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# P is for Patriotism: Messaging of Patriotic Symbols and Rituals in Picturebooks

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## Abstract

Patriotic education is mandated or encouraged in most US states. Picturebooks are used to promote values and beliefs with children. This qualitative study employs critical content analysis exploring how picturebooks (n = 49) intended for elementary school aged children frame patriotic symbols, rituals, and narratives. Often starkly dissonant to the lived experiences of children who interact with them, promoted meanings of patriotic symbols and rituals may be interpreted as “owned by others.” Picturebooks promote narratives of achieved social justice, white male ownership of patriotic symbols and rituals, and avoid the concepts of dissent or disengagement with patriotic rituals. Recommended to create more inclusive--and critical--patriotic experiences is employment of more diverse symbols and rituals and exploring various history and geography narratives.

**Key Words:** picturebooks, patriotism, historical narratives, Black Critical Patriotism, critical content analysis

Patriotic practices common in US schools include recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, school assemblies focused on veterans, school plays with historical and civically oriented themes, and music curricula emphasizing patriotic themes (Merisier, 2019). With focus on narratives purporting struggles for and achievement of “liberty and justice for all,” school-based patriotic practices such as assemblies and plays rarely acknowledge the reality that these concepts were intended only for White people (Mills, 2014). Rarely explored are narratives of marginalized peoples using their bodies, political thought, and intellectualism as patriotic tools in the fight to construct systems embracing universal personhood (Busey and Walker, 2017). Rather, many patriotic practices promote loyalty to histories, ideals, and contemporary systems that continue to be exclusionary of many *de facto* citizens (Banks, 2021).

Patriotically framed Symbols, Rituals, and Narratives (SRN) are employed throughout elementary schools. As crucibles for self and group identity development, elementary schools are important venues (Christou, 2007) for dissemination of a wide range of messages nested in patriotic SRNs. Many SRNs endorse ideals that were exclusionary in intent and practice and have not yet been achieved. When struggles for personhood are explored, they are often framed as working toward achievement of master narrative (Aldridge, 2006) ends that assume infallibility of founding documents and promote an “ideals achieved” framing of recent US History.

There is a body of research that examines dissonance between idealized narratives and realized experiences in the struggle for actualized equality, found in learning standards and curricula (An, 2022; Bickford, 2015; Busey and Walker, 2017; Hyres, 2022; King, 2014; King, 2020; Schroeder and Gates, 2021). However, little of this work is done in early childhood curricula framed as “patriotic”. With the ubiquitous expectation that US schools promote patriotism, as well as the universal employment of children’s literature, patriotic picturebooks influence countless children who interact with them.

Picturebooks serve as important venues for self- and group identity development (Chaudhri and Teale, 2013; Hall, 2008; Koss, 2015). As SRNs are important informants of identity development, (Clark, 2017; Connerton, 1989; Verbytska et al., 2019), it is important for teachers, librarians, family caregivers, and teacher-educators to explore whether patriotic SRNs in picturebooks are inclusive of all children. To this end, this article explores SRNs in picturebooks characterized as “patriotic.” We argue that SRNs expressing loyalty to documents and histories of exclusionary intent and practice—without exploration of the ongoing struggle to achieve societal equity espoused by these documents—works to alienate students who are relegated to subpersonhood by these documents and histories (Busey and Walker, 2017). Conversely, SRNs focusing on historic and contemporary uses of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) bodies, political thought, and intellectualism promote inclusionary patriotism focusing on personhood, rather than on exclusionary documents and narratives (Busey and Walker, 2017).

Literature calls for continued study of the role of patriotism in schools (Altıkulaç, 2016; Busey and Walker, 2017; Martin, 2012; Nash, 2005; Schatz et al., 1999; Westheimer, 2006). In exploring picturebooks specifically, we respond to Busey and Walker’s (2017) call for research into “...nuanced iterations of racialized citizenship in social studies curricula... (p. 458)”. Broadening Mills’ (2014) assertion that the ideals of the United States were intended only for White people to include a host of other historically and contemporarily excluded identities, we explore patriotic SRNs nested within included and excluded identities such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and (non)religious belief.

We begin with an operationalization of “patriotism” and subsequent discussion of the importance of symbols and rituals in individual and group identity formation. We then describe the theoretical lenses through which this study is viewed. After our articulation of how the text set was created, coded, and analyzed, we discuss the themes, implications, and recommendations drawn from our study.

### **Patriotism as Use of Symbol, Ritual and Narrative to Demonstrate “Love and Loyalty”**

Described as “love of country” (Hand, 2011) patriotism is frequently operationalized as actions that either blindly supporting a country’s narratives regarding founding, history, and heroes (authoritarian patriotism) or engagement in critique, political action, and social change while adhering to the proposition that founding documents and subsequent struggles were noble in their intents (democratic patriotism) (Altıkulaç, 2016; Busey and Walker, 2017; Hand and

Pearce, 2009; Kodelja, 2011; Martin, 2012; Schatz et al., 1999; Westheimer, 2009). What is frequently missing from this dichotomic view of patriotism are SRNs that “[...]take] the form of active rejection to the exploitation and degradation of Black bodies, land, and resources in addition to a rejection of the social ontology of freedom and equality as White designations (Mills, 1997)” (Busey and Walker, 2017, p. 461).

Our exploration of patriotic SRNs in picturebooks is viewed through a lens of Black Critical Patriotism (Busey and Walker, 2017). Taking Westheimer’s (2009) critique-based *democratic patriotism* further through challenge of the narratives that purport “life, liberty, and justice for all,” Black Critical patriotism does not assume the founding and subsequent history of the United States was intended as a universal struggle for realization of individual and group rights (Busey and Walker, 2017; Mills, 2014). Upholding the “[b]elief that one’s country’s ideals are worthy of admiration and respect” (Westheimer, 2009, p. 318), *democratic patriotism* works to improve upon social justice issues but does not deeply explore how these ideals were not intended for all. Rather than focus on ideals nested in documents and narratives, “Black critical patriotism centralized the person first before a set of ideals and offers the ideology of democratic patriotism as historically inapplicable to Black persons” (Busey and Walker, 2017, p. 459). Operationalized in our study, *democratic patriotism* assumes the infallibility of the patriotic narrative of “life, liberty, and justice for all” while Black Critical patriotism symbolism focuses on the use of Black [and others’] bodies, political thought, and intellectualism as centers for struggle for the systemic realization of personhood (Busey and Walker, 2017). We expand upon the concept of Black Critical patriotism to include the struggles of people and groups relegated to subpersonhood by institutions and histories.

Operationalizing “love of country” (Hand, 2011), we define “patriotism” as observable demonstration of commitment to one’s nation and its people. Purposefully broad, this definition acknowledges the many lenses through which individuals view their country’s purported ideals, history, and current social structures. As a country benefits from contributions of both *de jure* and *de facto* citizens (Banks, 2021), we argue genuine demonstration of love of country must be inclusively oriented toward the realization of universal personhood, rather than exclusionary in nature. Manifested through action, we agree with Busey and Walker (2017) who state “...that Black self-liberation from enslavement, physical resistance to subpersonhood via revolts and rebellions, and the self-placement of Black bodies in White intended spaces are all acts of patriotism” (p. 462). We thus explore the extent to which manifestations of patriotism in picturebooks emphasize unquestioning loyalty, tempered and limited critique of narratives of “liberty and justice for all”, or focus on individual and group struggles for societal embrace of personhood (Busey and Walker, 2017).

### **Symbolic Patriotism**

Use of symbols, imagery, and ritual work to create bonds between individuals and the greater societies in which they reside (Myerhoff, 2008). Interwoven, symbolic meaning and repeated public ritual influence individuals’ sense of self and sense of community (Clark, 2017;

Connerton, 1989; Verbytska et al., 2019). It is in childhood that individuals begin to view and integrate modeling of culture and identity into their self-concept and self-positioning in society (Chapin, 2018). Institutionally symbolized objects such as flags, fireworks, the Bald Eagle, the Statue of Liberty, Mt. Rushmore, the Liberty Bell, and the White House are broadly promoted as representing and interacting with abstract concepts such as freedom, equality, unity, opportunity, prosperity, peace, and security. Children are encouraged to blend patriotic symbols into their self- and civic identities through curricula, child-produced art, and instruction to revere patriotic symbols and their meanings (Bruter, 2003; Provenzo, Jr., 1984).

Informing generations of peoples' interpretations of patriotic SRNs are narratives leveraging patriotic symbols for racist, hegemonic, and xenophobic ends, reinforcing the conflict between purported liberty, unity, and justice and realized actions directly counter to those ideals. A terrorist organization described by its members as working to uphold "...real American Patriotism", (Wright, 1926, p. 37), the Ku Klux Klan, for example, describes itself as an "...essentially patriotic institution" (Wright, 1926, p. 37) that lists the US Flag after only the Bible and the cross as symbolic of its goals; "Under its fluttering folds, Klansmen will forever defend the sublime principles of a pure Americanism, and thus perpetuate the sacred memory of our venerable and heroic dead." (Wright, 1926, p. 34) Woven together, ethnocentrism, systemically racist governmental and social institutions, and SRNs; "...create *exclusionary patriotism*: a situation in which communal and national identities are supportive and positively correlated among socially dominant groups, but in conflict among those in subordinate communal groups" (Sidanius & Petrocik, 2001, p. 108, italics in original). In a landscape where socially dominant groups control governmental institutions, history narratives, economic messaging, and narratives of meaning of patriotic symbols, people who are othered by the socially dominant groups; "...are likely to see more of a conflict between their communal identity and national symbols that are associated with the communal identity of the dominant group" (Sidanius & Petrocik, 2001, p. 108). In this way, societally dominant meanings assigned to SRN may be seen as thin veneers, representative of true community values counter to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

Juxtaposed with the promotion and reverence of ideological symbolism are "banal reminders" (Billig, 1995) of nationhood through their universal display which further influences individuals' integration or challenge of the symbols into their understanding of their environments and their self-identities (Schwartz, 2012). Complicating interaction between individuals and ever-present institutional symbolism purported to promote unity in history, culture, purpose, and collective identity is dissonance between their suggested symbolic meanings and the lived realities of marginalized people and groups (Kook, 1998; Schwartz, 2012). Though common narratives may encourage meaning upon and through symbols such as flags, seals, and icons, it is individuals, ultimately, who interpret meaning (Butz, 2009; Foret, 2009; Marmo, 2010; Mick, 1986). It is through individual interpretation of symbols that children create personalized meanings of patriotic symbols and icons. Whether children see their identities as well-integrated or othered (Devine et al., 2008) through texts and educational

experiences rests in the interplay between promoted narratives of patriotic symbols and rituals and individual interpretation of them.

### **Ritual Patriotism**

Like symbols, patriotic rituals are assigned meaning by the individual (Butz, 2009; Clark, 2017; Foret, 2009; Marmo, 2010; Mick, 1986; O'Donnell et al., 2016). As texts, civic rituals; “afford insight into the way in which political legitimacy is defined, imagined, and articulated” (Kook, 2005, p. 152). Through music selection at firework demonstrations, organization of ceremony or parade, and individuals’ clothing choices for attendance at civic events, messages of membership/exclusion are sent (Koschnik, 1994; Willems, 2013). The wearing of “Thin Blue Line” clothing at Independence Day events, for example, conveys a wide variety of gendered and racialized messaging (Wall, 2019).

Deepening the impact and potential identity conflict with an individual’s self-concept of their patriotism is pressure to engage in patriotic ritual. Participation in patriotic ritual—particularly at school with recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance—is broadly framed as compulsory and to be performed without question or critique (Apple, 2004; Bennett, 2004; Smith, 2002). Though abstention is guaranteed by the US Constitution, members of religious groups, for example, have been expelled from school and socially ostracized for their refusal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance (Nussbaum, 2012). Because patriotic rituals are intended to inform social identity and purported to bring unity and community, individuals who choose to not participate in them or to participate in their own ways often face deep social ostracization (Smith, 2002). Indeed, responses to the personhood-oriented patriotic actions of Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe during playing of the Star-Spangled Banner were largely negative (Schmidt, 2019).

Through a wide variety of curricular resources and experiences—including picturebooks—children are encouraged to learn about and demonstrate reverence for patriotic symbols and to participate in rituals. Interpreting these symbols and rituals—aligned with specific narratives—children are encouraged to integrate often problematic and exclusionary messages into their own self-concepts (Busey & Walker, 2017). While interpretation of meaning of symbols and rituals is ultimately up to the individual, externally created contextualization of these symbols and rituals promotes specific interpretations and discourages others.

Broadly promoted as representative of US social and cultural identities with “uniformity of perception and action among group members” (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 226), patriotic symbols and rituals are the abstract meeting places of large “imagined” communities that work to inform civic and individual identity (Anderson, 2006; Firth, 2011; Schatz and Lavine, 2007). Interpretation of the messaging of these ideological meeting places, however “depend[s] on the social context and the concepts people associate with the flag and other national symbols” (Becker et al., 2011, p. 5). Interplay between individuals’ self- and community identities and promoted messaging of patriotic symbols and rituals influence individuals’ conceptualizations of each (Butz, 2009). Responding to Butz (2009), who calls for deeper exploration of the multi

referential nature of political symbol meaning and interpretation, we explore how authors and illustrators position patriotic symbols and rituals in picturebooks.

### Research Design

Our exploration of patriotic symbols, rituals, and narratives portrayed in picturebooks is viewed through a lens of Black Critical patriotism (Busey & Walker, 2017). Taking Westheimer's (2009) critique-based *democratic patriotism* further through challenge of the narratives that purport "life, liberty, and justice for all," Black Critical patriotism does not assume the founding and subsequent history of the United States was ever intended as a universal struggle for realization of individual and group rights (Busey & Walker, 2017; Mills, 1998). Upholding the "[b]elief that one's country's ideals are worthy of admiration and respect" (Westheimer, 2009, p. 318), *democratic patriotism* works to advance social justice issues but does not deeply explore how these ideals were not intended for all. Rather than focus on ideals nested in documents and narratives, "Black critical patriotism centralized the person first before a set of ideals and offers the ideology of democratic patriotism as historically inapplicable to Black persons" (Busey & Walker, 2017, p. 459). Operationalized in our study, *democratic patriotism* assumes the infallibility of the patriotic narrative of "life, liberty, and justice for all" while Black Critical patriotism symbolism focuses on the use of Black [and others'] bodies, political thought, and intellectualism as centers for struggle for the systemic realization of personhood (Busey & Walker, 2017). We expand upon the concept of Black Critical patriotism to include the struggles of other people and groups relegated to subpersonhood by institutions and histories.

This critical content (Wedwick & Latham, 2013) analysis approaches picturebooks as cultural artifacts infused with "ideological underpinnings in texts and images" (p. 335). Critical content analysis (Koss, 2015) "offers a way of reading power, explores the web of sociopolitical relations, and deconstructs taken for granted assumptions about language, meaning, reading, and literature" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. xv). Our work approaches books as non-neutral (Beck, 2005), influencing readers through encouraged meanings of patriotic symbol and ritual. Embracing Busey and Walker's (2017) questioning of "how citizenship is mediated through race" (p. 461), we ask how patriotism is mediated through racialized nesting of patriotic symbols and rituals (Johnson, 2018). With this question at the core of our work, we seek to shift common consideration of patriotic symbols and rituals as having exclusively a priori meanings toward how author and illustrator nest symbols and rituals within larger historical and socio-cultural narratives.

Identifying texts likely to be located and selected by teachers, librarians, and family caregivers, we each independently entered the phrase "patriotic picturebooks" into a popular commercial search engine. Commonly used for identifying and locating curricular resources, internet searches and resultant parenting and reading blogs constitute several layers of conceptualization and definition of "patriotism" in picturebooks. Blog curators serve as important arbiters of texts adults ultimately use. Indeed, many of the texts in our set did not

include the words “patriotism” or “patriotic” and may not even be described as such by their creators. Despite these influences on and limitations to the text set, teachers, parents, and other caretakers are likely to employ the same process to locate “patriotic picturebooks,” therefore reinforcing their dissemination and ultimate use with children. We compiled the first ten titles from the first ten websites listed in our searches. We identified a total of 65 unique texts. Owing to restrictions caused by Covid-19, we acquired and analyzed 49 books from our initial list.

Employing critical content analysis (Botelho and Rudman, 2009; Fairclough, 2003; Mathis, 2015; McDermid, 2020; Tonkiss, 2012), to “examine how ideologies are reproduced through language and texts” (Tonkiss, 2012, p. 407), we independently coded each text with a scheme of predetermined labels (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Roper & Clifton, 2013). These labels exemplified three manifestations of patriotism: symbols, rituals, and historical/geographical narratives. Our coding scheme included terms and concepts considered “commonly understood” patriotic symbols and actions such as flag waving, the Pledge of Allegiance, voting, military service, and learning about the American Revolution. Within these *a priori* codes, however, we provided conceptual space for counternarrative equivalents to these codes. Table 1 describes the codes and examples of their counternarrative equivalents.

To ensure intercoder reliability, each author independently coded written text and illustrations (Neuendorf, 2002). After the initial coding process, we convened to discuss and adjust codes for a second round by adding in vivo codes identified in the texts. These codes included: food (ex. pie, cake, hot dogs), founding or historic documents (ex. Declaration of Independence, Emancipation Proclamation, Equal Rights Amendment), careers of service (ex. astronaut, scientist, politician), and public events (ex. naturalization ceremony, court hearings, school plays).

After the second round of coding, each author independently wrote analytic memos to contextualize instances of codes within the broader narratives of the texts. For the purpose of this analysis, we viewed the intersections of gender, race, socioeconomics, and patriotism through the lens of Black Critical Patriotism (Busey & Walker, 2017)

### Findings

With titles such as *Celebrate Independence Day* (Heiligman and Dennis, 2007), *F is for Flag* (Lewison and Duke, 2002), and *Stars and Stripes: The Story of the American Flag* (Thompson et al., 2003), we anticipated and observed near-universal occurrence of SRNs adhering to the narratives of infallibility of the founders and founding documents with little exploration of struggles for universal personhood throughout US history. SRNs broadly adhered to master narratives (Alridge, 2006; Woodson, 2017) rather than to authentic, person-centered struggles against subpersonhood (Busey and Walker, 2017; Mills, 2014). We identified three themes regarding the positioning of SRNs:

1. SRNs portray the concepts of liberty, justice, and equity as fully realized in contemporary society.

2. SRNs are broadly within the dominion of White males and marginalize women and people of color.
3. Concepts of meaningful contemporary dissent or critique, non-participation in ritual, and counter symbols and counter rituals are broadly absent in patriotic picturebook narratives.

Though distinct, these themes often occurred concurrently in many of the texts, with several texts including all three themes.

### **Symbols Implying Realized Ideals**

Broadly, symbols framed as patriotic were integrated into narratives that avoid, minimize, or normalize historic and ongoing struggles for racial justice and equity. Common across the text set was the positioning of symbols into narratives of “achieved liberty and justice for all.” Frequent symbols in this narrative were buildings such as The White House and the Capitol Building, locations such as the Grand Canyon and “the West,” and objects such as “blind lady justice” and the Statue of Liberty. When symbols were associated with struggles for justice, the struggles were historically nested without reference to contemporary injustices or issues. Workers’ Rights banners, Women’s suffrage protest signs, and peace flags were common in these narratives. Table 2 provides examples of the nesting of symbols into narratives that purport “ideals achieved”, “critique but infallible origins” and “struggle for personhood”.

The flag of the United States, for example, was strongly associated with the US Revolution, the US Civil War, and—to a lesser extent—the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s. When presented in contemporary settings, however, the US flag was only strongly associated with military service and sacrifice and not with current issues of social or economic justice. Thus, the US flag was broadly framed as a symbol of struggle for freedom and justice only in historical settings. Contemporary struggles for freedom and justice in the text set were not symbolized by the flag or other “traditional” patriotic symbols such as the Statue of Liberty or the Liberty Bell. The few texts in the set with narratives exploring contemporary social justice issues had fewer graphics of or explicit connections to “traditional” patriotic symbols or rituals.

Framed as symbolic of US power at home and abroad, imagery and embedded narratives of the White House, for example, minimized, avoided, or deproblematized both history and contemporary societal issues. For example, in *Washington D.C., Our Nation’s Capital from A-Z*, (Schroeder 2018), an entry for the letter “S” is simply “slave”:

Slave—Many hundreds of slaves helped to build Washington, D.C. The U.S. government hired them from their owners for about fifteen cents a day. The slaves fired bricks, laid foundations, erected walls, felled trees, mixed mortar, quarried stone, and with the help of horses and cattle, removed stumps to clear the way for future roads and streets. (p. 23)

Through acknowledging—but downplaying—the forced contribution of enslaved people, this symbol of the United States implies an unproblematized history without moral or ethical challenge. This unproblematized history is strongly connected to symbols of patriotism such as the Capitol Building, the Washington Monument, and the Liberty Bell.

Examples of the coupling of patriotic symbols with implied achievement of ideals or with unproblematized histories included the following: Mt. Rushmore as symbolic of Presidential achievement without balanced narrative of the Indigenous land on which it rests; the Statue of Liberty as symbolic of unfettered economic opportunity without balance with the Immigrant Labor Paradox (Banks, 2021); and Independence Day symbolism and meaning without acknowledging deep systemic sexism and racism embedded in the founding documents. Additionally, Gingrich's (2012) *Land of the Pilgrim's Pride* includes an illustration in which a bald eagle is positioned alongside a historical narrative implying quickly resolved conflict: "Between the settlers and Indians, conflict quickly arose. Captain John Smith was soon captured by his foes. But his young friend Pocahontas courageously stepped in, saving the Englishman so peace could begin" (np).

Perfect and proud, these symbols and their idealized meanings are not balanced with narratives of historical and contemporary work to realize those meanings. The symbols represented the ideals achieved by White males who, from the founding of the colonies, have enjoyed their realization and who have often worked—through legislation and *de facto* practice—to keep them exclusive. Though narratives regarding historical and contemporary work toward social justice were present within the text set, they were not deeply ingrained with symbols such as US Flags, the Statue of Liberty, or the Capitol Building. Picturebooks with deep integration of symbolism framed ideals as accomplished; picturebooks with less integration of "traditional" symbolism were more likely to present narratives of ongoing social justice work.

### **Symbol and Ritual are in the Dominion of White Males**

Symbols and rituals throughout the text set were frequently associated with abstract concepts such as liberty, equality, justice, opportunity, morality, religious freedom, and military strength. The corresponding narratives widely implied these concepts had been achieved, often through struggle, without deep exploration of the exclusionary nature of the founding documents or ongoing systemic barriers to prevent their genuine realization. Because these concepts have historically been enjoyed by White males with the exclusion of others, the symbols represent their experiences and not the experiences of others. Counter-symbols, such as protest banners, raised fists, and the contributions of women, immigrants, or BIPOC, appeared more frequently. Texts exploring the Presidents of the United States, the Revolutionary War, and the Civil War focused on White men's contributions and implied successful achievement of "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness". When "traditional" patriotic symbols such as the US Flag, the White House, or the Statue of Liberty were evident in narratives of protest or struggle, the exclusionary intent of the founding documents was absent. Table 3 provides examples of narratives—with embedded symbols, rituals, and historic events—purporting "ideals achieved," "critique but infallible origins," and "struggle for personhood."

Reflecting their intersectionality with unproblematized, sanitized narratives, symbols and rituals were nested in and framed to insinuate an "all problems solved" view of history. Implied

as representing achieved ideals, symbols reflect ideals first and foremost achieved by White males. Occurring throughout the texts are symbols connected to the concept of freedom, despite centuries-long struggles to achieve *de jure* and *de facto* freedoms for everyone (Pavlick, 2019). Narratives about the creation of the flag during the American revolution, for example, focus on the flag as representing justice and liberty without acknowledging that, as the war concluded, these ideals were not realized by large swaths of the population. Symbols such as a blind Lady Justice (signaling equal treatment under the law), covered wagons and pioneers “taming” the prairie (signaling opportunity), and the Statue of Liberty (signaling welcome for immigrants) promote “achieved ideals” narratives without corresponding narratives describing the ongoing struggle for societal improvement.

Broadly absent from the texts were counter-symbols (i.e., the “Peace Flag”) representing protest, with the exception of the Gadsden Flag in the US Revolution. More current counter-symbols, such as those from the Black Lives Matter movement, were absent. Symbols representing indigenous nations were framed in historical contexts without contemporary balance or reference. Though the narratives in our text set implied unity and achievement, context was broadly absent regarding the struggles—historic and contemporary—to achieve them. Throughout US history, the ideals reflected in common patriotic symbols in the text set have only been realized by a select few. Despite this, symbols in the text set, with their historical positioning and lack of contemporary analogue, implied these ideals have been achieved by all.

### **Patriotic Ritual: No Room for Question, Dissent, or Alteration**

Across texts, patriotism as participation in ritual and civic ceremony centered around Independence Day celebrations. Parades—often spontaneous, child-generated parades—firework displays, and picnics were central events. Texts placing emphasis on patriotism as civic ceremony presented traditional gender roles in preparing for picnics, parades, and Independence Day celebrations, with women preparing food and caring for children and men socializing with one another, often exclusive of women. Socioeconomic diversity was not emphasized in ceremony-based texts—except in naturalization ceremony narratives—with broad framing of patriotic ceremony as solidly “small town, middle class.” Table 4 provides examples of the nesting of rituals into narratives that purport “ideals achieved,” “critique but infallible origins,” and “struggle for personhood.”

White males were often centered in civic ceremony while females and people of color were marginalized. For example, the cover of *My Fourth of July* (Spinelli & Day, 2019) features a White boy—in his pajamas—leading a parade down the street. Later, a landscape portrait in the town park positions the boy upon a hill, arms outstretched, with a multitude of people in the background. Contrasting these scenes is Wong and Chodos-Irvine’s (2006) story of an Asian-American girl who negotiates her family culture with the perceived “American” culture of Independence Day celebrations: “Even though my father has lived here since he was twelve, even though my mother loves apple pie, I cannot expect them to know Americans do not eat Chinese food on the Fourth of July” (p. 14). One illustration positions the character standing

alone in front of her family's business, watching a distant Independence Day parade. The story concludes with the girl's family sitting on the roof of their building, watching fireworks from afar. Though texts emphasizing civic ceremony included representation of diverse races and ethnicities, the default culture rests in rural, White, framing of patriotic ceremony.

Further empowering messaging of gender, racial, and socioeconomic norms of patriotic events was the theme identified in the text set related to implied universal, unquestioning participation in patriotic ceremony. Throughout the text set, no examples of protest or voluntary disengagement from patriotic ritual was identified. Children who—for religious reasons or otherwise—do not engage in patriotic ceremony will certainly not see themselves reflected in the texts analyzed.

Naturalization ceremonies as patriotic rituals were present in several texts. Framing the culminating event in which people studied and worked hard to reach citizenship, systemic barriers to this event (see Banks, 2021) and varied personal struggles were not explored.

Protest and dissent activities framed as patriotic were exclusively historical in nature. Narratives exploring the US Revolution and the Civil Rights movement as patriotic dissent were not balanced with contemporary examples of struggles for social justice. Several texts describing contemporary protest and action to change were framed in storylines regarding student-council election processes. Recess, homework, and school lunch concerns were addressed by students through protest and the elections process. Broadly, contemporary applications of “patriotic protest and dissent” were infantilized through the storylines that avoided issues of systemic inequity.

### Discussion

Congruent with literature exploring textbooks (Aldridge, 2006) our analysis revealed SRNs associated with hegemonic narratives (Busey and Walker, 2017; King and Swartz, 2014). SRNs are aligned with narratives presenting a country with a flawed past but with a near-perfect present where ideals fought for have been realized. Reflecting this realization are SRNs embracing these ideals without room for disengagement, critique, or alteration. While much societal improvement has been made since kidnapped people were brought to the shores of an already-populated continent in 1619, SRNs implied a lack of social issues remaining to be addressed. Framed as patriotic, these narratives, manifested through SRNs, portray a present that is dissonant to the lived experiences of many students, their families, and communities. The nesting of SRNs within narratives that do not resonate with many children send messages that many of SRNs represent concepts not actually experienced by many. Applying the concepts from Frederick Douglass' 1852 speech *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* children may not see their lived experiences reflected in symbols commonly framed as patriotic (Douglass, 2018). Given picturebooks are used to impart identity and environments in which symbols and narratives are not well-realized, children may see themselves as othered by common patriotic messaging. If it is to be healthy, patriotism requires voluntary participants learn deep history, celebrate successes, dialogue about and address challenges, and be dedicated to continued

societal improvement. Rather than eschew patriotic symbols and rituals, we encourage integration of more diverse cultural and historic symbols, discussion of ongoing work to achieve ideals SRNs represent, practical ability to challenge and withdraw from ritual, and engagement in dialogue exploring a complex history of both challenges and successes. SRNs have a long history of appropriation and use by racist, xenophobic, and hegemonic organizations and are embedded in broader sociocultural narratives (Wright, 1926). As—by their own admission—hate groups embrace patriotic symbols as representing their ideologies and actions—exploration of the various meanings assigned to SRNs is needed to better understand their positioning(s) in contemporary society. That a last sight of countless Black or Indigenous people—before their murders by terrorist groups or the US military in its quest to expand westward—was a US flag, requires honest acknowledgement and consideration. If love of country is to be manifested through symbols, deeper contextualization and complication of those symbols is necessary for a more informed citizenry. It is not our desire to encourage the framing of love of community and country as problematic. Rather, we encourage engagement in dialogue regarding the complex and often problematic symbols, rituals, and histories that inform individual understandings of national identity.

Discussing how the Statue of Liberty, Mt. Rushmore, or the Star-Spangled Banner, for example, represent ideals not yet realized by all balances those ideals with the lived realities of many. Beyond picturebooks, voluntary engagement in patriotic rituals that explore multiple narratives provides venues for consideration of the balance of ideals to which many strive with an imperfect history we share. Voluntary recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, in addition to Indigenous land acknowledgements, for example, deepens students' exposure to both ideals and historical reality. Exploration of both the Star-Spangled Banner and Lift Every Voice and Sing balance traditional patriotic work with narratives that expand understanding of the diverse experiences of people throughout US history. Reflecting Bello and Okpiliya's (2017) call to create children's literature that "... must not shy away from the realities that confront us as a people" (p. 18), we call on authors and illustrators to present ideals balanced with historical and contemporary realities.

### **Conclusion**

Patriotic experiences are foundational to the US elementary school experience. Likewise, employment of illustrated children's books is universal in elementary classrooms. This analysis explored how patriotism is conceptualized through picturebooks. Results of this analysis inform adults and will advance discourse regarding the role of patriotic education in schools and society. We encourage future deep critique of picturebooks to grow understandings of relationships between self-identities, civic identities, and the books to which children are exposed.

Children witness in their lived experiences their nation's wonders, successes, and greatness, struggles, flaws, and conflicts. Balancing exploration of these strengths and challenges through wider and more diverse patriotic symbols, rituals, and their associated narratives reflects the opportunities and challenges realized by such a large and complex nation. It is through well-

informed choice, meaningful action, and deep understanding of history and present that commitment, love, and loyalty to community—local and national—can be meaningfully achieved.

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**Table 1: *A priori* Codes Used in Analysis of “Patriotic Picturebooks”**

<b>Manifestation of patriotism</b>	<b>“Commonly understood” patriotic codes</b>	<b>Examples of counternarrative codes</b>
Symbols	Flags; liberty; fireworks; parades; picnics; Fourth of July/Independence Day; Bald Eagle; Pledge of Allegiance; and Star-Spangled Banner/National Anthem	Protest flags; Juneteenth; Lift Every Voice and Sing; “peace symbol”; raised fist symbol, totem poles
Rituals	Pledge of Allegiance; saluting the flag; military service; veterans; sacrifice; heroes; voting; protest; dissent; campaigning/elections; and volunteering	Conscientious objection; critique-based kneeling; lunch counter protests; the placement of Black and other disenfranchised bodies in spaces intended for White people
Historical people/places/events	Historic people (ex., George Washington); historic event references (ex. American Revolution, Civil War); historic processes (ex. westward migration); national monuments (ex. Grand Canyon, Statue of Liberty) and geographic locations (ex. Washington, D.C., Nebraska)	Historic people (ex. Sonia Sotomayor, John Brown, Claudette Colvin); historic event references (ex. Slave rebellions, marches/protests for civil rights); historic processes (ex. Limitations to legal immigration, slavery); national monuments (ex. Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site) and geographic locations (ex. Montgomery Jail).

Table 2: Patriotic Symbols and Ideals

	<b>Example Text or Illustration</b>	<b>Citation</b>
<b>Symbol nested as ideal achieved</b>	The cover of this text portrays children hoisting a flag in a style reenacting <i>Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima</i> , (Rosenthal, 1945) without mention of the context or price paid in the original event.	Cheney, L., and Glasser, R. P. (2002). <i>America: A patriotic primer (1st ed.)</i> . Simon & Schuster/Paula Wiseman Books.
	“When people come to our great country Aboard ships that cross the sea They are welcomed to our harbors By the flags of liberty”	Ryan, P. M., and Masiello, R. (2006). <i>The flag we love (Anniversary ed.)</i> . Charlesbridge.
	“The Statue of Liberty is a truly unforgettable sight—a symbol of all that is America.”	Maestro, G. (1989). <i>The Story of the Statue of Liberty</i> . New York, NY: HarperCollins.
<b>Symbol nested as critique but supporting infallibility of intent of founders</b>	Illustration of a civil rights protest of the 1960’s with the US Flag in prominent display. Text over the protest states “Woven together”. Text on the flag also states: “Woven together.”	Naberhaus, S., and Nelson, K. (2017). <i>Blue sky white stars</i> . Adfo Books.
<b>Symbol nested as struggle for personhood</b>	The illustration portrays Cesar Chavez in a corn field standing on a ladder with an upraised fist. A US flag is near the margin of the illustration. The text associated with this scene is: “Cesar picketed, prayed, and talked. The people listened to their hearts and marched for their rights. “ <i>¡Sí, se puede!</i> ” Cesar said. “Yes, you can!”	Obama, B., & Long, L. (2010). <i>Of The I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters</i> . Alfred A. Knopf.

**Table 3: Patriotic Narratives and Ideals**

	<b>Example Text or Illustration</b>	<b>Citation</b>
<b>Narrative nested as ideal achieved</b>	<p>“Tom [Jefferson] leveled a mountain to build his estate of Monticello in Virginia. Architecture was one of his ‘favorite amusements’.... [The illustration associated with this text has Jefferson sitting on a horse, smiling as he looks at a blueprint. Enslaved people are in the background pushing wheelbarrows and constructing Monticello.]</p>	<p>Kerley, B. and Fotheringham, E. (2012). <i>Those rebels, John &amp; Tom</i>. Scholastic Press.</p>
	<p>After four years of fighting, at last the North won. The country was united again.</p>	<p>Thomson, S. L., Dacey, B., and Bandelin, D. (2003). <i>Stars and stripes: The story of the American flag (1st ed.)</i>. Collins.</p>
<b>Narrative nested as critique but supporting infallibility of intent of founders</b>	<p>T is for Harriet Tubman, who fought against slavery. We’ll always remember her most for her bravery.</p>	<p>Stone, T. L., and Kelley, G. (2011). <i>A Is for America: A patriotic alphabet book (Original ed.)</i>. Price Stern Sloan.</p>
	<p>“Soon after [the Gettysburg Address] I [Abraham Lincoln] helped pass a law that ended slavery in America and freed all those people. Then we ended the Civil War. As a result, we didn’t just bring together these United States of America—we proved that this government of the people, by the people and for the people would be dedicated to freedom and justice.</p>	<p>Meltzer, B., and Eliopoulos, C. (2014). <i>I am Abraham Lincoln (Ordinary people change the world) (First Edition/First Printing ed.)</i>. Dial Books.</p>
	<p>Most [presidents] were wealthy, white, Protestant men who might have been surprised if they’d been around to see a Catholic or an African American man elected president...or a woman nominated by a major party for the highest office in the land.</p>	<p>Messner, K., and Rex, A. (2020). <i>The next president: The unexpected beginnings and unwritten future of America’s presidents</i>. Adfo Books.</p>

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<b>Narrative nested as struggle for personhood</b>	<p>“The delegates now turned to Tom’s declaration. He squirmed and suffered as they fine-tuned phrases and trimmed passages, including his condemnation of slavery—an issue the country would not resolve for almost one hundred years. They cut and cut until soon Tom’s work was only one page long: an expression, in terms plain and firm, of American independence.”</p>	<p>Kerley, B. and Fotheringham, E. (2012). <i>Those rebels, John &amp; Tom</i>. Scholastic Press.</p>
	<p>Ruby [Bridges] wouldn’t be treated like a second class student, and she persisted, walking for weeks past angry, hateful protesters to integrate an all-white elementary school in New Orleans</p>	<p>Clinton, C., and Boiger, A. (2017). <i>She persisted</i>. Adfo Books.</p>
	<p>“...in Montgomery, Alabama, Claudette Colvin was expected to give up her seat to a white woman just because she was African American. In her refusal to get up, she persisted in taking a stand for what’s right...”</p>	<p>Clinton, C., and Boiger, A. (2017). <i>She persisted</i>. Adfo Books.</p>

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**Table 4: Patriotic Rituals and Ideals**

	<b>Example Text or Illustration</b>	<b>Citation</b>
<b>Ritual nested as ideal achieved</b>	“Everyone marches on the Fourth of July.”	Ziefert, H., and Miller, G. (2000). <i>Hats off for the fourth of July!</i> Viking.
	“Then we sing “The Star-Spangled Banner and when we get to “the home of the brave,” the first fireworks go off. They light the sky—a red-and-blue umbrella. Bud barks. Jess cries.”	Osborne, M. P., and Catalanotto, P. (2003). <i>Happy birthday, America (1st ed.)</i> . Roaring Brook Press.
<b>Ritual nested as critique but supporting infallibility of intent of founders</b>	Citizens march for freedom with action, faith, and word. A righteous banner guarantees their voices will be heard.	Ryan, P. M., and Masiello, R. (2006). <i>The flag we love (Anniversary ed.)</i> . Charlesbridge.
	Illustration of protest with text “insure domestic tranquility”	Spier, P. (1987). <i>We the People: The Constitution of the United States</i> . Doubleday Books for Young Readers.
<b>Ritual nested as struggle for personhood</b>	Not all American Indians Celebrate this holiday [Independence Day]. For some of us it is a day to protest the loss of our native lands.	Heiligman, D., and Dennis, M. (2007). <i>Celebrate Independence Day</i> . National Geographic.

# 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, Burrige 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 trial:

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 name 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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# Unspeakable Violence: Reading and Writing about the Tulsa Race Massacre

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## Abstract

Social studies teachers in the United States are at ground zero of the culture wars, particularly concerning teaching issues of racial discrimination in U.S. history. Mostly motivated by political gain for elected office, conversations about slavery and Jim Crow segregation laws are being shut down in K-12 schools throughout the nation. Despite these political efforts, it is imperative that teachers address the role race and racism has played in U.S. history. This article highlights a literacy-based project addressing the Tulsa Race Massacre. The project includes a read-aloud and an analysis of *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre*, analyzing primary sources, and a structured writing task. The project was implemented in a sixth grade U.S. history class at a free public charter school in a mid-size Southern city.

**Key Words:** Tulsa Race Massacre, trade books, sandwich writing, inquiry, literacy

The past two years have seen a great deal of Anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) rhetoric, which incorrectly identifies DEI as Critical Race Theory (CRT). Republicans have introduced Anti-CRT legislation in over 30 states targeting K-12 social studies, setting restrictions on conversations about social justice issues, systemic racism, White privilege, sexual discrimination, and LGBTQ+ issues that do not align with their values, biases, and beliefs. According to those arguing for Anti-CRT messages, teachers are indoctrinating students by introducing social justice issues (Alfonseca, 2022; Kreiss et al., 2021). We argue social studies teachers can utilize inquiry-based activities for students to analyze and synthesize information from multiple sources as outlined in the C3 Framework by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) to reach their own conclusions about issues of systemic racism in America's past (NCSS, 2013). It is important to realize that exploring issues connected to racial discrimination in America's past is not indoctrination but instead fulfilling the requirements social studies teachers have to examine topics in U.S. history that appear within their state standards.

A key step of the Inquiry Arc in the C3 Framework is communicating ideas to others. Although social studies teachers have a variety of writing formats from which they can utilize in their lessons, they all rest on the students' ability to synthesize information, make a claim, and support that claim with evidence. In this article, we share the "Sandwich Writing" approach and

a student position paper assignment to explore how students can articulate systemic racism that can be seen with the Tulsa Race Massacre.

### **Historical Overview**

The end of the U.S. Civil War and the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the U.S. Constitution created opportunities for African Americans to actualize the principles of American democracy (Foner, 2019; Gates, 2019). Black citizens voted in record numbers, electing a number of African American men to state legislatures and the U.S. Congress. Notable Reconstruction-era Black Congressmen included Robert Smalls and John Roy Lynch. These Congressmen advocated for free public education, an end to debtor's prison, and public assistance to the elderly (Billingsley, 2007; Dray, 2008; Miller, 1995). Additionally, the Freedmen's Bureau helped African Americans throughout the South establish lives for themselves during Reconstruction (Guelzo, 2012; Logan, 1997). It is evident that some progress toward creating a biracial democracy for all U.S. citizens was happening during the Reconstruction era. Unfortunately, it was not to last.

In the aftermath of Reconstruction, Southern whites employed public policies such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and Jim Crow segregation laws to disenfranchise Black Americans (Woodward, 1951). This resulted in millions of African Americans migrating to areas outside the South. Tulsa, Oklahoma, whose oil industry promised economic opportunity, became a popular destination for Black migration. Settling in Tulsa's segregated Greenwood District, the African American community created a prosperous enclave. There were nearly 200 Black-owned businesses in the Greenwood District. These businesses included a movie theatre, restaurants, a pool hall, several department stores, and even a furrier. The economic successes of the Greenwood District earned it the nickname of Black Wall Street (Brophy, 2002; Hirsch, 2002).

On May 30, 1921, the Greenwood District's prosperity came to a sudden and violent end. Historical evidence suggests that Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old African American male, accidentally stepped on the foot of Sarah Page, a 17-year-old White female, during an elevator ride. *The Tulsa Tribune* published a story implying that this minor accident was actually an assault of a White woman by a Black man. Accusations of African American men attacking White women were often the pretense used to justify acts of vigilantism that often resulted in the lynching of Black men. This newspaper story coupled with Tulsa's White population's simmering resentments of African Americans' economic successes led to a White mob invading the Greenwood District. White Tulsans obliterated symbols of African Americans' economic successes. They burned black-owned businesses, the hospital, churches, the junior high school, and homes throughout the Greenwood District. The White mob destroyed over 1,000 buildings in the Greenwood District and killed more than 300 African Americans in the May 30<sup>th</sup> attack (Ellsworth, 1982; Eulinberg, 2021).

The Tulsa Race Massacre fits within the themes and events of a time known as the Nadir, or lowest point, of race relations in the United States. From 1890 to 1940, the United States experienced an overwhelming degradation of race relations. Many Whites saw attempts by African Americans to better their lives as a threat and took calculated steps through unlawful acts

of violence to destroy African Americans' wealth, as evidenced by the 1873 Colfax Massacre, 1898 Wilmington Massacre, the Elaine Massacre, and the Tulsa Race Massacre to name a few (Anderson, 2017; Keith, 2008; Lancaster, 2018; Madigan, 2001; Zucchini, 2020). White rage over the changes to the social, cultural, political, and economic fabric of the United States by African Americans resulted in barbaric acts of violence and the wanton destruction of African American communities (Loewen, 2018).

### ***Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre***

We used the 2022 NCSS Notable Trade Book *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre* by Carole Boston Weatherford (author) and Floyd Cooper (illustrator) as the anchor text set for the lesson sequence described in the next sections (Weatherford & Cooper, 2021). In *Unspeakable*, Floyd Cooper uses realistic artwork to capture life in the Greenwood District prior to, during, and after the Tulsa Race Massacre. The picture book depicts the vibrant economy and culture within the Greenwood District before the massacre and the destruction caused by this tragedy. The author closes with the importance of remembering the Tulsa Race Massacre as an historical event showing the triumphs of African Americans in the Greenwood District and the role racial discrimination played in tearing down symbols of economic successes in Black Wall Street.

### **Tulsa Race Massacre Lesson Sequence**

This lesson sequence exploring the Tulsa Race Massacre will take about five lessons to implement. The lesson sequence centers on the following compelling question: “How can American citizens in the present take civic action to raise awareness of the systemic racism that caused the Tulsa Race Massacre?” It is also based on the following supporting questions.

1. What successes did the African American community in the Greenwood District accomplish prior to the Tulsa Race Massacre?
2. What events led to the destruction of the Greenwood District in the Tulsa Race Massacre?
3. What were the effects of the Tulsa Race Massacre on the city's African American population?
4. How has the Greenwood community in contemporary U.S. society worked to remember the tragedy of the Tulsa Race Massacre?

This lesson sequence addressed two pathway targets in the C3 Framework: D2.His.14.6-8, “Explain multiple causes and effects of events and developments in the past.”; and D4.2.6-8, “Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequences, examples and details with relevant information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation.” We implemented this project focusing on the Tulsa Race Massacre during February 2022 with sixth grade students in an urban middle school within a mid-sized Southern city.

### ***Reading about the Tulsa Race Massacre***

Prior to reading *Unspeakable*, we projected the cover of National Geographic's June 2021 issue focusing on the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Created by artist Kadir Nelson, the vivid

cover provides a visual summary of the massacre, <https://nationalgeographicpartners.com/2021/05/national-geographic-releases-june-magazine-issue-reckoning-with-the-past-examining-race-relations-in-the-united-states/>. We initially covered the bottom half of the image and asked students to make observations about what they saw in the top half of the cover. Then, we asked students to make inferences about the people depicted in the image. The same process was used to analyze the bottom half of the cover. The image analysis served as an anticipatory task prior to reading *Unspeakable*.

We used the provided graphic organizer (**Appendix A**) as a way for students to record information from the trade book during the initial read aloud of *Unspeakable*. We paused at different points during the read aloud to ask students questions found in the second column of the graphic organizer. Students provided the evidence to support their answers in the third column. They took turns reading in the initial class read aloud of *Unspeakable*. We paused at three points during the read aloud. The first stopping point was for students to answer the questions in “On the Way to Tulsa, OK” and “A Segregated City.” The second stop addressed the questions in “Black Wall Street,” “A Prosperous Time,” and “White Displeasure.” At the third stopping point, students answered the questions from “The Spark that Ignited a Massacre” and “Invading the Greenwood District.” At the end of the trade book, we provided time for students to answer the questions for “The Aftermath of a Massacre” and “Remember the Tulsa Race Massacre.” This activity allowed the students to become aware of the ways African Americans’ actions in the Greenwood District led to economic prosperity for the community. They also observed the racist actions taken by White Tulsans to destroy all symbols of African Americans’ wealth.

After finishing the class read aloud, we distributed two primary sources for students to analyze in pairs. The first primary source, a photograph showing the destruction of the Greenwood District due to the Tulsa Race Massacre (**Appendix B**). The second primary source, a short newspaper story that appeared in the *Tulsa Tribune*, is provided in **Appendix C**. This is the newspaper story that enflamed the passions of Whites in Tulsa after Dick Rowland’s encounter with Sarah Page. Students also watch a short video clip from a survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre, Viola Fletcher, in which she shared her experiences of this tragedy. This video clip can be found at the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tKSDYcvw9A>. After the student pairs examined the photograph, read the short newspaper story, and watched the short video clip, the students completed the analysis prompts (**Appendix D**). These prompts offered students experience with deconstructing the content of primary sources while also allowing them to corroborate similar arguments found in multiple sources (Nokes, 2019). Students grappled with how simmering resentments of whites boiled over in response to the newspaper reporting by the *Tulsa Tribune* and the negative impact that this tragedy had on the African American community in the Greenwood District. Students shared their responses to the prompts in a class discussion that allowed them to add to their own arguments based on peers’ comments.

Following the primary source analysis, we conducted a second close reading of *Unspeakable* focusing on impactful quotes and imagery from the picture book with the following analysis prompts.

1. How does the artist use images to show the economic successes of the Greenwood District? Use evidence to support your arguments. **For this question, use the two-page spread about Black Wall Street.**
2. Why were whites in Tulsa threatened by African Americans' economic successes in the Greenwood District? **For this question, use the two-page spread about why members of Tulsa's white population were not pleased with the economic successes of the Greenwood District.**
3. How were African Americans negatively impacted by the Tulsa Race Massacre? Use evidence to support your arguments. **For this question, use the two-page spread about how African Americans were negatively impacted by the Tulsa Race Massacre.**

By completing an initial reading of *Unspeakable*, these sixth graders gained background knowledge about the Tulsa Race Massacre and could thus discuss aspects of the trade book connected to these prompts during the second reading in more depth. These prompts encouraged students to examine why the author used certain words in the narrative, and why the artist utilized particular imagery to convey the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre. Students also observed how African Americans gained a level of economic parity with Whites in Tulsa and how White Tulsans' actions were designed to destroy this economic equity (Kendi, 2019).

### ***Writing About the Tulsa Race Massacre***

The next step tasked students with summarizing the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre. To accomplish this, we utilized the Sandwich Writing template (**Appendix E**) as an incremental approach to writing their summaries.

Students initially defined the term "evidence" and provided an example of a time they used evidence to support a claim. Using the space in the middle of the first page, students identified their writing topic and the main ideas within the three sections of their sandwich template. For this assessment, these three parts could be labeled "Before the Violence in Greenwood," "Sparking the Violence in Greenwood," and the "Effect of the Violence in Greenwood." Students used the template (**Appendix F**) to craft a rough draft of their summary. They included details gathered from the *Unspeakable* graphic organizer, the primary source analysis, and the second reading of the picture book within their summary drafts. The process was critical since over 90% of these students could not write a complete sentence at the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year.

Upon completing their drafts, students critically examined their drafts looking for how their summary statements were supported with details gathered from the lessons. This review process can be self-reflective, or students can exchange papers. Students used highlighters to make the connections among their statements in each layer of the sandwich with the information they included as supporting details within their summaries.

To revise the three sections of the summary, students utilized the “Adding Details and Evidence” form (**Appendix G**). Using the information gathered from the critical review of their rough draft, students determined where revisions were needed. They recorded additional details and evidence to enhance their drafts, making their summaries more robust and thorough. These editing steps were especially important for these students since most were struggling writers. The final stage of the Sandwich Writing process is creating a final draft (**Appendix H**). Students included information they provided on the “Additional Details and Evidence” page to flesh out their summaries, writing their final draft on the provided form. The steps in this sandwich writing activity reflect the disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills argued for in the C3 Framework as students replicated the heuristics employed by historians to research an event and communicate their findings through evidence-based arguments (Monte-Sano, 2012; VanSledright, 2013). We intentionally designed this project with primary and secondary sources about the Tulsa Race Massacre to avoid any complaints from students’ guardians, administrators, and the children about attempts on our parts to indoctrinate the students. Students used authentic evidence about the Tulsa Race Massacre and communicated their interpretations about the causes, outcomes, and significance of this event.

The steps discussed to this point were implemented with these sixth graders. We have provided two students’ writing examples (**Appendix I and J**). Both convey a largely accurate summary with the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre. These essays are especially encouraging since the overwhelming majority of these students could not write a complete sentence at the beginning of the 2021-2022 academic year. The sandwich writing activity provided students with scaffolding and learning supports for them to become more proficient writers.

All of the steps in the lesson sequence prepare students to take civic action in contemporary U.S. society. Due to time constraints, we were not able to implement the last step of having these sixth grade students take civic action in the present. However, we would advise middle school social studies teachers wanting to implement our project to also have their students use their gathered evidence to write a position statement to their school system on why the Tulsa Race Massacre should be taught in the U.S. history curriculum. Students’ position statements could discuss why it is important to discuss events like the Tulsa Race Massacre and how it is an historical example of systemic racism that led to violence. Such writing activities offer students a way to articulate why in contemporary U.S. society issues of systemic racism need to be discussed to begin healing as a nation by acknowledging mistakes in the past and addressing corollary issues in the present (King, 2022; King et al., 2018; Levine & Levinson, 2013).

### **Final Thoughts**

The featured primary sources and *Unspeakable* provided the students a vehicle to research an historical event that shows the triumphs of African Americans in Black Wall Street and the tragic impact of racial discrimination that led to the Tulsa Race Massacre. The Sandwich Writing approach discussed has much potential. By using the well-known architecture of a sandwich, the students were able to systematically engage in the writing process from identifying

main ideas, to crafting a rough draft, revising the draft with additional information, and producing a final draft for submission as seen in the two student examples. Social studies teachers need to develop similar learning experiences that allow their students to research and honestly discuss issues of racial discrimination throughout U.S. history. It is these honest discussions that help to heal the wounds from the past that racial discrimination caused and address modern corollaries where racial discrimination still exists in U.S. society.

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### Resources for the Tulsa Race Massacre

#### Websites:

- Oklahoma Historical Society- The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture- <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=TU013>
- PBS- Tulsa Race Massacre: 100 Years Later- <https://www.pbs.org/video/tulsa-race-massacre-100-years-later-ygtwbn/>
- Tulsa Historical Society and Museums- 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre- <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/>
- CNN- Dreamland: The Burning of Black Wall Street- <https://www.cnn.com/shows/dreamland-cnn-films>

#### Books for Adolescents:

- Ball, A., Robinson, S., Anderson, R., & Yellowrobe, C. (2021). *Across the tracks: Remembering the Tulsa Race Massacre and Black Wall Street*. Harry N. Abrams.
- Hylton, N., Lansana, Q.A., & Hill, S. (2021). *Opal's Greenwood oasis*. The Calliope Group Ltd.
- Smith, N.S., & Jenai, M. (2022). *Lena and the burning of Greenwood: A Tulsa Race Massacre survival story*. Stone Arch Books.

#### Reference Books:

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## Appendix A

Graphic Organizer for *Unspeakable*

<b><i>Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre</i></b> by Carole Boston Weatherford and Floyd Cooper		
<b>Parts of the Story</b>	<b>Question to Consider</b>	<b>What is your Evidence?</b>
<b>On the Way to Tulsa, OK</b>	Why did African Americans settle in Tulsa, OK?	
<b>A Segregated City</b>	Why did African Americans live in the Greenwood District of Tulsa, OK?	
<b>Black Wall Street</b>	Why did the Greenwood District earn the moniker of “Black Wall Street?”	
<b>A Prosperous Time</b>	What factors caused the Greenwood District to be prosperous?	
<b>White Displeasure</b>	Why were white Tulsans resentful of African Americans’ economic successes in the Greenwood District?	
<b>The Spark that Ignited a Massacre</b>	What were the events that led to the violence in Tulsa on May 31, 1921?	
<b>Invading the Greenwood District</b>	Why did white Tulsans invade the Greenwood District? What happened during the attack?	
<b>The Aftermath of a Massacre</b>	What were the effects of the violent attack on the Greenwood District by white Tulsans?	
<b>Remembering the Tulsa Race Massacre</b>	Why do you think a formal investigation of the Tulsa Race Massacre was delayed for decades?	

**Appendix B**

**Photograph of the Destruction after the Tulsa Race Massacre**



**Photograph taken by the American Red Cross in 1921.**

## Appendix C

## Tulsa Tribune Article

# *Nab Negro for Attacking Girl In an Elevator*

A negro delivery boy who gave his name to the police as "Diamond Dick" but who has been identified as Dick Rowland, was arrested on South Greenwood avenue this morning by Officers Carmichael and Pack, charged with attempting to assault the 17-year-old white elevator girl in the Drexel building early yesterday.

He will be tried in municipal court this afternoon on a state charge.

The girl said she noticed the negro a few minutes before the attempted assault looking up and down the hallway on the third floor of the Drexel building as if to see if there was anyone in sight but thought nothing of it at the time.

A few minutes later he entered the elevator she claimed, and attacked her, scratching her hands and face and tearing her clothes. Her screams brought a clerk from Renberg's store to her assistance and the negro fled. He was captured and identified this morning both by the girl and clerk, police say.

Rowland denied that he tried to harm the girl, but admitted he put his hand on her arm in the elevator when she was alone.

Tenants of the Drexel building said the girl is an orphan who works as an elevator operator to pay her way through business college.

"Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in an Elevator," Tulsa Tribune (Tulsa, OK), June 1, 1921, State Edition.

### Appendix D

1. How does the newspaper story describe the incident between Sarah Page and Dick Rowland? Use evidence from the newspaper story to support your arguments.
2. What opinion does the newspaper story try to convey to the reader about the incident between Sarah Page and Dick Rowland? What evidence from the newspaper story helps you reach this conclusion?
3. How is the destruction of the Greenwood District conveyed in the photograph? Use evidence from the photograph to support your arguments.
4. How did Ms. Fletcher's testimony discuss the impact of the Tulsa Race Massacre on her and African Americans as a whole in the Greenwood District? What evidence from the clip helps you reach this conclusion?
5. How could the language of the newspaper story about the incident between Sarah Page and Dick Rowland help lead to the destruction of the Greenwood District depicted in the photograph, picture book, and discussed in Ms. Fletcher's testimony? Use evidence from the newspaper story, photograph, video clip, and picture book about the Tulsa Race Massacre to support your arguments.

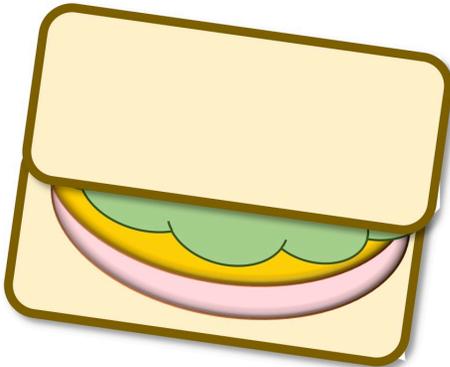
## Appendix E

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Sandwich Writing

What does the word "evidence" mean?

How have you used evidence in your previous work this year? Write an example here.



What is the topic of your writing assignment?

What are the three main parts of your writing assignment?

Top Piece of Bread:

Filling:

Bottom Piece of Bread:

**Time to Write!** The purpose of a rough draft is to get all our main ideas and thoughts on paper. Once we have a draft, it is time to re-read, edit, and add details. Use the provided "Rough Draft" Handout on the next page to write your draft.

**Editing the Rough Draft.** Use two different color highlighters to mark your draft. Use one color to indicate each main idea and the other color to indicate the evidence provided to support the ideas.

Once you have determined which main ideas need more supporting evidence, it is time to gather information. Use the "Adding Details and Evidence" handout found on page three to record the additional information you need to improve your draft.

Appendix F

# Sandwich Writing Rough Draft

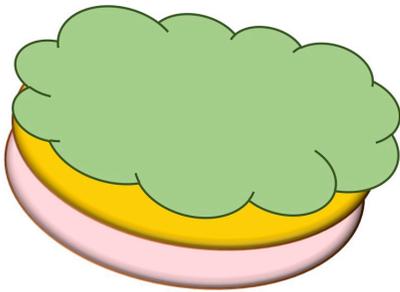
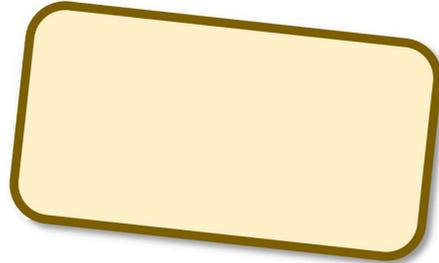
A large, empty rectangular box with a dashed border, occupying most of the page. It is intended for students to write their rough draft within this space.

## Appendix G

## Adding Details and Evidence

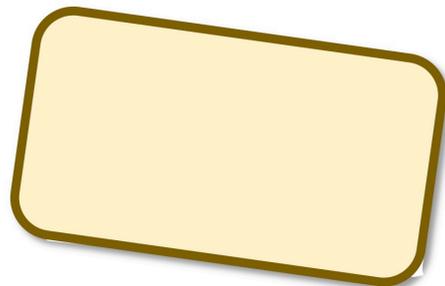
**Adding information.** Use the boxes below to gather the additional information you need to improve each part of the writing assignment.

**Additional Top Bread Evidence:**



**Additional Filling Evidence:**

**Additional Bottom Bread Evidence:**



**Final Draft!** Now that you have gathered the additional information you need to improve each section of your document, it is time to write the final draft. Use the “Final Draft” Handout on the next page to complete the assignment.

Appendix H

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Sandwich Writing Final Draft

A large, empty rectangular box with a dashed border, intended for the student to write their final draft of a sandwich. The box is centered on the page and occupies most of the middle section.

**Appendix I**  
**Student Work Sample 1**

In the book *Unspeakable* we are introduced to the town of Tulsa where people come for a fresh start or to strike it rich, the town of Tulsa is segregated by neighborhoods with train tracks in between. The black neighborhood of Greenwood is thriving with countless black owned businesses, movie theaters beauty salons a world famous doctor and an amazing school system that might be better than the white school district. We know this because the book says “the community kept thriving.” and we have an illustration of people enjoying themselves on Black Wall Street named after Wall Street in New York for having many successful shops and businesses. After the town is introduced we are presented with our problem, a black shoe shiner is accused of assault on an elevator, we know this because the story says, “ one seventeen-year old elevator operator accusing a nineteen-year old shoe shiner of assault” The shoe shiner ( Mr. Rowland) is taken to jail and the news paper tells the white citizens of Tulsa to nab him before he can go to trial, but before they can, a group of armed black men one to protect Mr.Rowland. When the mob couldn’t get to him they stormed into Greenwood destroying all things in their way after all the flames had settled some left and some rebuilt. The way we know this is that the story says “the white mob stormed into Greenwood looting in burning homes and business” and “ Some black Tulsans left and never returned, other stayed and rebuilt” this event would later be known as the Tulsa Race Massacre.

I think that most of us can agree that this was a terrible event in history, thank you for reading good bye.

## Appendix J

## Student Work Sample 2

In the book unspeakable there was a successful black town  
 in Tulsa, OK called green wood. In green wood there was a  
 one mile stretch of black businesses. Booker T. Washington  
 called the area "Negro wall street of America". The name later  
 became black wall street and the community kept thriving.  
 But in 1921 not everyone was pleased with signs of black  
 wealth. Not happy African Americans could achieve just as much if not  
 more than whites. M.S. page accused Mr. Rowland of assault, thi-  
 rt y armed black men came to get him out fearing he would  
 be lynched. The white mobs spread rumors the black com-  
 munity was planning to attack. The white mobs stormed to  
 green wood, looting and burning homes. WWI veterans tried  
 to protect the town. 300 people were killed. 75 years passed  
 before they started a painful investigation. They found out  
 the police and mobs planned it. they built a monument  
 for green wood. That is what happened in unspeakable.

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-10\*