly be done), when we should be spending our time figuring out how to teach all students to their strengths. Single-sex classrooms can give educators this opportunity, especially when it comes to girls and their relationship to the social studies curriculum. But this method would also be beneficial to boys. As previously mentioned, there are some classroom attributes boys need in order to be successful, and their needs, generally, differ greatly from those of girls (again, there are always exceptions and not every child will fit completely into all the learning styles of each sex). For this reason alone, we should be looking at the single-sex classroom model in our educational system. In 2005 the American Institute of Research reviewed literature on single-sex education and found that the positive effects of single-sex education were higher than that of coeducational schools (Hayes et al., 2011). And Hayes et al. (2011) notes, in her own research, that girls who attended single-sex schools showed "higher academic achievement at the end of sixth grade than girls attending coeducational middle schools, despite the fact that the two groups were comparable in achievement the year prior" (Hayes et al., 2011, p. 700).

There are many benefits to a single-sex classroom. For example, girls will be more likely to try new things when there are no boys around, especially if it is in an area that is considered a boy subject or interest (Maher et al., 2002). Since girls are usually better about discussing and discovering emotions, they are more comfortable sharing their feelings. This means they are more likely to like books and curricula about relationships. Since these are not areas most boys would usually enjoy, it would make sense to separate the

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sexes (Maher et al., 2002). Also, girls lose self-confidence at a younger age than boys. As boys demand more attention from the teacher, girls tend to withdraw (Maher et al., 2002).

A single-sex classroom would be a great opportunity to implement a curriculum that might not have quite the same effect in a co-ed class. A great resource for a single-sex classroom is *Gender on the Chalkboard* (a syllabus for teachers about women of the world) (Tyson, 2008). This source is provided by *Women's Studies Quarterly* and would be a useful resource for a single-sex classroom for boys and girls (Crocco, 2008; Tyson, 2008). As stated previously, boys need to learn about women in history just as much as girls do, although they do not necessarily have to do it together. Boys can say some rather unpleasant things when presented with curriculum about women, and girls do not necessarily need to be exposed to that unconstructive commentary. However, educators at all levels should be setting a positive example for both boys and girls about what gender norms should be tolerated in the classroom. Too many students get away with stereotyping each other in negative ways.

Single-sex education (SSE) helps students' academic performance. "Multiple studies found SSE implementation to increase test scores in both all-male and all-female class cohorts (Her & Arms, 2004; Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Malacova, 2007; Mulholland et al., 2004; Robinson & Gillibrand, 2004)" (Crawford-Ferre & Weist, 2013, p. 305). In Ferre et al.'s (2013) study, they found that SSE was "positive for girls academically, with girls covering more content and achieving higher class-room advantages..." (Ferre & Weist, 2013, p. 305). And the girls themselves had improved perceptions of their abilities. It was also reported "the all-boy program within a public school showed a pass rate on the state writing test increased 51% in all-male classes" (Ferre et al., 2013, p. 305). If SSE were to be implemented in social studies classrooms, educators could teach to the strengths of the students and in the process see an increase in student performance and interest.

## **6. How can we set the example for equity and achievement in social studies?**

With society telling girls they can't do things, it is difficult for teachers to teach them what they *can* do. Young women are bombarded with societal expectations of what they should be like and sometimes teachers can have a hard time reversing what they have already been taught at home or through the media. Teen Barbie® released a doll in 1994 that said, "Math is hard, let's go shopping." While Mattel got some negative attention for the release of this doll, because of the negative stereotype it perpetuated, this illustrates how pervasive these social attitudes are, and the sort of messages young women are hearing from society (Maher et al., 2002). We have seen over and over again that girls do not do as well in certain courses, such as social studies or other male-dominated subjects, because of the social pressures to conform to stereotypes (James, 2009). A young person's perspective about the social world is shaped by their community, their family, religion, as well as their racial and ethnic identity, etc. (Epstein & Shiller, 2010). Young people bring a significant amount of knowledge and observation to the table before a teacher even gets started with a lesson. It is clear from the information above that society cannot be trusted to bring about positive change in the social world for girls, so we, as educators must make that happen within the constraints of our classrooms. We have seen girls fail to achieve in ways that baffle us. Even in areas where girls have superior skills, they are underrepresented in those fields when it comes to employment. For instance, girls seem to have better writing skills than boys. Even though girls write more fluidly and organize their thoughts better, boys are still more likely to become writers. According to a 2005 study, only 18.8% of writers and 27.2% of television writers were female (James, 2009).

It is odd that girls are unfairly represented in those fields since they tend to have better writing skills. While there is support for the notion that boys and girls have similar skills at a young age and that cultural

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expectations create the differences, it is still interesting how girls can outperform boys in a subject and then lack employment in that subject to such a noticeable degree (James, 2009). All in all, the best thing that schools could do is to facilitate girls believing that they have the skills and that they should pursue interests in the social sciences (James, 2009). But how can teachers do this when they only have the students for six hours a day? And depending on the school's culture, it could be just one teacher who has a student for one hour a day.

It is important to get our students interested in the controversy that surrounds gender and equity. This is a public argument that extends beyond the classroom. It is the perfect subject to get girls interested in the social studies. Women now make up half of the workforce in America; yet, they still earn less than two-thirds of what a male earns in the same field. When this fact was shared with high school class of United States history students the girls were in shock; though it did not seem to bother the boys, even though it should have! Even in today's society women are not equal. Most full-time working women are still responsible for the bulk of housework and childcare. This is called a 'double-day' and it illustrates how women are still considered the second sex in society (Maher et al., 2002). This is very interesting, because as mentioned earlier, Girls are more likely than boys to vote or collect money and signatures for a cause. They are more likely to join a political party or write letters to the editor about social change and political justice. One study showed that girls are more likely to volunteer their time for community service ventures as well (Crocco, 2008).

According to these data, women should be well suited for careers in the social studies, including civics and political involvement. It is not for a lack of interest that many women do not pursue these fields, but rather a lack of confidence in their ability to achieve in these fields. Also, many women are held back by their male counterparts and excluded from participation in fields traditionally dominated by men. Boys had more positivity to ward history than girls and as a result participated in more activities that were history themed (Crocco, 2008). Also, boys outperformed girls in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade National Assessment of Educational Progress test (NAEP) in 2000. Most scholars believe this is because boys take more history courses than girls, they think this is because most history courses do not fulfill the interests of girls. The major fact impeding female interest and achievement in social studies is the lack of female representation in the history content (Crocco, 2008). One of the biggest obstacles to the inclusion of women's history is the simple fact that social studies teachers never learned it themselves (Crocco, 2008). Gender differences are found in all areas of the social studies, but geography may be the starkest. In geography, the gap starts early and male students continually out perform female students, and have long dominated the subject area (Crocco, 2008). However, when it came to analyzing historical texts, females did significantly better than their male counterparts (Crocco, 2008). This goes back to the difference between male and female spatial reasoning capabilities. Since we know that girls struggle with spatial reasoning, we should be using techniques to help them succeed in this content area, instead of concluding that girls are not good with maps and geography. Encouraging the young women in our classes and teaching to their strengths and interests is the best way to increase achievement in the social studies.

## CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be reached from the research on this topic. Students, both male and female, (generally) have different strengths and interests when it comes to subject matter. At the onset of investigating this topic, it was important to discover why so many girls thought history and social studies were boring and discover how this linked with studies on girls' achievement in math and science. As it turns

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out, what is going on in math and science (girls being underrepresented and underachieving) is exactly what is going on in social studies, although it does not get as much attention and not much is being done to close the achievement gap. It has also been made clear that boys and girls develop completely differently and the rate at which they develop certain skills predetermines what subjects and skills they will succeed at more naturally. The research about the difference in brain development and the areas that are being used across the two genders is clear. Because of this knowledge, educators should be teaching their subjects so that their students can achieve at the highest levels possible. This would be more feasible in a single-sex classroom. When single-sex classrooms are not possible, teachers need to utilize gender specific project options, or even split up the class into gendered groups. Most important, for both male and female students, it is key that the teacher covers women's history and the contributions of women in history and other areas of the social studies. It is important to remember that this information is not only for the girls and it is not only *women's* history. It is important for boys to see new perspectives and be able to respect learning a subject from multiple viewpoints. Also, women's history is everyone's history. Stereotypes about female roles need to be debunked, with more female role models in social studies textbooks.

While gender and social studies are not usually talked about in the K-12 community, it is still important enough to be discussed in many social studies journals and books on education. As a teacher, it is quite valuable to allow students the opportunity to choose the topics about which they would like to learn. Students are generally more interested in completing an assignment when they have had some choice in the matter. For girls, offering a choice gives them the opportunity to learn about women's history, particularly if they are made aware that it is an option.

From a personal experience, I conducted some research and observations on this topic in my own classroom. For ten weeks, I used purposeful (gender specific) assignments and observations of students (specific to student achievement with respect to gender and how boys and girls learn). This project allowed me to teach a war (boys' domain) in a way that tapped into the social/emotional framework (girls' domain). In this brief study, I found that by allowing the boys and girls to learn from both domains helped to keep everyone interested, even though they were not in a single-sex classroom. I plan to pursue studying this phenomenon and conducting deeper research to understand how girls can access the social studies that can lead to improved achievement.

In closing, I realize that for some, this paper and review may spark some controversy, but in my view, these ideas need to be considered in order for educators to do a better job in encouraging girls in the social studies. We need to teach them that they can excel in social studies and that it is a subject in which they can be very successful. Showing them lots of examples of successful, confident women in the social studies fields and disproving cultural stereotypes about women and academics, particularly social studies, should be the focus. Women have the natural abilities and strengths to do well in all areas of the social studies; we only have to convince them by increasing interest in the subject area. In order to do this, we need to teach about women in social studies and display their contributions to both boys and girls in our classrooms. This will allow us, as educators, to encourage both young men and women in our subject matter. We need to teach social studies so that it is gender inclusive and equitable for all. It is important that we show young women that they can be the change they read about in the history books and that not all of the glory has to go to the men.

*NOTE: The views expressed in this paper represent those of the author and not necessarily those of the California Council for the Social Studies. Please contact the author directly with any questions or concerns.*

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