Social Studies Teaching and Learning

Volume 4, Issue 1

An open-source peer-reviewed journal of the

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Social Justice Lite: Problematic Conceptions of Human Rights Education

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Abstract

American scholars and the National Council for the Social Studies (2021) have called for an increased emphasis on human rights education (HRE) in K-12 classrooms, however, few studies have investigated HRE in U.S. schools. This case study examined secondary social studies teachers' conceptions of HRE in a small Midwestern city to gain a better understanding of its current and future application in teaching for social justice. The first key finding of this study indicated that participants' conceptions of human rights centered on Western notions of rights, which were often viewed through a lens of American exceptionalism. The second key finding was that participants' conceptions of HRE supported common social studies aims, such as the promotion of empathy and tolerance. However, participants' collective notions of social justice were superficial, lacked critical action, and appeared to be shaped by their racial identities. While they acknowledged the importance of understanding unjust systems of power, the data showed that participants focused on highlighting injustices that did not challenge their worldview.

Key Words: human rights education, citizenship education, social justice education

Human rights education (HRE) is a key component of citizenship education and represents an important educational aim (Oxley & Morris, 2013; Bajaj, 2017). Furthermore, the National Council for the Social Studies has emphasized the importance of HRE to social studies instruction in a recent position statement (NCSS, 2021). However, little attention has been paid to HRE within social studies education in the United States (Grossman, 2017; Mathews, 2022). This article seeks to address the HRE gap that exists in the American context.

HRE is learning that develops the knowledge, skills, and values of human rights with the broad goal of creating a universal, shared human rights culture. The goal of HRE is to teach students how to examine their own experiences and actions from a human rights perspective and incorporate human rights concepts into their personal values and decision-making processes (Osler, 2016). This learning has immense potential to develop young people who care about social justice and center transformative citizenship. A human rights approach allows teachers to address sensitive topics, make global connections, promote critical perspectives, and frame injustice by emphasizing the value of human dignity (Corrigan, 2022).

CRT and Human Rights

Context matters when discussing issues of citizenship, and critical race theory (CRT) is a way to frame human rights education within the U.S. experience. Race is a key dynamic in citizenship discourse in America, and citizenship domains have often been influenced by race and racism. Since CRT is grounded in the U.S. context, it represents an appropriate theoretical framework for a study that examines rights issues in a country where race is a primary determinant of social and economic conditions (Adami, 2020). Critical race theory is concerned with issues of White supremacy, colonization, and forms of oppression that have been racially motivated and maintained. Key CRT tenets include discontent with liberalism, differential racialization, interest convergence, and revisionist history. Classical liberalism's promise of freedom and equality has been harshly criticized by critical theorists for concealing structural racism (Goldberg, 1993). For example, color blindness and other value-neutral concepts can be used in "reverse discrimination" arguments or to skew the deterministic role of race in the United States. Differential racialization refers to the fluid ways in which racial groups come to be viewed and treated differently by mainstream society, generally taking the form of negative stereotypes of minorities that provide advantages for White people. The principle of interest convergence contends that non-dominant groups advance when it is convenient and beneficial for the dominant group. In American race relations, this means that social and political gains by racial minorities have been, and still are, correlated with the interests of Whites. Lastly, revisionist history reexamines American history in a way that "replaces majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities' experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017)." These (re)interpretations are often called counternarratives.

Race is a neglected topic in United States curriculum (Loewen, 2007), and teachers can use human rights approaches to address this glaring omission (Chan & Cheng, 2022). For example, in order to provide counternarratives that unflinchingly humanize the oppression of racial groups in the United States, Howard and Navarro (2017) argued that social studies research, theory, and practice must be more race-focused. Since race in America has served as a primary basis for human rights violations, human rights education must confront this powerful driver head-on. HRE, grounded in CRT, can serve as a powerful tool in formulating the counternarratives that will propel such instruction. Social studies classrooms in particular have the obligation to teach students about past and present racism in the United States. However, U.S. curriculum fails miserably in this endeavor. Vickery and Rodriguez (2022), for example, demonstrated how both racism and antiracism are absent from commonly used resources in social studies classrooms. Furthermore, when racism is mentioned, it is hardly tackled head on. Similarly, Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) historicized similar themes specific to Indigenous people in the United States. She highlighted how curricular discourse around the dispossession of land from Native Americans is most often lumped into themes of westward expansion and migration, with little to no acknowledgement of the human rights violations involved in such actions.

Literature review

HRE Research

Most studies that have explored teachers' conceptions of HRE have been conducted outside of the United States and scholars have concluded that these teachers lacked substantive knowledge of human rights. For example, Cassidy et al. (2014) surveyed pre-service and practicing teachers pursuing various degrees in education at a university in Scotland about their understanding of human rights, including children's rights. This study found that content knowledge about human rights was often lacking and the most significant barrier to the teachers engaging with HRE. Similarly, Burridge and Chodkiewicz (2016) concluded that both practicing and pre-service teachers in Australia lacked an understanding of key UN conventions on human rights and/or the role of the Australian Government in the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The majority of studies that have explored teachers' attitudes towards HRE, like those that measured teachers' conceptions of HRE, have also been conducted in international contexts, including Hong Kong (Lim, 2015) and Norway (Osler & Solhaug, 2018). Rinaldi (2018) analyzed how teachers' attitudes in Switzerland can obstruct the implementation of HRE, noting that a substantial number of teachers found rights discourses to be too abstract/overwhelming (for both teachers and students), politically indoctrinating, and sources of potential friction between them and their students. In contrast, Bajaj (2011) found that teachers in India came to view HRE as a way to connect with their students and democratize the classroom through common efforts to interrupt local human rights abuses.

Within the formal curricula, human rights violations are often discussed in theoretical terms, as if they only happen in a far-off land, or in the distant past (Hahn, 2020). Few studies have investigated how local human rights violations are taught in U.S. schools and few have examined how teachers connected local issues to human rights. Human rights education, however, has the potential to better link rights discourses with social justice education in the United States. Human rights education connects specific rights-seeking groups to the larger human rights picture (Osler & Starkey, 2010). This means that human rights education promotes women's rights, civil rights, LGBT rights, disability rights, and the rights of other minoritized groups, in pursuit of human rights that are truly universal. This omission is important because human rights education helps to historicize and contextualize these social injustices in order to provide the knowledge about past and current inequities so that awareness of these conditions can lead to informed action.

HRE and Citizenship Education

Human rights education is a key component of citizenship education and can also reinforce key social studies concepts for students (Tolley, 2013). In fact, scholars like Banks (2004) have argued that human rights should underpin all citizenship education. Similarly, Carano and Clabough (2016) directly linked the study of human rights to global citizenship education while Gaudelli and Fernekes (2004) have argued that social studies students who do

not consider human rights issues in the global context can be left with serious misconceptions of life outside of the United States. Furthermore, HRE has the potential to contribute to a critical approach to citizenship education because human rights (more specifically, the UDHR) is the primary tool to achieve equality and universal human dignity (Andreotti, 2014).

Although HRE holds enormous potential for the development of young citizens who care about social justice, relatively little attention has been paid to HRE within social studies education in the United States (Grant & Gibson, 2013; Grossman, 2017). Within the U.S., human rights are frequently left out of conversations about social justice and national history in school settings even though human rights discourses were a central tool employed by leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. linked the pursuit for African American equality in the United States to the global struggle against imperialism and colonialism. This omission is important because a human rights-focused curriculum and pedagogy can serve as a counter-narrative to whitewashed versions of United States history that often ignore and downplay racism and other persistent themes of human rights violations.

HRE and Critical Consciousness

Critical pedagogy aims to name and interrupt the power imbalances that are central to HRE and CRT. The goal of critical pedagogy is to build critical consciousness in order to encourage individuals to be agents of change through social critique and critical action (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2007). HRE aims to use human rights concepts to illustrate injustice and serve as the basis for reform. Using HRE to raise critical consciousness supports the goals of critical pedagogy by facilitating social critique and framing action. This activism dimension also reinforces key components of social studies education, such as transformational citizenship. Furthermore, the field of Whiteness studies, can also be helpful in building consciousness regarding racism in American education (Leonardo, 2013). Concepts in Whiteness studies complement the use of CRT in analyzing findings of a study in which White participants are confronted with issues of race and racism, which commonly prompt defensive responses (DiAngelo, 2018).

Methods

This study examined social studies teachers' conceptions of human rights education, focusing on how participants conceive the relationship between human rights education and citizenship education. The primary research question of this study was: *How do social studies teachers conceptualize human rights education (HRE)?*

This research project utilized a collective case study design. A case study approach is most appropriate for this study since the objective is to gain an understanding of social studies teachers' conceptions of HRE by collecting data in a *distinct situation* (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The *case* for this study is the following: secondary social studies teachers in a small city in the Midwestern United States. This case represents the sole public school district in the city which contains one middle school and one high school. It provides a distinctive ecosystem that will

hopefully produce data and insights that will address my research questions (Stake, 1995; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Eight of the nine secondary social studies teachers in this district were able to participate in the study, meaning this case is fairly representative of the district's social studies teachers as a whole. Five participants were male and three were female. All teachers in this study are White, with ages ranging from 26-76. (The teacher who was not able to participate in this study is a middle-aged White male). Participants are referred to by pseudonyms in the sections that follow.

There were three phases of data collection in the study, which was conducted over the course of one semester. The first phase of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with each individual teacher. The second phase of data collection included classroom observations. The third phase of data collection utilized follow-up semi-structured interviews with each teacher. Data was coded using the constant comparative method.

Findings

The data show that participants consider HRE to be an essential component of social studies instruction. Participants demonstrated conceptions of HRE consistent with three emergent themes: empathy and tolerance, social justice, and American exceptionalism.

HRE as Empathy and Tolerance

"I try to encourage them to be empathetic and community-minded." (Mrs. Harrison)

Participants often talked about HRE as a way to develop desirable attitudinal orientations. In particular, empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of another) and tolerance (a sympathy or indulgence of beliefs/practices different from one's own) were mentioned in interviews by seven participants as key aims of HRE. For example, Mrs. Clark expressed concerns that students sometimes devalue the struggles that Black Americans have faced in the United States due to their repeated denial of basic human rights:

> I have quite a few students who try to minimize the civil rights movement, and say little comments about how it's not a big deal or it happened so long ago, or who cares, and are kind of like trying to portray minorities as whiny like and they should just get over it. So we've gotten into a few difficult conversations where I've just tried to remind them to think about it from a different perspective and to be more empathetic towards people in general.

In a similar line of reasoning, Mrs. Harrison expressed that she sought to have discussions with their students about the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to "promote empathy and allyship."

All participants connected human rights education to empathy and/or tolerance during the lessons I observed. In many cases, this connection was strong and appeared to be the primary objective of instruction. For example, six teachers used films to illustrate and prompt discussions about human rights violations. In Mr. White's U.S. History class, students watched *Amistad*, which he used to highlight the horrors of the Middle Passage, by which many slaves were

brought to the New World. During this lesson, Mr. White expressed to me that he believed that students empathized with the plight of slaves based on what they knew about plantation life, but wanted to illustrate another dimension of slavery of which students were less knowledgeable in order to build additional empathy for those held in bondage. Similarly, Mrs. Clark used *Schindler's List* to "humanize the Holocaust," remarking to me that students are much more moved by individual stories of tragedy rather than the "macro view and statistics." Furthermore, in two additional classrooms, *Hotel Rwanda* was shown illustrate the horrors of the Rwandan genocide. When discussing this film, both teachers highlighted the importance of tolerance, with one teacher comparing the ethnicity-based human rights violations in Rwanda to the Bosnian genocide in the 1990s.

HRE as Social Justice

Participants saw HRE as a way to frame discourse around morality and equity, though participants' views on issues of social justice varied widely. Mrs. Harrison frequently used human rights violations as a way to identify racism. In our first interview, she gave a few examples of questions that she regularly poses to her students, "Do we see racism that's occurring within our community? Do you see it in our hallways? Do you see it within the school system?" Mrs. Harrison also said that highlighting and illustrating human rights violations were an effective way to teach students about racism, stating that slavery, Jim Crow, and lynchings were framed as racist rights violations in her U.S. history class. Additionally, she spoke about the "power of narrative" when using HRE to promote social justice, "I just feel like when students can relate and see like the stories of people, where they're human rights are violated, just makes it more powerful."

While all participants expressed the belief that human rights education was linked to notions of social justice in U.S. history, Mrs. Harrison was the only teacher that made connections between race and contemporary rights issues. In asking participants about their possible use of HRE to teach the murder of George Floyd and/or the Black Lives Matter movement, I found that the seven other teachers were hesitant to discuss police brutality and accompanying human rights issues. Five of these teachers expressed the importance of teacher neutrality on this topic, while others believed that the systemic racism alleged by BLM did not apply to this community and its students. For example, Mr. Shelby recalled difficulty in mediating a student discussion of the verdict in the Derek Chauvin trail:

> It can get heated pretty quick because people are pretty passionate on either side. I didn't let it escalate too much, but I mean they talked about that and there were people definitely upset that you know he was convicted and there was definitely you know people that thought okay he did something wrong, you know what I'm saying is, people in all the different groups. So, you know, people thought he got what he deserved and people that thought maybe it was too harsh and people thought that he shouldn't have gotten anything.

Mr. Shelby did not use student discussions of police brutality to push for critical analysis of racism and/or human rights issues in the U.S. criminal justice system. Likewise, while Mr. Sterling told me that he taught students about systematic racism in the United States, he admitted that instances of police brutality do not provide teachable moments for his students, "We tried to discuss it, maybe a little, but now we don't see it as much here, as some other parts… we don't see that maybe the systematic racism and stuff like that, as much." Five participants did not attempt to make connections between the death of George Floyd and broader social issues, despite the fact that they said HRE has the potential to address discrimination and injustice.

During discussions about the role of human rights in naming and protecting against oppression, five teachers shared their stance that it was each individual's right to choose whether or not to wear a mask or vaccinate. In this case, human rights discourse around issues of social justice was framed in terms of individual rights and freedoms. In particular, four teachers saw the government as the enemy of human rights. When speaking about mandatory vaccinations, Mr. Sterling said, "Human rights should protect us from government overreach." Notably, Mr. White seemed to project his opinion on mandatory vaccinations onto his perception of students' views on the subject, "Okay you know that violates their freedoms and it violates their right to move and assemble and all that good stuff. So, yeah, they're there, they're absolutely 100% against mandatory vaccines and vaccination cards to be on planes." Mrs. Armstrong, similarly, compared their opposition to smoking bans in bars/restaurants to mask mandates and mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations in order to illustrate that individual freedom and choice were central to human rights. Other examples of individual rights given by participants when asked to describe their notions of human rights included the right to choose whether or not to wear a helmet when riding a motorcycle, the right to have an abortion, and the right to bear arms.

HRE as American Exceptionalism

A key finding of this study is that participants equated human rights with American values and notions of American exceptionalism. Seven participants said those living in the United States were fortunate and/or lucky to be living in the United States due to the many rights enjoyed by Americans. For these teachers, human rights were closely tied to Western values, such as democracy and capitalism, and the successes of the United States were attributed to rights enjoyed (or at least professed) by American systems and institutions. During interviews, a number of participants stated that the human rights enjoyed by those in the United States are what set it apart from other nations and cultures. For example, Mr. Sterling stated, "We have a constitution that I think protects our basic civil and human rights, but many places don't." Mr. Shelby echoed Mr. Sterling's thoughts on the appreciation that students should feel to reside in a country that guarantees a number of rights to its people:

> I don't think a lot of students are aware of the rights we have here not being available everywhere and just making them aware and kind of being like, man, I'm really kind of lucky to be where I am.

Similar to Mr. Sterling and Mr. Shelby, both Mr. White and Mr. Cavanaugh used a comparative approach to discussing human rights to impress upon students how privileged they are to be living in the United States. Mr. White stated that he used discussion to specifically teach American exceptionalism, "I teach about human rights so they get an idea of how fortunate they are. And then we can go back and we can start looking at the other cultures." Moreover, Mr. Cavanaugh said that he emphasizes human rights violations throughout the world so that students are aware of the high quality to which Americans have access:

> I think a lot of students might be unaware that it's an issue in a lot of areas of the world, and I think it's unfortunate that it is an issue that, you know, not everyone does have rights just because you know they may live in a certain country.

Additionally, the United States was offered as an example of a violator of human rights by only one teacher when participants were asked to give examples of current/past human rights violations. The examples given to this question were from the following countries/regions: Germany, Iraq, Mexico, Middle East, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Africa, Rwanda, China, Russia/Soviet Union, Cambodia, and Hungary. Five participants named the Holocaust as an example of a human rights violation, making it the single most cited example. Three teachers gave similar answers to Mrs. Clark's quote about the Middle East when asked to give examples of human rights violations:

> I would say that I always think about the Middle East. I'd say they've got more progressive lately I guess, like women can drive now without the permission of their dad or their husband. Like they can actually have driver's licenses, in not everywhere, but some places.

Only after specifically asking for examples of national and local rights violations did some participants named a rights violation by the United States. Atrocities during the Vietnam War, slavery, Jim Crow, and human-trafficking were cited, though these were often-minimized and seen as temporary and/or fleeting issues.

During classroom observations, six teachers discussed human rights in terms of American exceptionalism, while one participant demonstrated their conception of the notion by juxtaposing it with conditions in the United States. Human rights violations were most commonly framed as occurring far from home, namely outside of the United States. For example, when discussing the United Nations, Mr. Sterling listed the prevention of genocide as one of the primary goals of the United Nations. He gave more than five examples of genocides that have occurred in the last 150 years around the world without mentioning any possible instances in the United States. Additionally, Mr. White said that the political and economic rights enjoyed by American citizens was one of the primary reasons that the United States has attracted so many immigrants that have been able to enjoy personal freedoms and socioeconomic mobility not present in their home countries. Participants used comparative analysis to illustrate their views on human rights, which they did by illustrating rights denied to those outside of the United States. These conceptions demonstrated that human rights are often viewed through a lens of American exceptionalism.

Discussion

The conceptions of HRE displayed by participants demonstrated connections between key aims of citizenship education, however, these conceptions lacked essential elements commonly emphasized by HRE scholars. Most notably, conceptions were indicative of White, Western perspectives, and lacked the essential component of critical action. While these themes are present in HRE scholarship, this study revealed a heavier emphasis on Western thinking and a narrower view of social justice than is common in HRE literature.

Implications of Western Values and American Exceptionalism

During this study, five teachers expressed the need of non-Western nations to "catch-up" with the United States in terms of protecting the human rights of their citizens. These statements support aforementioned assertions that human rights have been advanced by powerful Western countries who seek to export their institutionalized rights concepts. The framing of individual rights as central to human rights discourse also highlights fears expressed by scholars who view human rights as a tool of modern-day colonialism (Ishay, 2008; Iriye et al., 2012). Students were primed to develop deficit views of certain nations and world regions as a result of how human rights violations were portrayed by participants.

The conceptions of human rights and HRE displayed by participants in this study are consistent with the idea of American exceptionalism- the notion that the United States is inherently different from other nations due to its values, political system, and historical development, and is deservedly destined to play a major and positive role on the world stage. The concept of American exceptionalism often entails ignoring the issues of racism, inequality, and colonization that critical race theory seeks to illuminate. Furthermore, participants generally framed human rights violations as occurring far from home, namely outside of the United States. Only after specifically asking for examples of national and local rights violations did some participants name a rights violation by the United States. When such injustices were named, they were often-minimized and seen as temporary or fleeting issues. The findings of this study support the findings of Hahn's (2020) study. The data in this study suggests that participants have been influenced by national narratives of success and superiority. On several occasions, participants avoided critical reflection on current right violations in their own country, just as those in Hahn's study, "They focus on violations in the Global South or in the national past while overlooking violations close to home and in the present (p. 25)." These findings can also be linked to key tenets of CRT. The negative stereotypes used to anchor descriptions of Middle Eastern cultures were clear examples of differential racialization, while the lack of critical perspectives on U.S. history demonstrates the importance of revisionist interpretations of American realities, which is at the core of CRT.

The implications of this specific finding are two-fold. First, if HRE is to be transformational, it must provide opportunities to take action, which will most commonly occur at the local level. In order to make transformative action possible, a curriculum that provides students with current and localized knowledge of human rights issues is imperative. Second,

HRE that illuminates contemporary rights issues in one's home country may challenge nationally biased and whitewashed histories that contribute to ideologies, such as American exceptionalism, that perpetuate ethnocentrism and prevent critical action at all levels of society.

The finding that teachers framed human rights in terms of individual rather than collective rights perhaps best illustrates the Western values that are often taken to the extreme in the United States. For example, current event discussions about COVID-19 policies (especially mask mandates and vaccination requirements) clearly illustrated the value that they placed on individual freedoms. During these discussions, four teachers shared their stance that it was each individual's right to choose whether or not to wear a mask or vaccinate, and three teachers saw the government as the enemy of human rights. When Mr. Sterling said, "Human rights should protect us from government overreach," he highlighted his fears of collective action infringing upon his individualistic conception of human rights. Similar statements by other participants, which often criticized nations with strict mask mandates, demonstrated that they favored individual rights over collective rights, and these values were displayed and promoted in their classrooms.

The rhetoric of the majority of teachers in this study regarding human rights issues correlates with the Western liberal notion that individual freedom is the best way to ensure justice and equality. CRT critiques "liberal jurisprudence," which includes ideas such as affirmative action, color blindness, and meritocracy. Proponents argue that these purportedly neutral approaches to human rights ignore structural factors that prevent their use and instead maintain an unjust social order. In making this argument, many critical race theorists point to gains in civil rights during the 1960's that did not translate into better outcomes for African-Americans (Bell, 1980). The emphasis on individual rights by the teachers in this study should also not be surprising, given the genesis of the best known and most widely accepted codification of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a document created by predominantly Western countries whose histories have been shaped by liberal ideology (Hunt, 2007; Osler and Starkey, 2010; Bajaj, 2017). Furthermore, a CRT critique could make the argument that those with the power to reinforce human rights and/or reimagine them choose not to do so since such actions would not benefit them, thus illustrating the CRT tenet of interest convergence.

Social Justice Lite

The findings of this empirical study support the theoretical assertions of Grant and Gibson (2013) that HRE can provide focus for social justice education, however, the conceptions of HRE demonstrated by participants were incomplete, and at times, problematic. The teachers in this study made connections between human rights issues and dimensions of social justice, but the data demonstrated that their conceptions of HRE were contrary to basic tenets of human rights and largely influenced by their racial identities.

While participants stated that critical consciousness was an important part of HRE, it seemed as if they assumed students would make critical interpretations on their own. It is also

possible that they were simply giving lip service to these concepts. Critical pedagogy is useful in analyzing the absence of critical discourse in these teachers' conceptions of HRE. The goal of critical pedagogy is to awaken critical consciousness in order to encourage individuals to be agents of change through social critique and critical action (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2007). While teachers in this study did raise the level of critical consciousness in their students, they hardly encouraged political action. Like HRE, critical pedagogy assumes that teaching is political and that neutrality is not possible or desirable (Apple, 2006). However, these social studies teachers expressed their desire to build/impart content knowledge in an apolitical way. During interviews, most participants stressed the importance of concealing their personal convictions on sensitive topics, but also felt the need to tell "both sides of the story," even when such a framing had dubious moral implications. These teachers' unwillingness to incorporate critical ideas can be partly attributed to their belief that educators should be "neutral" and create apolitical classroom environments. As Hess (2009) has argued, teachers are often concerned about bringing controversy and/or political discourse into their classrooms, underpinned by the belief that it is not a teacher's place to incite discord.

The aim of empathy and tolerance in participants' conceptions of HRE aligns with several models of HRE (Bajaj, 2011; Amnesty International, 2012; Osler, 2016). These frameworks generally contain three similar components that build upon each other: knowledge acquisition (content), attitudinal/moral development, and action-oriented instruction (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Evans, 2008; Patterson, Doppen, & Misco, 2012; Banks, 2021). While the participants in this study often covered the first two components of such models, action-oriented instruction was limited. During the lessons I observed, teachers would raise the consciousness levels of their students through knowledge acquisition and attitudinal development/exploration of intense and engaging human rights issues, however, they often stopped there. The goals of these lessons never seemed to go beyond creating awareness and/or lamenting past wrongs. For example, after watching Hotel Rwanda, there was no discussion about how the international community could have intervened sooner or what individual citizens should do if they see or experience precursors to genocide in the future.

The clearest example of the tension and contradictions in the conceptions of HRE demonstrated by participants in this study was illuminated by discussions and regarding democratic participation. Participants stated that democratic participation was a human right and HRE should work to ensure that future citizens have the knowledge and skills to positively contribute to democratic life. However, seven of the eight teachers in this study displayed a relatively limited view of democratic participation. During interviews and classroom observations, participants strongly emphasized the importance of voting and freedom of expression, but omitted, or at least tempered, their support for many other dimensions of democratic participation. For example, when teaching about the importance of 1st Amendment rights in broad terms, Mrs. Armstrong highlighted the importance of free speech and religious liberties. She cited multiple court cases that upheld these ideals and fostered discussion amongst students on these topics. However, when a student asked about a local (and nonviolent) Black

Lives Matters protest, she was quick to criticize the messages and points of contention raised by protesters rather than classify these protests as democratic participation. I observed similar phenomena in other classrooms as well, where teachers initially signaled broad conceptions of democratic participation, but then demonstrated uneven support in relation to the political orientations of those exercising these rights.

In essence, the teachers in this study did not subscribe to an essential element of HRE frameworks- the obligation to grant rights to people with whom you may fundamentally disagree. The conversations that followed Mrs. Armstrong's response to local BLM protests, as well as separate but similar situations in other classrooms, contained emotionally charged and inaccurate statements on numerous fronts. The knee jerk reaction of these teachers was to abandon their support and value of democratic participation when such participation challenged their personal and/or political views, and in this particular situation, these protests and questions revolved around racism in the United States. These reactions contradict the concept of democratic enlightenment, which refers to the moral aspects that shape democratic engagement, such as norms and values that promote freedom, justice, tolerance, empathy, and respect for difference (Parker, 2003). Scholars are quick to point out that political engagement is meaningless (and possibly dangerous) without democratic enlightenment, using the example of the Ku Klux Klan to illustrate a group that has been politically engaged but unenlightened. Based on this model of democratic participation, these participants' conceptions of human rights and HRE are lacking, as voting is only one of many forms of civic participation and (legitimate) public debate should be embraced as an opportunity to create a more inclusive society that values diverse perspectives and seeks to understand and empathize.

The finding that five of the all-White teachers in this study curbed their support for democratic participation when it challenged their views on race can potentially be explained by concepts related to "White defensiveness": White denial, White diversion, and White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). Each of these components of White defensiveness describes differing responses by White people when confronted by race and racism. White denial describes when White people deny or downplay racism, while the label of White diversion is used when White people obstruct or redirect discussions of racism to avoid confronting racism (Mattias & DiAngelo, 2013). Lastly, White fragility describes a range of defensive responses by White people when confronted with racial stress. DiAngelo (2018) argues that most White people in the United States do not have to confront issues of race and racism in their daily lives, and therefore, they do not build the "racial stamina" non-White Americans are forced to develop (making them more fragile in this area). White fragility can result in emotional outbursts, feelings of guilt, argumentation, and/or silence related to racialized incidents and dialogue.

Ms. Armstrong's response to a student's question about a local Black Lives Matter protest during a discussion on democratic participation perfectly illustrates the concepts of White fragility and White diversion. In an instant, she transitioned from extolling the virtues and importance of democratic participation to visibly angry and redirecting the class conversation to violent incidents (in cities far away) that represented a very small percentage of BLM activity.

Additionally, I observed similar, though less conspicuous, phenomena in other classes. Mr. White and Mr. Sterling were both asked about the local BLM protests during class discussions of current events. Although both of these teachers identified democratic participation as a human right during interviews, neither of them mentioned this to their students. Instead, they focused on some missteps of the BLM movement in other states and derailed any conversation about the goals of these protesters or the ideology behind those pursuing racial justice. The highly disproportionate emphasis by these White participants on BLM's errors represents another example of differential racialization.

The narrow conceptions of democratic participation displayed by participants in this study could be classified as White diversion. By avoiding conversations about racial barriers to citizenship and the exercise of basic human rights, teachers are missing an opportunity to be anti-racist educators (Howard, 2021). For instance, it appeared that some participants focused on suffrage because it was perceived to be a racially neutral form of human rights, instead of structural barriers affecting people's ability to exercise the right to vote. This approach can be connected to the 'value-neutral' ideals of liberalism that CRT critiques as inadequate and potentially dangerous when addressing racial justice. Teachers can unintentionally reproduce "White dominance" by avoiding conversations that could add depth to racial awareness.

Significance and Future Research

A focus on human rights education has the potential to promote citizenship education that advocates for those who have been silenced or dispossessed. HRE holds enormous potential to pursue goals of social justice, especially with regard to racism in the United States. Few studies in HRE literature are situated within the American context. Additionally, I could find no studies that measured teachers' conceptions of HRE in the rural United States. The findings of this case study illuminate beliefs about HRE and social justice education in social studies classrooms that have not previously been uncovered. For example, the finding that critical action was generally absent from participants' approach to HRE contradicts the findings of empirical studies that have examined HRE Asian nations, where such action was centered (Bajaj, 2020; Khoja-Moolji & Merchant, 2020).

This study contributes to the field of HRE by providing nuance to previous studies and illuminating directions for future research. First, this study provides supporting evidence for those who argue that human rights discourse and/or HRE is framed by Western values and perpetuated by Western institutions. For example, one of the key findings of this study is that teachers generally framed human rights in terms of individual rather than collective rights. This conceptualization of rights can be traced to key documents in Western political history, which played an outsized role in the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As the preeminent human rights document, the UDHR has colonizing potential that the participants in this study minimally recognized or showed the desire to critically evaluate. Therefore, these American teachers demonstrated similar conceptions of HRE as their counterparts in other Western nations. Second, this study revealed superficial understandings of social justice

education. The lack of critical action in participants' conceptions of HRE are concerning and provide direction for future research. Participants did not recognize this important dimension of citizenship, or intentionally chose to disregard it. Future research may uncover why social studies teachers may be hesitant to promote action consistent with HRE frameworks. Third, the lack of acknowledgement of local rights violations was particularly concerning. By viewing human rights violations as occurring far from home, social studies teachers miss opportunities to teach for social justice in a way that has potential to impact their communities and/or nations. It also reinforces notions of American exceptionalism that are already ingrained in social studies education. Future research that provides curricular/instructional guidance on teaching about local human rights issues would be valuable to the field of HRE. In such work, HRE could operate as a framework for the counternarratives/revisionist history that underpin CRT.

While the rural setting of this research project contributes to a neglected context in HRE literature, it does come with limitations. The population of the schools and staff in this school district are over 90% White, and this small city is located in one of the least racially and culturally diverse regions of the United States. All participants in this study are members of this dominant group and the similarities in their contributions to the data were likely a reflection of the lack of diverse participants. Social studies teachers in urban areas or other rural settings would likely have different conceptions of HRE due to differing racial, cultural, and religious populations. The field of HRE would benefit from studies conducted with more diverse participants in a variety of urban, suburban, and rural settings. Also, this study highlights conceptions of HRE in one of the most politically conservative regions of the United States. Studies conducted in contexts with more diverse political orientations would be valuable to the field.

Conclusion

This study investigated the theoretical claims made by scholars who argue that social justice should be approached from a human rights perspective, and that such a framing connects movements to values inherent in global citizenship. By investigating how teachers conceptualize HRE, I was able to examine how these concepts are operationalized. Furthermore, this study shed light on some of the topics most often used to illustrate human rights issues in American social studies classrooms. While the social studies teachers in this study made clear connections between HRE and the aims of social justice education, these connections were often narrow and/or problematic. The findings of this study support the arguments that HRE can give focus to social justice education. However, viewing empathy and tolerance as an end, rather than a means to an end, weakens the effectiveness of HRE. It is certainly valuable to raise the level of critical consciousness in students and promote attitudinal orientations that center empathy and tolerance, but when transformational action is absent, HRE and social justice pursuits are incomplete. It is insufficient to highlight injustice, wring one's hands, and move on.

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