

**The Effects of Social Justice Education on Critical Consciousness in a High School Social
Studies Classroom**

Natalie Gentile

The Department of Education, Colorado College

Master of Arts in Teaching

May 2021

Abstract

This explanatory mixed-methods action research examined if the integration of Social Justice Education in a social studies classroom influenced students' critical consciousness. This study's participants (N=41), aged 16-18, all attended a suburban high school and were in a single semester social studies elective class that covered both constitutional and criminal law. Through the lens of Social Justice Education, instruction went beyond the scope of the course's standardized textbook by integrating readings, documentaries, and videos that introduced new and oftentimes marginalized perspectives. The participants' critical consciousness was measured by a Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI) both before the integration of Social Justice Education and afterward to evaluate if critical consciousness would be significantly influenced. The participants also engaged with reflections that encouraged them to reflect on issues of oppression, meritocracy, and empathy. Survey data indicated that there was no significant change between pre- and post-tests. However, through reflections, students expressed the desire for Social Justice Education as they understand and feel angry about injustices in American society but are not comfortable taking meaningful action to aid in or create systemic change.

Keywords: Critical Consciousness, Social Justice Education, Social Studies Standardization, Textbooks

Introduction

In the past half century, American education has become increasingly standardized. Standardized education creates an educational culture where schools are given a curriculum that is most closely aligned with content found on each states' standardized tests. The United States uses standardization to dictate what the federal government believes are the "appropriate" knowledge and skills American children must learn to be productive and valuable members of society (Sparapani & Callejo Perez, 2015). The goal of standardization is to test students and provide measurable outputs that the American government uses to evaluate the effectiveness of the American education system in comparison to other countries (Slater & Griggs, 2015).

To teach to the standards, a majority of educators (~79%) depend on textbooks as their primary source (Watt, 2015). Standardized textbooks have become the norm in American classrooms; however, the emphasis on streamlined content knowledge creates problems for both educators and students. Educators often feel overly-stressed in standardized classrooms as their jobs and school funding rely on how well their students can remember specific content knowledge (Collie et. al, 2017). For students, standardized education minimizes or erases marginalized voices and perspectives which consequently minimizes students who identify with those missing voices. It also reinforces harmful stereotypes and discourages diversity of thought and critical thinking.

The purpose of this research was to evaluate how American social studies curriculum creates a standardized view and how a more multicultural approach using social justice education encourages students to engage in dialogue and critically reflect on both themselves and the world around them. The driving research question was: how does the integration of multicultural social justice education in a social studies classroom affect students' critical consciousness?

Literature Review

Usage and Reasons for Standardized Textbooks in American Classrooms

With the introduction of federal standards, textbook companies that are distributed nationally (e.g., McGraw-Hill) quickly update and publish new books that closely align with the new standards (Sawchuk, 2012). Standardized textbooks in subjects that are tested annually such as English and Mathematics are generally written to complement the Common Core State Standards so students in all states have the means to be successful on state testing (Polikoff, 2015). Math teachers overwhelmingly use textbooks to guide their teaching, as many as 87% in one study; 96% of those participants also admitted to using the textbook every day (van den Ham & Heinze, 2018).

Textbooks in content areas that are tested less frequently like science and social studies have become standardized because the federal government, state governments, and corporations have a vested interest in students learning common content that primarily reflects the values of mainstream American culture (Neumann, 2014). Science textbooks, for example, often discuss politicized subjects such as evolution and climate change. One textbook mentioned climate change over 270 times, but when analyzed, humans being the cause of climate change was only mentioned 19% of the time (Román & Busch, 2015). This suggests that textbook companies are less likely to support the more factual perspective that climate change is almost directly linked to human activity as this narrative may not align with the popular political opinion. When analyzing social studies texts, the research overwhelmingly supports that textbooks are written through a white and western view that complements the social and political order of the United States (Lucy et. al, 2020).

This is a problem because the population of the United States is becoming increasingly more multi-ethnic, multiracial, and multicultural. With this demographic shift, a growing number of students feel both unrepresented and/or misrepresented in standardized social studies textbooks (Nieto, 2017). White-centered curriculum makes marginalized groups feel as if they are outsiders even though their people contributed to the American story and their current lives are affected by institutionalized and systemic oppression (Chandler & Hawley, 2017).

Standardized Social Studies Textbooks Present a White, Western Worldview

To reinforce American mainstream culture, social studies textbooks primarily focus on the histories of white men and also omit the more negative actions of the same population (Wiggan & Watson-Vinader, 2017). For example, many textbooks applaud Christopher Columbus for discovering the Americas while ignoring the multitude of atrocities he committed against the indigenous people he encountered (Hanchett Hanson, 2019). Textbook coverage of Westward Expansion focuses on Manifest Destiny and the achievements of white settlers (various gold rushes, homesteading, railroads, etc.), while simultaneously neglecting to mention that the land they settled on was gained through forcing indigenous peoples onto reservations and government-sanctioned violence (Stanton, 2015).

While the prevailing narrative is white history, throughout the past decade there has been an increase in textbook content revolving around minorities; however, this content is frequently problematic as it often stereotypes minority groups (Chu, 2017). For example, introductory criminal justice textbooks often contain content focused on violent crimes (murder, assault, rape, etc.) that frequently show white women as the victims and portray specifically Black men as the perpetrators (Sever & Grillo, 2015). Asian Americans are almost always portrayed as the stereotypical “model minority” in which they are more “successful” compared to other minority

groups and therefore do not face any types of oppression or discrimination (Takeda, 2016). With this outlook, injustices against Asian Americans such as Japanese internment camps or Anti-Asian discrimination are missing from the narrative.

Alongside the lack of content surrounding marginalized groups is an added issue of those groups being presented homogenously. The lack of intersectionality in textbooks paints a one dimensional picture of individuals whose identities are comprised of multiple marginalized groups. It was found in various textbooks, for example, that Black women were either treated as Black or as women, but almost never as women who were Black (Woyshner & Schocker, 2015). The prevailing narrative surrounding the women's suffrage movement grouped women of all colors together and portrayed everyone as equal participants (Miller, 2015). This simplified history ignores that Black women were often ostracized by white suffrage leaders and even with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, Black women still struggled to vote due to Jim Crow laws (e.g., poll taxes and literacy tests).

The content in social studies textbooks is problematic because it harms students who belong to marginalized groups by disregarding their identities and making them feel unimportant in both the classroom and society as a whole. The stereotypical content in textbooks can also reinforce false notions that certain groups are dangerous, unmotivated, illegal, etc. That content is then accepted by students and perpetuated to continue the cycle of misinformation and trauma (Woodson, 2017). These consequences often cause students to disengage from their academics as the content can negatively affect students so that they no longer feel safe or comfortable in the classroom (Brandle, 2020).

Multicultural Education as an Antithesis to Standardization

To remedy the harm inflicted on marginalized groups in American schools through standardized textbooks, educators can integrate multicultural practices into their classrooms. Multicultural education aims to question students' previous understandings of the world around them and forces them to analyze their history, politics, modern society, etc., through a more honest and critical lens (Au, 2017). Banks (1995) broke down multicultural education into five components: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure. For content integration, educators are encouraged to integrate multiple cultures into the curriculum. Within the knowledge construction process, educators should take a more passive approach and teach their students how to critically think and evaluate. Educators must also work through their own racial prejudices and biases to create a more democratic form of education. Educators can achieve equity pedagogy by modifying their content to reflect the identities in their classroom while simultaneously holding all students to high academic standards. Lastly, educators and students must understand how school is a social structure and for education to become more democratic and equitable, institutional oppression in school systems must be challenged. When classrooms adhere to the principles set out by Banks, students generally remark that they feel more connected to the curriculum as it moves past including content that is stereotypical and surface-level (Acuff, 2015). Students of color often express appreciation for classrooms where being a student of color does not mean they are less than their white counterparts.

Multicultural education also forces educators to move from a non-racist pedagogical approach to an anti-racist one. Non-racist education is a passive approach to race that ignores more extreme forms of racism and ensures students, specifically white students, do not feel uncomfortable (Case & Ngo, 2017). One major reason this approach is problematic is that many

students of color have voiced frustration that content surrounding racism is actually harmful as they believe it minimizes real struggles and suggests racism in America is a relic of the past (Baldrige, 2020). In contrast, anti-racist education exposes and explores structural and institutional racism and how it has been presented throughout time (King & Chandler, 2017). It calls on administrators, educators, and students to work toward dismantling institutional racism within the American schooling system.

Through anti-racist multicultural education, many educators have noted an increasing comfortability when teaching and talking about systemic oppression. This comfortability also directly impacts student, as they also exhibit increased comfortability when speaking about systemic oppression (Flynn, 2017). Educators and students are also able to confidently challenge others around them to acknowledge their own biases and complicity, and also feel equipped to transform structural inequities (Lynch et. al, 2017).

Social Justice Education as an Extension of Multicultural Education

One way education can equip students with the tools to transform these social inequities is through Social Justice Education (SJE). SJE is an extension of multicultural education aimed at creating students who are engaged, politically and socially aware citizens who have the tools to transform their communities (Cho, 2017). Students who are engaged with SJE often hear perspectives that directly contradict what the standardized curriculum is teaching them. An ideal classroom rooted in SJE is one that relies on holding students to high academic standards while incorporating all students' cultures, identities, and experiences through an inclusive lens that highlights marginalized perspectives (Sleeter, 2015). Research suggests students in these classrooms began to realize that most issues in society are not black or white and to become forces for change, they recognize they need to confront previously held beliefs or assumptions

(Adams & Bell, 2016). Students who are consistently exposed to SJE have increased commitments to political participation, civic engagement, and multicultural activism compared to those who receive more traditional instruction (Krings et. al, 2015).

For example, a frequently misrepresented policy issue in American curriculum and mainstream conversations is Affirmative Action. The common consensus in introductory government textbooks is that Affirmative Action gives minorities an advantage when it comes to situations like college admissions (Wallace & Allen, 2016). Within the framework of Social Justice Education, students are exposed to institutional and structural oppression within admissions processes and hiring practices. Through this exposure, students would be able to recognize that Affirmative Action was needed and that it was a step toward equity, not a step toward giving marginalized groups advantages. As a result, students will feel comfortable challenging others' beliefs surrounding the misunderstood concept and working to protest the institutional oppression that made Affirmative Action necessary.

Students engaged with SJE have an increased commitment to learning about systemic oppression, engaging in constructive dialogue with their peers and within their communities, and feel confident and equipped to take meaningful action to confront injustice. These commitments stem from the theory of critical consciousness in which students are called to become so radicalized that they cannot ignore the dehumanization of others and are compelled to educate themselves and others with the goal of creating social change (Freire, 1973).

Critical Consciousness

Freire developed critical consciousness as a concept that advocated for three main educational tenets: exposure to social and political inequities, self-reflection of one's own identities; and constructive dialogue within communities. Freire exposed the need for critical

consciousness when he observed that those who are oppressed generally have no experience of dialogue and participation, are unsure of themselves, and are consistently denied the right to have a say (Freire, 1973). He argued that the oppressed must equip themselves with the skills to activate social change because the “elites” of society were desperate to hold onto their societal dominance and therefore unwilling to change. In Freire’s book, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), he argued that those three tenets of critical consciousness, when taught and explored, should empower students to invoke progressive, social change.

Critical consciousness in education was developed when Freire noted that traditional curriculum does not allow for stimulating conversation, self-reflection, and honest content surrounding structural inequities. To develop critical consciousness in students, Freire proposed that education should be less authoritarian and instead rely on a democratic approach.

Democratic education “[is] focused on faith in men, on the belief that not only they can, but should discuss the problems of their country, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself” (Freire, p. 33). Throughout Freire’s philosophies, he frequently argued that men and women were not passive members of the world in which things just happened to them. Instead, every man and woman were both in and with the world. In addition, students would be encouraged to not only reflect on the world around them, but to also reflect on one’s own positions and identities.

Democratic education should put students at the center where they can critically evaluate all of the communities they participated in. The main result of critical consciousness in education is for students to feel comfortable learning and speaking about inequities, and then to develop the tools to intervene when exposed to those inequities. With the development of the internet and social media, students have become much more aware of the world around them (Seider et al.,

2017), and now, more than ever, are taking an active part in their local, national, and global communities. With this seemingly infinite amount of information available at the click of a button, it is even more critical for educators to teach students to recognize and protest social injustice.

Method

This study was an explanatory, mixed-methods, action research study designed to evaluate if students' critical consciousness was influenced by the integration of social justice education in a social studies elective class.

Site of Study

This study took place in a public high school with a population of approximately 1,300 students that ranged in age from 14-18 and serviced grades 9-12. This high school was in a southwestern city in the United States with a population of approximately half a million residents. The high school was in a suburban community and served students from both the surrounding suburbs and students who lived in more urban areas of town.

The Course

The focus of this study happened in a single semester social studies elective class entitled Constitutional and Criminal Law. The main objective of this elective was to teach students about how the Constitution of the United States provides the basis for municipal, state, and federal laws. Key concepts focused on individual rights and liberties, law enforcement, the judicial system, and various other elements of criminal law. There were two class periods in this study (3rd and 7th). Both periods were a hybrid style format with instruction given simultaneously to in-person students and online learners. For the duration of this study, approximately 75% of

students were online with the rest of the students in class. Each class period was only 95 minutes long.

For the duration of this study, the class was focused on a four-week mini-unit surrounding civil rights. There were four main topics in the mini-unit: the criminal justice system, gender equality, immigration law, and voting rights. Both class periods received the same instruction during the data collection period. Each topic took between one to two class periods to complete.

The textbook used for this class was *Street Law: A Course in Practical Law (8th Edition)* written by Lee Arbetman and Ed O'Brien and published by Glencoe (a McGraw Hill company) in 2010. Three of the topics (gender, immigration, and voting) could all be found in one chapter: the chapter on discrimination. The topic of the criminal justice system could be found throughout the book but there were few mentions of how the criminal justice system was corrupted or how it targeted certain communities (mainly poor communities and/or communities of color). The textbook focused on base level understandings of each topic and frequently disregarded intersectionality (e.g., in the section committed to discrimination based on gender, there was no acknowledgement of specific struggles for women of color). The lessons for each topic used the book as a starting point, and the students were also given videos, articles, and graphics to help them see the bigger and more holistic picture.

Participants

The participants in this study (N=41) were either in their junior or senior year of high school, aged 16-18. All of the students were enrolled in one of the two Constitutional and Criminal Law classes. The first class (3rd period) had 17 active participants and the second class (7th period) had 24 active participants. The demographics between the two classes generally

aligned with the school population. Approximately 60% of the students were white, 24% were Hispanic, 5% were Black, and 2% were Asian. More than half of the total participants were male (54%).

Instruments

The quantitative aspect of this study was the scale, Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI), which targets individuals' understanding of their positionality in society (e.g., race, class, gender, etc.) and was developed to measure specifically how youth develop critical consciousness (Thomas et. al, 2014). The scale was also chosen because it was designed to be effective for members of both oppressed and non-oppressed groups.

The scale has nine subscales, with four items in each section (Appendix A). The sections represent either an individual's sociopolitical development or were questions designed for perspective taking. Items that assessed sociopolitical development were focused on issues of equity. For example, some items focused on access to resources such as education or how certain social groups are treated. Items designed for perspective taking evaluated an individual's empathy and emotional reactions to oppression. The CCI was designed as a sequential Guttman scale, which indicates that the only possible responses to each item were either "yes" or "no."

The qualitative measures in this study comprised four rounds of anonymous student reflections given to students through Google Forms. A major component of critical consciousness is the ability for individuals to successfully reflect on their own opinions and positions. These reflection questions gave participants intentional time at the end of each topic to reflect on what they have learned, what they previously thought about the issues, and their current views. The questions were items from the CCI scale that most closely aligned with what was covered in each topic (Appendix B).

Procedures

Before data collection started, students completed an assent form and their parents completed a consent form. The students were explicitly told that participating in this research would in no way affect their grades or any other academic/curricular prospects. They were also informed that their results would remain anonymous.

Students completed uniform pre- and post-test CCI scales in the Spring of 2021. They took the CCI pre-test at the beginning of the four week period in mid-February. The surveys were in a digital format and administered at the beginning of the first class period of the four week period. Some students took the survey at home due to remote learning, while those attending class in person took the survey in person. The students then took the same scale as a post-test at the end of the four week period in mid-March.

In the four weeks between the pre- and post-test CCI surveys, all students participating in the study were asked to complete four rounds of student reflections. These reflections were given at the conclusion of each unit topic, generally the end of each week, and students were given 15 minutes in class to submit them. The students filled out their responses through Google Forms and their responses were anonymous. Students were instructed to respond openly and honestly.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Survey data was first analyzed utilizing a Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality to ensure that the data was normally distributed and to indicate which tests should be used to evaluate the data across classes. The results indicated that the data was normally distributed, $D(35) = 0.15$, $p = .37$, and that an independent t-test could be used to compare the data across the

two classes. This result concluded that the difference in results between the two classes was not significant, $t(35) = .07$, $p < .05$, and the classes could be combined.

Critical Consciousness

The items in the Critical Consciousness Inventory were categorized into four main categories based on Watts et. al (1999) model of sociopolitical development: precritical, beginning critical, critical, and post-critical. Individuals in the pre-critical stage do not recognize oppression and tend to believe that the world is fair for everyone. Those in the beginning critical stage are beginning to recognize issues of oppression and inequity but lack empathy and do not have the tools or the confidence to engage in constructive dialogue with others or take part in social action. Individuals in the critical phase have a solid sense of critical consciousness in which they recognize issues of oppression and now have the tools to have constructive dialogue with others and the tools to inflict systemic change. They also find it easier to empathize with others and are more adept at perspective taking. Finally, those in the post-critical stage do not only have the tools to create change but are actually using them either in their personal or social lives.

For each subscale, the first question reflects the precritical phase, the second question represents the beginning critical phase, and so on. The precritical phase represents answers ranging from 1.0-2.0, beginning critical answers will fall between 2.0-3.0, critical results will be between 3.0-4.0, and post-critical individuals fall within a 4.0-5.0. When evaluating the means of each subscale of items from the Critical Consciousness Inventory, the students' answers for every subscale was between a 2.0 and a 3.0 for both the pre-test ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.07$) and post-test ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.08$). This result indicates that, on average, the students ranged between the stages of beginning critical and critical meaning they recognize oppression and inequity but are

not comfortable with constructive dialogue nor do they feel like they have the agency to aid in or create systemic change.

Table 1

Stages of Critical Consciousness by Subscale

Subscale	Pre-Intervention <i>M(sd)</i>	Post-Intervention
1. Issues of equity and justice (fairness)	2.89 (1.02)	2.91 (0.92)
2. Issues of equity and justice (discrimination)	2.84 (1.02)	2.80 (1.0)
3. Access to educational opportunities and resources	2.81 (1.31)	2.81 (1.24)
4. Equitable treatment across social groups (fairness)	2.76 (1.23)	2.72 (1.24)
5. Equitable treatment across social groups (respect)	2.92 (0.95)	2.92 (0.99)
6. Questioning experiences related to oppression (prejudiced comments)	2.90 (1.11)	2.93 (1.16)
7. Questioning experiences related to oppression (offensive jokes)	2.94 (1.09)	2.92 (1.08)
8. Emotional reactions to oppression (hopelessness)	2.97 (1.22)	2.94 (1.10)
9. Emotional reactions to oppression (sad or angry)	2.87 (1.13)	2.89 (1.09)
Total	2.88 (0.07)	2.88 (0.08)

A matched pairs t-test was used to determine if there was any significant change between the total pre-test values and the total post-test values. According to this analysis, there was no significant change, $t(35) = -0.28$, $p < .05$, between the pre-test and the post-test which indicates that for this particular study, the integration of social justice materials did not significantly change the students' critical consciousness.

Student Reflections

The student reflections were coded by each topic (criminal justice system, gender equality, immigration law, and voting rights). The students responded to specific statements for each topic; therefore, the overarching themes were pre-determined for them, but how they responded to each of those themes was what was coded and analyzed. For example, one of the statements students responded to at the end of the gender equality lesson focused on whether education gives everyone who works hard an equal chance and therefore the overarching theme for that statement was meritocracy. The statement was then analyzed to determine if students believed in the notion of meritocracy or if they understand that systemic issues hold back certain communities despite education and work ethic. The student reflections mostly corresponded with the quantitative data in that they mostly aligned with the beginning critical stage of sociopolitical development. Students recognized oppression but showed a lack of empathy and also remarked that they felt unable to do anything about the systemic issues they were learning about.

Reflections were analyzed in the order in which they were administered starting with the criminal justice system, moving to gender equality and immigration law, and finishing with voting rights.

Oppression is less than in the past but still prevalent

Students generally agreed that oppression is less than in the past, but “not by much” and “not enough has changed.” Many students also indicated that oppression may only seem like a relic of the past but that it has become more discreet and that it is “just easier to hide today.” Others noted that oppression looks different than it did in the past but is still just as prevalent. One student wrote that oppression “is less than in the past, but not by much because though the laws regarding different groups have gotten better, they are treated similarly but in more discreet

ways, such as the move from slavery to segregation to mass incarceration.” Other students noted that “slavery ended a long time ago, but nothing has changed” and “oppression today takes many different forms from injustices within the prison system to unlawful treatment toward racial, social, and political groups from authorities.” Overall, almost every student agreed that oppression is less than in the past, and many students recognized that oppression is still prevalent in modern day America but is more discreet compared to slavery or Jim Crow laws.

America is or should be a meritocracy

Approximately three-quarters of the students believed that America is a meritocracy and that education is the great equalizer. Many students noted that “if you work hard in school, you get the same opportunities as everyone else” and that “people get the same work with education no matter what.” One student wrote that the “education system is supposed to be standardized and if people work hard and give their schoolwork all they’ve got, then they will be able to go far in life.” In terms of hiring practices and promotions, some students reflected that “if someone is more educated on a subject, they are more likely to be chosen.”

The remaining students acknowledged that America should be a meritocracy, but that certain groups are discriminated against in school and that hinders them from achieving the same opportunities as more privileged groups. For some, they believed that “education tries to give everybody an equal chance, but there’s something missing. [For example], not every gender gets to play the same sports.” However, others expressed that the “education system is built specifically so that some succeed while some fail. It is built to cater to neurotypical students with no room for neurodivergent students.” One student reflected that “...mental health or family situations may prevent students from learning in the way they need to in order to be as successful as those who work less hard but are more privileged.”

The actions of a few should not reflect whole groups

The majority of students argued that the actions of a few should not represent whole groups of people. One student remarked:

I think that some people fear people due to other's mistakes. For example, when people say all atheists are bad because of places like China or Russia...or terrorist groups that might follow Islam, making people weary of Muslims. People have fears, so while it is wrong to write a group of people off just because they belong to a larger group...not everyone in a group has entirely the same beliefs.

Others similarly noted that “there is always going to be bad people that make good people look bad” and that there “will always be a bad apple among any group that can cause people to think badly of them.”

A large group of students also reflected that the media greatly affects how people view social groups, one blatantly remarking that “the media cannot be trusted.” Others wrote statements expressing that social groups are not inherently bad “but they are portrayed through the media as bad people.” Students generally also believed that a lot of the information and perceptions the population has against social groups is based on stereotypes. Students tended to believe that “social groups have done nothing wrong to earn the ways other view them. It is stereotypes that divide people” and “that most [social groups] are just misunderstood because of the stereotypes that are placed on them.”

Lack of agency and empathy to create social change

Most students recognized modern oppression and suppression but feel they do not have the agency or tools to make change. Many students expressed feelings of “hopelessness” and believe they cannot be changemakers on their own. One student wrote that they feels “helpless

when [they] sees oppression because even if [they] do something, there are thousands of people that will continue to oppress.” Another remarked that “people can work hard to create an equal environment for themselves, but they cannot singlehandedly change the masses.” A few students made similar remarks that they can do more once they are over the age of 18 and can actually vote. Some students acknowledged that even small actions can lead to bigger change and noted they were “signing petitions, donating money, and protesting” or having “difficult conversations with friends and family.”

The majority of students also expressed that they are constantly angry when they think about oppression and other injustices in America. Students reflected that it makes them “really angry when people talk about how bad oppression is and those same people do not do anything to try and stop or fix it.” In regard to voting rights, this particular student was acknowledging that many people complain about injustices but refrain from voting. Other students said they felt angry because it’s “overwhelming and prevalent everywhere.” However, most only felt these strong emotions when it is happening to them or someone they know. For example, one student admitted it was “easy to cope with [their] feelings when the actions do not immediately affect [them].”

Discussion

This study was aimed at analyzing if critical consciousness in youth would be influenced by the introduction of Social Justice Education in a textbook-based social studies classroom. The participants’ levels of critical consciousness in this study reflect adolescents’ moral and brain development, while the lack of significant change between pre-test and post-test scales can be attributed to cognitive dissonance theory and peer pressure.

Lawrence Kohlberg's (1984) theory on moral development explains why the participants in this study, all adolescents aged 16-18, averaged between beginning critical and critical stages. While Kohlberg does not assign ages to his stages, most adolescents are either in Stage 3 (Good Interpersonal Relationships) or Stage 4 (Maintaining Social Order). The students in this study that resided in Stage 3 were focused on maintaining good social relations and act in ways that will gain the approval of others, especially with the researcher. In their reflections, many students simply wrote that they "agreed with [the researcher]." This suggests the students assumed the research statements were the opinions of the researcher and agreeing with the statements would be met with approval, which is consistent with Stage 3. The students in Stage 4 were not persuaded by moral dilemmas and believe that the law is necessary to maintain order. One student noted in a reflection that "oppression as it is is needed to make society run like it has for years." While others were not as explicit in their remarks, many students through reflection and class observations noted that the law is necessary in society to keep the peace and that it is unfortunate but inevitable that some people will be falsely accused of crimes they did not commit. For this scenario, the end justifies the means for the Stage 4 students who value maintaining order over the moral implications of the law. There were a select few participants that may have progressed into Stages 5 (Social Contract and Individual Rights) and 6 (Universal Principles) that acknowledged what the law says is not always what is just and those laws, and the people/institutions that uphold and support them, must be challenged.

Alongside moral development, adolescence is also a time period of development in the brain, particularly the "social brain." The social brain refers to the network of brain regions that are the basis of cognitive processes needed to understand and interact with others (Frith, 2007). Three skills that are still maturing in the adolescent brain are empathy, emotional awareness

(Burnett et. al, 2011), and perspective taking (Andrews et. al, 2021) which explains the levels of sociopolitical development of the students in this study.

Lack of empathy due to “social brain” development was observed in the statistical analysis, student reflections, and class observations. One student blatantly remarked that they do not feel sad or angry about oppression because it is “not [their] problem.” Except for a select few, most students did admit to feeling angry about injustices, and when asked if they were able to easily move on after hearing prejudiced comments, a majority of them answered yes ($M = 1.12$, $SD = 0.33$). Students also tended to believe it was primarily the victim’s responsibility to change their mindsets and as one student remarked: “there are people who are treated badly, but there are without a doubt ways for people to get away from that.” Students’ lack of empathy most likely stems from the belief that people can make personal changes to increase their quality of life. The students do not fully understand that oppression is so deeply ingrained in American culture that marginalized groups are intentionally oppressed to maintain the social and political order.

While moral and brain development explain the participants’ levels of critical consciousness, Cognitive Dissonance Theory is one potential reason there was no significant change in results. Festinger’s (1957) theory rests on the principle that when people are presented with new information that causes discomfort, their immediate reaction is to distance themselves from the conflict. If the new information contradicts their previously held beliefs, individuals tend to explain why their initial beliefs are correct and reject the new information. In a class discussion surrounding the criminal justice system, specifically focusing on race and the prison industrial complex, students were directly confronted with the argument that many people actually do not get what they deserve and are victims of a system that relies on filling prison cells

to turn out a profit. Many students resisted this conversation and continued to rely on the argument and belief that the purpose of punishment is to “lock up the bad guys” and that it keeps communities safe. During this discussion, students were tense and many refused to participate and were showing signs of physical discomfort (tense, fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, etc.). This resistance can also be corroborated in the survey data. When asked if they believed that people get what they deserve, almost exactly half of the students answered “yes” ($M = 1.51$, $SD = 0.5$).

Festinger (1957) also suggested in his Cognitive Dissonance Theory that peer pressure persuades individuals to form attitudinal consensus within social groups. The strength of peer pressure and want for communal harmony is an important part of cognitive dissonance and is significantly heightened for the adolescent participants in this study as peers are adolescents main social partners and there is an intense desire for individuals to feel socially accepted (Brown & Larson, 2009). Peer influence may have stopped some students from being truthful or feeling comfortable voicing their own thoughts. In one of the classes, discussion was dominated by a group of girls who all were generally aligned in their views. When they took over the conversation, students that were undecided on their opinions or had opposite views completely disengaged from the conversation. This is not uncommon for students who feel ostracized by their peers, even if it is not intentional (Tetzner et. al, 2016). It is also fair to assume that students who did not agree with the dominant class narrative felt extremely uncomfortable adding to class discussions and then subconsciously altered their opinions in their anonymous reflection questions or agreed with certain statements on the scale that most aligned with the popular class consensus and not their personal beliefs.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study was an inconsistent learning environment. Engaging in constructive dialogue is a crucial component of Freire's theory on critical consciousness and that component could not be executed successfully due to the frequent changes in the learning context and a hesitancy for online students to contribute to class discussion. Because of COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions at the time of this study, students were on a hybrid schedule and grouped into three cohorts (two hybrid and one fully online). With this schedule, the hybrid students switched between online learning and in-person learning every other class period. While students were in-person, the level of engagement was significantly higher compared to when they were online. Students online avoided engaging in online discussions and missed much of the conversations had in class. Since teaching was happening both online and in-person at the same time, when in-person students asked questions or made comments, the students online often could not hear. With a class policy of not enforcing turned-on cameras, this study also ran the risk of the online students being completely disengaged from class. One class period was also impacted by a two-hour delay and an e-learning snow day, which forced learning completely online.

Coinciding with the inconsistent learning environment, the time frame of this study was too short. The study spanned four weeks, but with the hybrid schedule, each class period only met twice a week for a total of eight class sessions per class. For there to be significant attitudinal and behavioral changes, constant instruction for a longer period of time would have been needed. A more focused group that was seen every day for a whole semester or a whole year would have most likely yielded a significant change between pre-test and post-test results.

Another possible limitation of this study was the influence of researcher bias into both lesson content and classroom conversations. While adolescents have an intense desire to be

accepted by their peers, students also notice educators' opinions and biases and change their thinking to reflect that, which was seen in many student reflections. Even though the reflections were anonymous, it can be assumed that some students were writing what they thought the researcher wanted to read and not exactly their own original thoughts and opinions.

Action Plan

Future studies focused on implementing Social Justice Education should span over long periods of time, focus on creating an equitable classroom community, frequently introduce social justice texts and documentaries, engage in intentional self-reflection, and equip students with the tools and the confidence to take meaningful action.

In my future classroom, it would be beneficial to have students take the Critical Consciousness Inventory at the beginning of the semester or year. The results would be analyzed to see where the students rank in the stages of sociopolitical development so that instruction can be modified to represent where the students are and challenge them to develop into the higher stages. I would also have the students complete the scale throughout instruction as a checkpoint to assess if the intervention is effective for that particular group of students. Then at the conclusion of the class, the scale would be completed one last time to analyze if there was any significant change from the beginning of the year.

The most challenging hurdle I foresee is creating a classroom community where students feel safe to work through their previously held beliefs and do not feel ostracized by their peers if they have differing opinions. One possible way to overcome this is to introduce students to good classroom discussion practices at the beginning of the class. Students and educator as co-creators of knowledge should come to a shared understanding of what respectful dialogue looks like in the classroom, primarily focusing on mutual respect between students as well as between student

and teacher. This will hopefully create a space where all students feel safe to share their opinions and feel comfortable being challenged on those opinions and open to changing their minds when presented with new information.

In terms of Social Justice Education content, the most effective lesson the students engaged with during the study was the documentary, *13th*, directed by Ava Duvernay, that focuses on how the 13th amendment has led to mass incarceration in modern America. Many students remarked in the discussion afterward that the documentary should be “mandated viewing for everyone” and one student even admitted that it “completely changed their view on the prison system.” Students reacted well to this piece of social justice content, so if I were to teach this class again or one similar, I would show the documentary again and also introduce certain social justice texts such as *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander and *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. Other texts such as *A People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn would be beneficial in American history classes.

The practice of self-reflection was a crucial part of this study and is a practice I will continue with my students moving forward. I will give students intentional time in class to self-reflect on the content we have covered, especially since much of this content directly contradicts previously held beliefs. Students need to be given purposeful time and space to reflect on what they have learned and how it affects them and the communities to which they belong.

The last component of critical consciousness that has to be addressed in my future classrooms is helping students develop the tools to confidently go out in the world and be agents of change. Many students in this study remarked they could not do anything to fix injustices especially since the majority of them are under the age of 18. While they may get the right to

vote at 18, there are a plethora of ways to become involved as a minor. Bringing in community stakeholders (politicians, community organizers, non-profits) is a practice that will help students learn about ways to take action in their communities. Students will also constantly be engaged in problem based learning wherein they explore a current issue, research proposed solutions, and then develop their own tangible solution. This practice will help students realize the power of their own agency.

While the quantitative results in this particular study indicated that the integration of Social Justice Education did not influence students' critical consciousness, the reflections and qualitative analysis made it clear that the need for SJE is imperative. Almost every participant in this study felt frustrated, angry, and/or sad about injustices in American society but do not feel they have the agency or skills to be change-makers in their communities. Social Justice Education, when implemented properly, will equip students with the tools to confidently engage in purposeful action that targets systemic oppression and creates meaningful change.

References

- Acuff, J. B. (2016). 'Being' a critical multicultural pedagogue in the art education classroom. *Critical Studies in Education, 59*(1), 35–53.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2016.1176063>
- Adams, M., & Bell, L. A. (Eds.). (2016). Pedagogical foundations for social justice education. In *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (pp. 27–55). essay, Routledge.
- Andrews, J. L., Ahmed, S. P., & Blakemore, S.-J. (2021). Navigating the social environment in adolescence: The role of social brain development. *Biological Psychiatry, 89*(2), 109–118.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2020.09.012>
- Arbetman, L. P., & O'Brien, E. L. (2004). *Street law: a course in practical law* (8th ed.). Glencoe/McGraw Hill.
- Au, W. (2017). When multicultural education is not enough. *Multicultural Perspectives, 19*(3), 147–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2017.1331741>
- Baldrige, B. J. (2020). Negotiating anti-Black racism in 'liberal' contexts: the experiences of Black youth workers in community-based educational spaces. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 23*(6), 747–766. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1753682>
- Banks, J. A. (1995). Multicultural education and curriculum transformation. *The Journal of Negro Education, 64*(4), 390. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2967262>
- Brandle, S. M. (2020). It's (not) in the reading: American government textbooks' limited representation of historically marginalized groups. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 53*(4), 734–740. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1049096520000797>
- Brown, B. B., & Larson, J. (2009). Peer relationships in adolescence. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy002004>

- Burnett, S., Sebastian, C., Cohen Kadosh, K., & Blakemore, S.-J. (2011). The social brain in adolescence: Evidence from functional magnetic resonance imaging and behavioral studies. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, *35*(8), 1654–1664.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2010.10.011>
- Case, A., & Ngo, B. (2017). “Do we have to call it that?” The response of neoliberal multiculturalism to college antiracism efforts. *Multicultural Perspectives*, *19*(4), 215–222.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2017.1366861>
- Chandler, P. T., & Hawley, T. S. (Eds.). (2017). Using racial pedagogical content knowledge and inquiry pedagogy to re-imagine social studies teaching and learning. In *Race Lessons: Using Inquiry to Teach About Race in Social Studies* (pp. 1–18). essay, Information Age Publishing, Inc. .
- Cho, H. (2017). Navigating the meanings of social justice, teaching for social justice, and multicultural education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, *19*(2), 1–19.
<https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i2.1307>
- Chu, Y. (2017). Twenty years of social studies textbook content analysis: Still “decidedly disappointing”? *The Social Studies*, *108*(6), 229–241. <https://doi.org/https://doi-org.coloradocollege.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/00377996.2017.1360240>
- Collie, R. J., Perry, N. E., & Martin, A. J. (2017). School context and educational system factors impacting educator stress. *Aligning Perspectives on Health, Safety and Well-Being*, 3–22.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53053-6_1
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.

- Flynn, J. E. (2017). Speaking up and speaking out? Long-term impact of critical multicultural pedagogy. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 19(4), 207–214.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2017.1365611>
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Frith, C. D. (2007). The social brain? *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 362(1480), 671–678. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2006.2003>
- Glasnovic Gracin, D. (2018). Requirements in mathematics textbooks: a five-dimensional analysis of textbook exercises and examples. *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology*, 49(7), 1003–1024.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0020739x.2018.1431849>
- Hanchett Hanson, M. (2019). Navigating the ideology of creativity in education. *Creativity Theory and Action in Education*, 279–296. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99163-4_16
- King, L. G. J., & Chandler, P. (2016). From non-racism to anti-racism in social studies teacher education: Social studies and racial pedagogical content knowledge. *Rethinking Social Studies Teacher Education in the Twenty-First Century*, 3–21.
https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22939-3_1
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The psychology of moral development nature and validity of moral stages*. Harper & Row.
- Krings, A., Austin, E. A., Gutiérrez, L. M., & Dirksen, K. E. (2015). The comparative impacts of social justice educational methods on political participation, civic engagement, and multicultural activism. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 48(3), 403–417.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2015.1057087>

- Lucy, L., Demszky, D., Bromley, P., & Jurafksy, D. (2020). Content analysis of textbooks via natural language processing: Findings on gender, race, and ethnicity in Texas U.S. history textbooks. *AERA Open*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858420940312>
- Lynch, I., Swartz, S., & Isaacs, D. (2017). Anti-racist moral education: A review of approaches, impact and theoretical underpinnings from 2000 to 2015. *Journal of Moral Education*, 46(2), 129–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2016.1273825>
- Miller, J. C. (2015). Never a fight of woman against man: what textbooks don't say about women's suffrage. *The History Teacher*, 48(3), 437–482. <https://doi.org/10.2307/24810524>
- Neumann, R. (2014). An analysis of the treatment of corporate influence on government by United States history and American government high school textbooks. *The Social Studies*, 105(2), 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2013.820163>
- Nieto, S. (2017). Re-imagining multicultural education: new visions, new possibilities. *Multicultural Education Review*, 9(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615x.2016.1276671>
- Polikoff, M. S. (2015). How well aligned are textbooks to the common core standards in mathematics? *American Educational Research Journal*, 52(6), 1185–1211. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831215584435>
- Román, D., & Busch, K. C. (2015). Textbooks of doubt: using systemic functional analysis to explore the framing of climate change in middle-school science textbooks. *Environmental Education Research*, 22(8), 1158–1180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2015.1091878>
- Sawchuk, S. (2012). New texts aim to capture standards. *Education Week*, 32(12).

- Seider, S., Graves, D., El-Amin, A., Soutter, M., Tamerat, J., Jennett, P., ... Johannsen, J. (2017). Developing sociopolitical consciousness of race and social class inequality in adolescents attending progressive and no excuses urban secondary schools. *Applied Developmental Science*, 22(3), 169–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2016.1254557>
- Sever, B., & Grillo, M. (2015). Do our books reinforce criminal justice stereotypes? An analysis of the images in introductory criminal justice textbooks. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 27(1), 53–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2015.1078387>
- Slater, G. B., & Griggs, C. B. (2015). Standardization and subjection: an autonomist critique of neoliberal school reform. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 37(5). <https://doi.org/https://doi-org.coloradocollege.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/10714413.2015.1091259>
- Sleeter, C. E. (2015). Deepening social justice teaching. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*. https://doi.org/http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/SSO_Feb2015_Template.pdf
- Sparapani, E., & Callejo Perez, D. (2015). A perspective on the standardized curriculum and Its effect on teaching and learning. *Journal of Education & Social Policy*, 2(5).
- Stanton, C. R. (2015). Beyond the margins: evaluating the support for multicultural education within teachers' editions of U.S. history textbooks. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 17(4), 180–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2015.1079491>
- Takeda, O. (2016). A model minority? The misrepresentation and underrepresentation of Asian pacific Americans in introductory American government textbooks. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 12(4), 387–402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2016.1142449>

- Tetzner, J., Becker, M., & Maaz, K. (2016). Development in multiple areas of life in adolescence. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 41*(6), 704–713.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025416664432>
- Thomas, A. J., Barrie, R., Brunner, J., Clawson, A., Hewitt, A., Jeremie-Brink, G., & Rowe-Johnson, M. (2014). Assessing critical consciousness in youth and young adults. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 24*(3), 485–496. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12132>
- van den Ham, A.-K., & Heinze, A. (2018). Does the textbook matter? Longitudinal effects of textbook choice on primary school students' achievement in mathematics. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 59*, 133–140.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2018.07.005>
- Wallace, S. L., & Allen, M. D. (2016). Affirmative action debates in American government introductory textbooks. *Journal of Black Studies, 47*(7), 659–681.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934716649645>
- Watt, M. (2015). Research on textbook use in the United States of America. *IARTEM e-Journal, 7*(2), 48–72. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21344/iartem.v7i2.746>
- Watts, R. J., Griffith, D. M., & Abdul-Adil, J. (1999). Sociopolitical development as an antidote for oppression-theory and action. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 27*(2), 255–271. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1022839818873>
- Wiggan, G., & Watson-Vandiver, M. J. (2017). Pedagogy of empowerment: student perspectives on critical multicultural education at a high-performing African American school. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 22*(6), 767–787.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2017.1395328>

Woodson, A. N. (2017). “There ain’t no white people here”: Master narratives of the civil rights movement in the stories of urban youth. *Urban Education*, 52(3), 316–342.

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915602543>

Woyshner, C., & Schocker, J. B. (2015). Cultural parallax and content analysis: Images of Black women in high school history textbooks. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 43(4),

441–468. <https://doi.org/https://doi->

[org.coloradocollege.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/00933104.2015.1099487](https://doi.org/https://doi-)

Appendix A

Critical Consciousness Inventory

Item	Yes	No
1a. I believe the world is basically fair.		
1b. I believe that the world is basically fair but others believe it is unfair.		
1c. I believe the world is unfair for some people.		
1d. I believe that the world is unfair and I make sure to treat others fairly.		
2a. I believe that all people are treated fairly.		
2b. I believe that some people don't take advantage of opportunities given to them and blame others instead.		
2c. I believe that some groups are discriminated against.		
2d. I work to make sure that people are treated equally and are given equal chances.		
3a. I think that education gives everyone an equal chance to do well.		
3b. I think that education gives everyone who works hard an equal chance.		
3c. I think that the education system is unequal.		
3d. I think that the educational system needs to be changed in order for everyone to have an equal chance.		
4a. I believe people get what they deserve.		
4b. I believe that some people are treated badly but there are ways that they can work to be treated fairly.		
4c. I believe that some people are treated badly because of oppression.		

4d. I feel angry that some people are treated badly but there are ways that they can work to be treated fairly.		
5a. I think all social groups are respected.		
5b. I think the social groups that are not respected have done things that lead people to think badly of them.		
5c. I think people do not respect members of some social groups based on stereotypes.		
5d. I am respectful of people in all social groups, and I speak up when others are not.		
6a. I don't notice when people make prejudiced comments.		
6b. I notice when people make prejudiced comments and it hurts me.		
6c. It hurts me when people make prejudiced comments but I am able to move on.		
6d. When someone makes a prejudiced comment, I tell them what they said is hurtful.		
7a. When people tell a joke that makes fun of a social group, I laugh and don't really think about it.		
7b. When people tell a joke that makes fun of a social group, I laugh but also feel uncomfortable.		
7c. When people tell a joke that makes fun of a social group, I realize that the joke is based on a stereotype.		
7d. I tell people when I feel their joke was offensive.		
8a. I don't see much oppression in this country.		

8b. I feel hopeless and overwhelmed when I think about oppression in this country.		
8c. I feel like oppression in this country is less than in the past and will continue to change.		
8d. I actively work to support organizations which help people who are oppressed.		
9a. I don't feel bad when people say they have been oppressed.		
9b. I feel sad or angry when experiencing or seeing oppression.		
9c. I often become sad or angry when experiencing or seeing oppression, but I find ways to cope with my feelings.		
9d. I work to protect myself from negative feelings when acts of oppression happen.		

Appendix B

Student Reflection

At the conclusion of each topic during the mini-unit, students were given two reflection statements to respond to. Students were directed to indicate if they agreed or disagreed with the statement and why.

Criminal Justice System Reflection Questions

1. I feel like oppression in this country is less than in the past and will continue to change.
2. I believe that the world is unfair to others.

Gender Equality Reflection Questions

1. I believe that some people don't take advantage of opportunities given to them and blame others instead.
2. I think that education gives everyone who works hard an equal chance.

Immigration Law Reflection Questions

1. I think that social groups that are not respected have done things that lead people to think badly of them.
2. I believe people get what they deserve.

Voting Rights Reflection Questions

1. I believe that some people are treated badly but there are ways that they can work to be treated fairly.
2. I often become sad or angry when experiencing or seeing oppression.