Why Aren’t We Teaching About Women in West Virginia?

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## Abstract

Education is supposed to prepare students for the world around them. Teachers are entrusted with the job of providing students with everything they need so that they can function in and benefit their society. As a society we are divided into two groups: men and women. Since we can assume that roughly 50% of the population is women, should they not represent 50% of the curriculum? The answer should be yes, but it is not. The content standards and objectives for the state of West Virginia do not require that teachers educate their students about the roles and contributions of women throughout history. Our students cannot thrive in a society where half of the population is not represented in education. Teachers must be made aware of this situation and educated on how it can be rectified if we hope to have an educational system representative of our population. Of the teachers that were surveyed, 66% believe it is important to teach about women specifically. The survey did not address in what manner, but this does show that over half of teachers realize that there is a deficiency. 75% of the respondents think that the content standards do not require us to address gender diversity, which shows that they are aware of what is required in their classroom and what is not. 69% believe that the students would benefit from a curriculum that requires teachers to address gender diversity. How that diversity could be portrayed in the classroom has yet to be solved, but it is encouraging that the educators surveyed are open to the idea of a gender diverse curriculum.

Introduction

Every public school in West Virginia has the same set of educational content. It is a list of content that must be covered in a certain subject during an academic year of schooling. These standards are broad and very thorough in the aim for providing an appropriate education, but there is something missing. West Virginia does not make it a point to teach about women. Why are we not teaching about women in West Virginia? Back in 1972, Carol Gilligan examined the role of woman in psychological theories and found limited research. The same was true in a study by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule in 1986 looking to examine “women’s ways of knowing” but little has been completed since this time. It appears that half of the population has either been forgotten or disregarded. The problem with the current curriculum in West Virginia is that it does not require teachers to diversify their curriculum in regards to educating students about the roles of women in society. The term “women” is only mentioned eleven times in all grades across all content areas. A teacher may, whether consciously or not, devote his/her entire curriculum to the achievements and contributions of men, without ever mentioning anything about women (Teach21 On-line CSO Level Resources, n.d.). This study aims to examine if teachers are aware of this situation, what they know about it and women’s studies, and are they incorporating women’s studies and gender education into their curriculum? For the purpose of this research women’s studies will refer to the study of women, as a biological sex, along with their contributions and achievements throughout history.

There is a limited focus on women across all of the secondary education programs in West Virginia, and some may ask why this is important? The reason it is important is the same reason all education is important. We must learn about our past and our peers to shape our future. If young girls only learn about the accomplishments of men, and women are added to their education as an afterthought or not at all, what are they going to believe? Women have a history and culture just the same as men and that education needs to be incorporated into our secondary curriculum.

My interest in this topic began when I started my undergraduate career at West Virginia University in August of 2002. That spring I enrolled in a course titled “Introduction to Women’s Studies.” My advisor informed me that I needed a minority course and women’s studies was a more predominant choice on campus. Until that moment, I did not know what “women’s studies” was and it was not until the third week of the course that I started to understand. Many people ask me “What is women’s studies?” The National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) describes it best: “Women’s studies has made the conceptual claims and theoretical practices of **intersectionality**, which examines how categories of identity (e.g., race, class, gender, age, ability, etc.) and structures of inequality are mutually constituted and must continually be understood in relationship to one another” (NWSA, 2012, para. 2). Women’s studies also pertains to the roles women have played throughout history, their achievements and struggles, and the future of women in terms of their place in society.

After the introductory course, I became a duel major in English, my previous focus, and women’s studies. The course had ignited an undeniable interest in me that I wished to pursue. After many enlightening courses, I graduated with a degree in English and women’s studies and proceeded into my Master’s in Secondary Education. I was eager to join my three passions of literature, women’s studies, and education when I began teaching, but was soon disappointed to discover that there were no set requirements pertaining to women in education in West Virginia language arts courses. The only mention of women in the state content standards is in science and social studies. Students are expected to study the career contributions of men and women while they are in middle school and women are mentioned in one standard per year in fourth through tenth and twelfth grade social studies (Teach21 On-line CSO Level Resources, n.d.).

The problem with the current curriculum in West Virginia is that it does not require teachers to diversify their curriculum in regards to educating students about the roles of women in society. The other issue is that educators may not even be aware of this situation. We are told to incorporate multicultural elements into our classes, but everyone forgets that we must also incorporate gender based diversity into our curriculum. This study aims to examine if teachers are incorporating women’s studies into their curriculum and if so, how? This is a relevant issue in education because it affects each and every student and an awareness of the ideals of women’s studies can alter their perception and understanding of their world. It is not only important for female students to have role models of women throughout history, it is also important for male students to be aware of female accomplishments and their complimentary role in society.

The purpose of this study is to determine the level of interest and appropriate measures of incorporating women’s studies into a secondary education curriculum. This study will evaluate what teachers teach in their classroom and if they are aware that this is even an issue. Do they already make an effort to teach about women’s roles? Or do they even realize that they should be teaching about women? I hope to understand how they may become more aware of their curriculum in regards to women, and how this may affect student’s learning. The goal of the study is to eventually educate teachers on why they should be conscious of the diversity in their teaching, especially as it relates to including women’s studies.

I expect that the teachers will not be aware of the lack of gender diversity required in their curriculum. I think that they may be open to the idea of gender diversity, but may be wary of incorporating women’s or gender studies into their classes. I do not think that many will really know what women’s studies are, or if they do, it will only be a very general idea. I think that this study will increase their awareness of the issue and perhaps they will stop and think about what they are doing in their classroom and consider if they are really being as diverse as they think they are.

Why Aren’t We Teaching About Women in West Virginia?

The most basic definition of women’s studies is “courses in history, literature, psychology, etc, that are particularly concerned with women's roles, experiences, and achievements” (Collins, 2009, para 1). Women’s studies, as a field of study, was developed in the late 60s to early 70s. It rose in prominence as students and professors saw the lack of education in women’s roles, contributions, and place in society. It started at higher education institutions, and unfortunately has stayed there ever since. The main issue that professors and students sought to solve was the enlightenment of students about women. It may seem like a very basic idea. Are women not an integral part of society? Do they not constitute roughly 50% of the world population? The answer to both questions would be yes, but the academics realized that women were not equally acknowledged in research and education (NWSA, 2012).

When considering altering the curriculum, we must seek to understand what it is we want to do. The basis of women’s studies is feminism, which is where it all began. Second wave feminists sought not only a different work force with different opportunities; they also sought a reform in the education of men and women about women. The educational representation of feminism and feminist beliefs is women’s studies. Women’s studies can take many shapes and forms and does not necessarily have to be a full class as it is in colleges and universities. The simple act of addressing women’s role in society and incorporating this diversity into the curriculum would be a step in the appropriate direction (Rich, 2007).

It is not just the curriculum that changed during the second wave of feminism, but also people’s way of thinking about various aspects related to women, feminism, and women’s studies. “During the next quarter century, this rethinking opened up new conceptual pathways for considering not only the relationships between sex and gender, kinship and procreation, men’s work and women’s work, and public and private spheres but also the significance of gender to language, primatology, archaeology, religion, and cosmology” (Anthropology, 2013, para 1). Academics and researchers realized that this topic was much broader than just a one class introduction. In focusing on women’s studies, which some are now calling gender studies; we embrace many different areas of study that are touched by both sexes (Freedman, 2002).

With the study of women we have also come to realize that to study gender we must study men in relationship to women, instead of exclusively women. With this growth in knowledge we also started to understand gender as a spectrum, and not a black and white issue. There is a tie between sex, gender, and sexuality that academics were able to discover once they focused on the lives of both sexes and not just women (Anthropology, 2013). These preconceived notions of masculine men hunting in the forest with feminine women gathering in the field is archaic and with the development of women’s studies courses we are able to better understand women’s and men’s roles and place in society, without having to put either sex in a rigid box (Anthropology, 2013).

Women’s studies are not what we would call a “one woman show.” It has its hand in every field imaginable including subjects such as sociology, psychology, literature, biology, history, education, and many more (What is Women’s Studies, 2013). Women not only have a place, or history, in these fields, but also a future. As society grows and develops it must include the study of women and women’s roles in all of these fields so that the curriculum is inclusive and not discriminatory.

Along with the study of gender “Women's studies provides new frameworks that are sensitive not only to issues of gender, but also race, class, and ethnicity. By analyzing the powerful and problematic impact of sexual inequalities, Women's studies revised the way we see ourselves and our world” (What is Women’s Studies, 2013, para. 1). That is why this subject is so vital. Students need this opportunity to better understand who they are and the world in which they live. How can we ignore half of the population in our curriculum, and yet consider it representative of what a student needs?

Bias can also play a role in why women’s studies are not as prevalent as it should be. People do not always understand what women’s studies are, but if they did they may be more open to incorporating it into the curriculum. Women’s studies allows for various students to gain perspective about their life and their role and place in society. It is an “interdisciplinary approach that raises important epistemological questions about all other academic areas” (What is Women’s Studies, 2013, para. 2). It is also a way to study the contributions of women throughout all areas of history. Women’s studies also provides “an opportunity for students to take an active role in bringing about social change both inside and outside the classroom” (What is Women’s Studies, 2013, para. 7).

Some may feel that women’s studies classes or studies are a place where women can belittle men and lament their misfortune in the world with no thought of a curriculum or structure. I personally have met men who are scared to take a women’s studies course because they feel they will be treated as the enemy or persecuted. This could not be further from the truth. The point of women’s studies is to examine the role of women alongside men, not against them. This is not about who was appropriate or who was inappropriate or who is to blame, this is about a lack in curriculum that professors and students of the 70s sought to solve, which is slowly starting to transform higher education. Unfortunately, this reform has not found its way into secondary curriculum in any state, most especially West Virginia (What is Women’s Studies, 2013).

When looking at the West Virginia Department of Education’s website a person can find a wealth of information. The state is incredibly concerned with preparing our students for the future and wants to ensure that technology pervades every aspect of their education. There are several paragraphs about the 21st century skills, technology, and tools. Teachers can access plans and procedures for ensuring that there classroom is as technologically advanced as it can be. On this site, one may view a reading initiative that is endorsed by celebrities who were originally from this state. It encourages parents and teachers to promote reading across the curriculum, in all grade levels, all the time. It also gives resources for how this may be accomplished (Teach21 On-line CSO Level Resources, n.d).

A deeper investigation will uncover the state content standards and objectives. They were created as a guide for teachers and directs them as to what they need to cover in their classroom in a given year. Most of the standards are vague so that the teacher has some choice and flexibility in their room and are not tied down as much to the curriculum. It may state that a ninth grade English teacher needs to teach figurative language during the year, but it does not say how. It may also state that a history teacher needs to teach their class about the civil war, but the teacher may choose the depth, scope, and overall content of the lesson based on the textbook, supplies they have and also based on their own preference for how they want to run their lessons (Teach21 On-line CSO Level Resources, n.d).

All of these programs were created to benefit the student, and in many ways they do. The only thing missing is diversity. Nowhere in the technology requirements does it mention gender diversity or its inclusion. The reading section does not promote a diversity of text, just reading. The content standards commit the worst crime of all, because they allow teachers to create a curriculum completely devoid of any gender studies. The English teacher can stick to their favorite male authors and poets. The history teacher can espouse the achievements of the great male heroes of the last two centuries without ever mentioning any contribution by any woman at any point, and there is nothing that says these teachers are inappropriate. It seems that the curriculum in West Virginia may need a second look; unfortunately, we do not yet have the literature to support this void (Teach21 On-line CSO Level Resources, n.d).

There is currently limited research on incorporating women’s studies into the secondary curriculum, or even the importance of diversifying the curriculum to include women (Clark & Millard, 1998; Dalton & Rotundo, 2000). There are several articles about why women’s studies is important, but the studies are based on higher education (Berger & Radeloff, 2011; Buckmann, Thomas, & McDaniel, 2008; Sadker & Sadker,1994; Wood, 1981). There are also articles about why African American studies are important, along with queer studies, but again the focus is always higher education (Whitlock, 2010; Olzak, Susan., & Kangas, Nicole, 2008; Gomez, 2004). These various studies are relatively new in terms of developing curriculum and have not yet disseminated into secondary education.

The literature is incredibly insightful as to why women’s studies are important, but few studies have been conducted in terms of how it could be beneficial in secondary education (Hall, 2011). Some studies, such as Buckmann’s titled “Gender Inequality in Education” does discuss male versus female educational performance, but again does not address the curriculum (Buckmann, Diprete, and McDaniel, 2008). One school tried to implement a gender based curriculum, but was met with some resistance. Students, along with the teachers, are so used to only learning about men, that they feel disconcerted when they must confront women’s roles or gender issues. They appear to want to hold on to their stereotypes, but with time they adjust to the idea that in education we must learn about what everyone in our society contributes, not just what a certain group does.

To gain a better understanding of the previously stated issues, the following research questions were posed: (1) Describe what you teach about women’s accomplishments, in comparison to men’s accomplishments, in your classroom? (2) What content standards do you teach in relation to women’s accomplishments? (3) What do you know about women’s studies? (4) What courses have you taken related to women’s studies?, and (5) Why is it important to incorporate women’s studies into the secondary curriculum?

Method

A ten question survey was electronically mailed (e-mail) to a group of approximately 42 middle school teachers. Of the 42 e-mails distributed, 32 responded to the survey. The school surveyed has 45% of students receiving free or reduced lunch and the student body total is 575. The survey was composed online using Survey Monkey. The teachers received an e-mail from the researcher that was approved by the IRB and principal that asked them to participate in the survey. The participants’ survey cooperation was completely voluntary and anonymous. After the survey was complete, teachers were able to volunteer for a 20 minute follow-up interview by e-mailing the researcher and stating their interest. All responses were recorded and analyzed.

Results

87% of teachers responded that they knew what women’s studies was, but 53% stated that they do not include it in their curriculum. Further inquiries may ascertain the depth of their women’s studies knowledge, but for now we must assume that they have a general knowledge. 81% admitted that their content standards do not require them to teach about women, while 10% did not know if it was required or not. 66% of the teachers surveyed believe it is important to teach about women specifically and 45% believe that they must make a conscious effort to do so every day. 65% of them believe that women’s studies has a place in secondary curriculum, and 50% believe it is an issue that needs to be directly addressed. 75% of the respondents think that the content standards do not require us to address gender diversity and 69% believe that our students would benefit from a curriculum that requires us to address gender diversity. As to whose responsibility it is to enact these standards, 56% of the teacher noted that the state should alter the content standards and objectives to require more gender diversity in the curriculum. Even if these changes were enacted by the state, it still comes down to the educator. It appears that educators would be open to incorporating women’s studies into their curriculum if they were given the support.

After the survey, three teachers and one principal emailed me and expressed their wish to be interview. My first interview was with Carla who is a 58 year old social studies teacher with eighteen years of experience. When interviewed she gave the following responses:

Would you say that you teach about women’s accomplishments in society as much as men’s? I think that women's studies should be featured more in integrated classrooms. This would be so that students are aware of the limits that were put on woman's education, civil liberties, and livelihood throughout history. There should be studies of specific woman who are outstanding in various fields that show courage, accomplishments, and progressive works.

In terms of content standards, are there any requirements in regards to teaching about women and their accomplishments specifically? Not that I am aware of. There are a few content standards that mention the suffrage era and social reformers, such as Hull house and experiments of that era founded by Jane Addams.

What do you know about women’s studies? Have you ever taken a course in it? I might suppose they are studies about women written or sponsored studies driven by the energies of other women.

Do you think it is important to incorporate women’s studies into the secondary curriculum? Why or why not? It is important to show profiles in courage of women to early adolescent girls and throughout the secondary curriculum. This would most definitely help to foster growth and confidence in this generation and to bolster their egos by studying about outstanding women throughout history and through the ages. We need to show them where we are going by way of where we have come from.

My next interview was with Kristin, a 34 year old music teacher with six years experience.

Would you say that you teach about women’s accomplishments in society as much as men’s? Personally, I do not choose my music or materials based on whether a man or woman wrote it. I base it on quality of the work. However, with that said if a piece is based on a female poet’s work or otherwise, I do incorporate background and history of that poet and the position they were in at that point.

In terms of content standards, are there any requirements in regards to teaching about women and their accomplishments specifically? In music we do have standards regarding the incorporation of multiculturalism and encouragements of studying a variety of cultures, however there are no specific standards that regard gender based studies.

What do you know about women’s studies? Have you ever taken a course in it? Women’s studies is the examination of the role women have and will play throughout history and the effect women have had on society. It looks at stereotypes as well as the contributions women have made to society often breaking those stereotypical roles.

Do you think it is important to incorporate women’s studies into the secondary curriculum? Why or why not? I do believe that if we are going to present and teach a well-rounded perspective to our students we should not only present the multi-cultural perspective, but also gender, race, age, etc. perspectives as well

My third interview was with Richard, a 52 year old principal with over 30 years of experience.

Would you say that you teach about women’s accomplishments in society as much as men’s? The logical place to teach these things would be in history courses and potentially in literature courses.

In terms of content standards, are there any requirements in regards to teaching about women and their accomplishments specifically? Not that I’m aware of.

What do you know about women’s studies? Have you ever taken a course in it? It gained momentum in the early 70s and usually explores socially defined gender roles some colleges offer majors in this.

Do you think it is important to incorporate women’s studies into the secondary curriculum? Why or why not? It helps students with critical thinking skills and gives them an understanding of how women have contributed to society in general.

My final interview was with Andrea, a 36 year old librarian with three years of experience.

Would you say that you teach about women’s accomplishments in society as much as men’s? I think it should be incorporated into different subjects based on the topics. For example, if a history class is covering the civil rights movements, important women from that time should be included. Personally, when I order books for my students I try to include books boys and girls would like. I don’t target specific authors.

In terms of content standards, are there any requirements in regards to teaching about women and their accomplishments specifically? No, not at all.

What do you know about women’s studies? Have you ever taken a course in it? Very little, I have never taken a course.

Do you think it is important to incorporate women’s studies into the secondary curriculum? Why or why not? Much of the pervious curriculum has focused on men and their accomplishments. It’s important to include both men and women in the secondary levels. Opinions can continue to be shaped by including women.

Discussion

Based on my research, it appears that teachers realize the content standards do not require any type of gender diversity in the curriculum. This means that they do not have to teach about women or women’s roles at all. The teachers also seem to believe that we need to diversify the curriculum and that they must enact the change. I would classify my findings as descriptive and exploratory. Through my qualitative research, I was able to describe situations and explore how my participants felt about situations and what they thought should be done about the topics.

There needs to be more research done to see how much teachers know about women’s and gender studies. Once we ascertain the knowledge base, we can build a diverse curriculum that would better suit our students’ needs. The studies that show students need a diverse education are there, we just need to provide that education. Teachers and administrators cannot exclude half of the population. Women have a history, achievements, and roles in society that need to be recognized and studied just the same as we have done with the roles of men throughout history. Without these changes we have a very biased and discriminatory curriculum that does not represent the student body at all. We do not find it acceptable to teach about only one religion or one race, so why are we still teaching about one sex?

I believe that the content standards need to be altered to require teachers to address gender diversity in their courses. The standards may state that when teaching about literature, the teacher must address women’s contributions as well as men’s. The standards may also require that a history teacher devote a certain amount of time during the school year to the roles of women in history. This change could be the first step into introducing an introduction to women’s studies course into the secondary curriculum.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Would you say that you teach about women’s accomplishments in society as much as men’s?

2. In terms of content standards, are there any requirements in regards to teaching about women and their accomplishments specifically?

3. What do you know about women’s studies? Have you ever taken a course in it?

4. Do you think it is important to incorporate women’s studies into the secondary curriculum? Why or why not?

## Appendix B

## Survey

1. Do you know what women's studies is?

Yes/No

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|  |

2. Do you incorporate women's studies into your curriculum?

Yes/No/I don’t know

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3. Do your content standards require you to teach about women?

Yes/No/I don’t know

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4. Do you think it is important to teach about women specifically?

Yes/No/I don’t know

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5. Is it a conscious effort to teach about women, or is it automatically included in the curriculum? I must make a conscious effort/It is automatically included/NA

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6. Does Women's Studies have a place in secondary curriculum?

Yes/No/I don’t know

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7. Should we consider this an issue or is the curriculum representative of what our students need? It is an issue/It is not an issue/I don’t know

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| --- |
|  |

8. Do you think the content standards require us to address gender diversity?

Yes/No/I don’t know

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9. Would our students benefit from a curriculum that requires us to teach equally about both sexes?

Yes/No/I don’t know

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| --- |
|  |

10. Do you think the state should alter the content standards and objectives to require more gender based diversity in the curriculum?

Yes/No/I don’t know.