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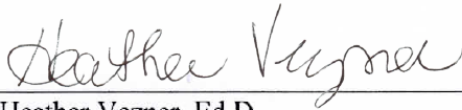Deborah L. Collins, Ed.D.
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CURRICULAR CONTROL: STUDENT AGENCY AND THE TEACHING AND LEARNING
OF CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

by

Tabitha L. Miller

A Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Since the inception of public education in the United States, members of the public have fought for control over what is taught to students and how concepts are presented. Public education lies continually in the crosshairs of politics and polemics related to issues ranging from prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance to language teaching and the inclusivity of transgender students. Culturally relevant teaching, while extolled by seasoned educators, is often branded as critical race theory by opponents of cultural awareness and sensitivity in schools. This study focuses on the history of such polemics as well as the decision-making process for social sciences curricula. It examines teachers' beliefs surrounding students' agency and the attitudes surrounding the teaching of controversial topics. The data revealed that the longer teachers have been in the profession, the less likely they are to be confident in their students' ability to think critically. Political affiliation impacted teachers' likelihood of engaging students with the roles of race, gender, and class in the U.S. legal system as part of social sciences coursework. More liberal teachers were less likely to engage with these topics, but only slightly. Recommendations for further research include more study on students' agency from the students' point of view, as well as the shift of education from a right supported by public funding to a commodity controlled by consumers.

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We seek normalcy, not philosophical lunacy!

We will not allow reality, facts, and truth to become optional.

We will never surrender to the woke mob.

Florida is where woke goes to die!

— Ron DeSantis, Inaugural Address, 2023

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept."

— Angela Davis

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Today's American society finds itself at a moral and ethical crossroads as it ponders how best to educate young people. At the time of this writing, America's culture wars are ever-present in public schools. In Arkansas, transgender students are barred from using school restrooms that do not correspond with their birth sex (CBS News, 2023). Despite the projection of a $1.4 billion governmental surplus in Idaho, the state's Republican lawmakers blocked a so-called "woke" plan to spend only $3.50 per student to provide free menstrual products for middle- and high-school-aged girls (Robertson, 2023). Meanwhile, 15 states and Washington, D.C. have already passed legislation to provide free menstrual supplies to girls so they do not have to miss school due to "period poverty" (Robertson, 2023).

House Republicans recently passed the *Parents' Bill of Rights Act*, a proposed modification of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of* 1965 in an attempt to block funding and student protections, while buttressing conservatives' efforts to control public education, down to the books in a school's library (Groves, 2023). Meanwhile, after a mass shooting at a Tennessee school, a debate on the proliferation of automatic weapons in the United States revealed the inherent hypocrisy of attention to the content of children's literature, since "dead children can't read" (Man, 2023, para. 1).

At the same time, a Tallahassee, Florida principal claimed she was forced to resign because of a lesson that exposed sixth graders to Michelangelo's famously naked "David" statue, which was seen as "pornographic" by some parents (Bella & Natanson, 2023). Florida may ban K-5 students from discussing their periods at school (Associated Press, 2023) and a South Carolina teacher allegedly assaulted a 15-year-old Black honors student for not stopping in the

hallway as the Pledge of Allegiance was recited throughout the school (Grant, 2023).

Parents have become activists over curricular content, packing school board meetings, and carefully typing complaints practiced for timing (Natanson, 2023). The curriculum publisher Studies Weekly revised social studies lessons to appeal to Florida legislators so they could continue to do business there. In their texts, Rosa Parks was told to move to a different seat but she decided to stay in it because it was the right thing to do and Harriet Tubman was famous for leading people from the South to the North at night (Petri, 2023). Without racial context, their stories are pointless. One wonders whether teaching the intricacies of American history to our children could put a dent in hate crimes, which were up by more than 11% in 2021, with anti-Asian hate crimes doubling and anti-LGBT incidents up 65% (Wendling, 2023).

As political polemics make their way into the present educational field, politicians, educational leaders, teachers, parents, and community members offer their passionate perspectives about how and what teachers teach, as well as how and what students learn. The controversy is often tied to the question of who has the right to set the parameters for these. Political influencers like Moms for Liberty (n.d.) and other activists claim their purpose is to stand up for parental rights at all levels of government. From well-researched advocacy to sophistry, public debates about curricular control are not new. Throughout the history of the United States, parents and community members have often been at odds with one another and with educators and legislators when it comes to the presentation or even acknowledgement of controversial topics in the classroom. Schwartz (2022) showed that "since January 2021, 42 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism" (para. 5).

Educators often decry the lack of parental involvement "as a contributing factor to a wide

range of problems in schools, from poor academic performance to disciplinary infractions" (Cummings et al., 2006, p. 44). Indeed, "while parental involvement is generally viewed as synchronistic with, and supportive of, the education provided their children in schools, such involvement can also constitute legal challenges to school decisions considered detrimental to their children's best interests" (Cummings et al., p. 44).

From the inception of compulsory public education in the United States, adult stakeholders in the public have expressed their consternation over a variety of perceived faults in the educational field, particularly within public education. Among these faults are real or imagined intentions of educators, and stakeholders go so far as to compare culturally relevant teaching—particularly in the social sciences—to totalitarian thought control or public manipulation through disinformation and propaganda (Byas, 2021). As in the examples already offered, throughout the history of public education in the United States, parents have made demands such as the inclusion of Judeo-Christian prayer in schools and have engaged in disagreements over the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in board meetings. Transgender student locker room access and sports team membership are more recent polarizing issues because of dueling beliefs about whether a student's biological identity overrides their gender identity when accessing communal, traditionally non-co-educational spaces and whether access denied is, in fact, education denied (Pirics, 2017). North Carolina's teachers wore red garments to Raleigh and Charlotte, North Carolina, to protest Republican legislation that discontinued tenure and master's pay for educators while also protesting the Wake County, North Carolina, Board of Education's attempt to "to throw out a desegregation policy that had made the district one of the most integrated in the nation" (McClain, 2014, p. 24).

Like parents of school-aged children, policymakers for the educational setting

"participate in introspection that calls on personal values, information, self-interest, and ideology in order to inform their decisions" (Blissett & Alsbury, 2018, p. 454). Much of the current controversy takes place at the local level, yet these issues eventually make it to the national stage, to be used as motivation for political partisanship. Over half of Americans prefer local school board governance over that of state or federal governments, and this is found across political affiliations (Blissett & Alsbury, 2018). The challenge arises when local school boards find no political value in addressing a particular problem in schools and prioritize other issues that may or may not be considered problems by all stakeholders. One complication in this process is financial in nature: in order to access billions of dollars in federal monies, schools and districts must consider how they market their "product" (education) to their "consumers" (parents, students, and society). This pressure may impact the prioritization of issues in schools, such that the public's concerns about culturally relevant teaching have priority, affecting enrollment—the driving force behind a district's finances. Education spending in the United States surpassed $1 trillion in 2018 (Grewal et al., 2022) and, when viewed as an outcome generated for recipients, society takes notice and makes demands regarding desired outcomes. Demagogues take notice, too, amplifying the ire felt by their constituents (Rozsa, 2023).

Captious public actors keep conflict at the fore of educational progress in the United States with a variety of complaints. Their legislative representatives add threats to those complaints, potentially holding public funds hostage if conservative demands are not met in schools. This includes everything from mask requirements and in-person learning during a global pandemic (Conrad, 2021; Rouhandeh, 2022) to transgendered children playing sports (Poindexter, 2022). On the left, President Biden threatened to withhold funding for school meals for non-alignment of LGBTQ+ policies at the state level, renewing President Obama's "Notice

of Interpretation" of Title IX guidelines (Dillon, 2022). A threat to allow schoolchildren to go hungry or to withhold federal or state funds for education is egregious and unconscionable, regardless of the morality of the desired outcome.

Finally, stakeholders in American education are currently concerned about how constructs like race and equity are treated in schools, most specifically in the context of social sciences content. Those on either side of the debate question the rationale for including or limiting the teaching of controversial topics. In this context, controversial topics include everything from exposing students to supposed witchcraft in *Harry Potter* to gender identity in current events reading or media selections. Some opponents to what they believe to be critical race theory accept certain topics for instruction but only in the sense that it may not make White students uncomfortable or cause them to feel shame (McCormick, 2022). For instance, the current spate of critical race theory-related laws within the last few years attempt to prohibit the teaching of divisive concepts about American history and activities that ask White students to consider their position of privilege in contemporary American society (Schwartz, 2022).

Increase in Schools' Social and Public Health Functions

The development of this topic began as a passionate response to the political climate of 2020, coinciding with the beginning of the researcher's graduate studies. At the height of a national pandemic, the researcher was serving as a second-year principal in California and had closed the school's doors for the remainder of the academic year. Teachers and staff were scrambling to figure out how to convert traditional learning to online learning. Different levels of experience, varying attitudes about technology, and collective bargaining all became part of a complex, systematic change that no one had expected or prepared for. Although the staff experienced their own challenges within a new educational structure, social inequities that

educators knew very well were now highlighted for the public to grapple with. As families became more responsible for their students' learning, suddenly, opinions about public education abounded.

During that time, 1.7 billion students' learning conditions changed worldwide (Reimers, 2022). Direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic upon students included learning loss, disengagement, dropping out, and psychological trauma. Public education as an institution changed fundamentally, yet there appeared to be an expectation that schools could and should step up to fill in the gaps created by the pandemic. This expectation came from decades of debate and research about how best to educate students, particularly disadvantaged students. For instance, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) Commission on the Whole Child recommended more focus on "ensuring that all students are healthy and feel supported, challenged, engaged, and safe" (Lewallen et al., 2015, p. 729). The coordinated school health approach expanded schools' responsibilities to include health and physical education, health services at school, a safe and healthy environment, social and psychological services including counseling, family and community engagement, nutrition, and promotion of health for school staff. In fact, scholars have suggested reframing dropout rates as a public health issue (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). This list has made public education a difficult proposition for teachers and leaders.

Reimers (2022) captured the intricacies of the inequities the public began to see in stark relief as a result of the pandemic. It was not that the public did not know these inequities existed; they were simply no longer out of sight and out of mind:

> One of the correlates of income inequality is educational inequality. Studies show that
> educational expansion (increasing average years of schooling attainment and reducing

inequality of schooling) relates to a reduction in income inequality. But education

systems, more often than not, reflect social inequalities, as they offer the children of the

poor, often segregated in schools of low quality, deficient opportunities to learn skills that

help them improve their circumstances, whereas they provide children from more affluent

circumstances opportunities to gain knowledge and skills that give them access to

participate economically and civically. In doing so, schools serve as a structural

mechanism that reproduces inequality, and indeed legitimize it as they obscure the

structural forces that sort individuals into lives of vastly different well-being with an

ideology of meritocracy that in effect blames the poor for the circumstances that their

lack of skills lead to, when they have not been given effective opportunities to develop

such skills. (Reimers, 2022, p. 11)

The so-called "learning poverty" was now front and center (Reuge et al., 2021, p. 2).

     While American public schools have typically shouldered much of the responsibility for

mitigating socioeconomic inequalities (Lewallen et al., 2015), "the idea that education policy can

mitigate the structural relationship between education and income inequality suggests that the

education system has certain autonomy from the larger social structure" (Reimers, 2022, p.5).

Problematically, this perceived autonomy is the central impetus for public dissatisfaction with

education at the current political moment; this dissatisfaction is leading to the removal of the

perceived autonomy of schools and districts such that parents' rights have superseded schools'

and districts' decision-making powers. All of this creates even more profound systemic issues

(Meckler, 2022). When schools' responses to the pandemic were inconsistent, inconvenient, or

incomplete, society railed at their efforts, leading educators to go on the defensive about their

decision-making (Meckler, 2022).

As the adults in their lives debated whether to appreciate public educators, find fault in their performance, or question how the institution of public education had entered such a state, students dealt with the stress of missing friends, teachers, and everyday experiences they had likely taken for granted. Parents in particularly vulnerable homes saw signs of psychological distress in their children: more than half felt less happy, more worried, and less safe, and students with disabilities were wetting the bed and screaming more (Reimers, 2022).

While students were suffering, conversations began about what public education is and should be, and these conversations continue today. In all the discussions about public education within this new, undefined, and haphazard learning paradigm, students were used as pawns in the adults' arguments. Adults managed to recognize the negative impacts of COVID-19 on their learning and well-being but used those issues to buttress arguments that had little or nothing to do with lost learning, a concept that is not lost on Americans.

A recent poll showed that 75% of Americans and 69% of Americans with children under age 18 agree that recent actions taken in states including Florida and Texas to ban books or make it illegal for teachers to educate their students on racial and LBGTQ+ issues are politically motivated (Migdon, 2022). Furthermore, almost two-thirds of Americans believe that politicians are much less interested in parents' concerns than in advancing their own careers (Migdon, 2022). The researcher recognized this pattern from the controversies observed initially as a young student and later as a dedicated teacher and defeated administrator. It was unclear who—if anyone—was listening to students when adults argued about prayer in schools, the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, sex education, vaccination rules, free and reduced lunch, state testing mandates, discipline, and more. The loudest voices have always been those of the adults, and it seems that students' experiences are unclear and unspoken, or even ignored in most scenarios.

Liberal Indoctrination

Public education, while being a target for how to best educate our current and future citizenry, is also often feared to be a haven for leftist political indoctrination. This fear is likely due to a perceived tendency toward promoting racial, social, and economic equity in taxpayer-funded schools—"perceived" because many educators promote equity, but the system often ignores it. The exhortation of public education as a socialist venture (Gonzalez, 2020) persists despite evidence that the inception of public schooling in the United States coincided with an influx of immigrants who purportedly needed to be assimilated into American culture (Grayson & Wolfsdorf, 2019). There is, undoubtedly, evidence that schools can be places where social justice reform begins. Lindsey et al. (2018) penned a cultural proficiency manual for school leaders, in which they address systemic oppression throughout history. The authors wrote, "Systems such as racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, and ableism create uneven playing fields by ensuring access to society for some members and impeding access for others" (Lindsey et al., p. 93). The authors also pointed out that "most educational policymakers and decision makers are White" and that "privilege creates either unawareness or denial of the reality that not all U.S. citizens have a common base of inalienable rights" (Lindsey et al., 2018, p. 94); in this instance, non-citizens are absent from the commentary. Also noted is the idea that public school curricula often support and perpetuate this privileged view.

The question remains whether recognizing the need for social justice and considering public education as an avenue for such qualifies as leftist indoctrination, or perhaps more clearly stated, a major political experiment is being practiced on children (Gonzalez, 2020). One example of the focus on social justice in schools is the call for the "culturally proficient school leader" to be active in ending oppression (Lindsey et al., 2018, p. 97). In fact, school leaders,

especially those who are members of a socially dominant group, should "assume personal responsibility and to take personal initiative to change [the system]" (p. 97). If social justice is leftist, then schools could be a center for leftist indoctrination, especially if the objective is to prevent questioning of leftist beliefs. However, if adults themselves exercise leftist principles in order to redress society's failures, indoctrination is a separate matter. The question, then, is whether opponents are simply not stating their acrimony toward the creation of opportunity for those who traditionally have none.

Incidentally, an example of this has to do with higher education. Cooper (2020) expressed significant discomfort over the "regressivity" of college loan forgiveness:

> Out of 255 million adult Americans, just 45 million have federal student debt. If economic relief is in order, it's highly inequitable to distribute tens of thousands of dollars to the 45 million while the other 210 million get nothing. Underlying student loan forgiveness is the logic that people who attended college in the recent past are more deserving of government assistance than everyone else, which makes little sense. For the cost of forgiving $10,000 in debt per borrower, the federal government could instead cut every adult American a check for just under $1,500. (para. 4)

In other words, rather than potentially changing the lives of (or making life more livable for) those who could not afford yet pursued the supposed economic betterment offered by a college education, all Americans, from the 1% down, deserve $1,500.

As for indoctrination, McInerney et al. (2020) believe that "left-wing progressives…have taken over the K-12 education system as well as our colleges and universities and have transformed these critical institutions into educational gulas for indoctrinating successive generations of Americans in Leftist orthodoxy" (p. viii). To these authors, leftist ideology in

schools equates to "a nefarious agenda" of implementing secularism, revising history, and promoting socialism (McInerney et al., 2020, p. viii). While not all questioners of school curricula are as dramatic in their descriptions of so-called leftist agendas, the fear stoked by such statements, as well as the consequences of that fear, are very real.

Iconoclasm and the Status Quo of Intolerance

Policymakers at the local, state, and national levels all come to the decision-making table with their own backgrounds and reasons for participating in or preventing change. Conservatives in opposition to critical race theory as a potential change force in public education express a series of beliefs approaching iconoclasm (McInerney et al., 2022). In fact, it appears that the possibility of a curriculum that hints at critiquing American history endangers a sacred understanding that the United States is the greatest country in the world and the lone example of a truly free society. In fact, 38% of the American public believes that America stands above all other countries (Thorsett & Kiley, 2017). That figure changed to 29% in 2017 and 23% in 2021, with only 10% of Americans aged 18-29 sharing this belief, which is, incidentally, the same percentage for those 65 and older who believe other countries are better than the United States (Hartig, 2021; Thorsette & Kiley, 2017). An opinion piece on the "world's happiest country" reveals that the United States lands in the 15th spot out of 149 countries based on factors like gross domestic product per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom to make one's own life choices, generosity of the general population, and perceptions of the level of corruption in the society (Heinonen, 2023).

A poignant fictional example occurs in an episode of the television series *The Newsroom*, starring Jeff Daniels as Will McAvoy, a disillusioned news anchor and former speechwriter for President George W. Bush (IMDB, n.d.). The character attends a university-

hosted panel discussion about American politics, in which a student asks panelists to explain why America is the greatest country in the world. Two other panelists, a liberal and a conservative, respond with familiar answers like freedom, diversity, and opportunity. At first, McAvoy states that the U.S. Constitution is a "masterpiece" but, as the moderator prods him further, he eventually states that America is not the greatest nation in the world for a variety of reasons, beginning with the reality that it is not the only country in the world with freedom (n.d.). Indeed, "being #1 in every category is not great." The U.S. leads the world in deaths related to firearms, mass incarceration, and weapons exports (Beaman, 2021). Teaching students that the United States is without flaw threatens the American society and functioning democracy.

Further to the point, Kruze and Zelizer (2023) suggested that "efforts to reshape narratives about the U.S. past…became a central theme of the conservative movement in general and the Trump administration in particular" (p. 13). The Trump White House initiated a "history war" with the formation of the President's Advisory 1776 Commission, "a commission [that] would provide…a 'patriotic education'" (Kruze & Zelizer, 2023, p. 13). However, as the authors noted, "A history that seeks to exalt a nation's strengths without examining its shortcomings, that values feeling good over thinking hard, that embraces simplistic celebration over complex understanding, isn't history; it's propaganda" (Kruze & Zelizer, 2023, p. 13). Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis publicly supported HB 999, legislation that ensures that the state's

> public universities and colleges are grounded in the history and philosophy of Western Civilization; prohibit D.E.I., C.R.T. and other discriminatory programs and barriers to learning; and course correct universities' missions to align education for citizenship in the constitutional republic and Florida's existing and emerging work force needs. (Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, 2023, para. 1)

The proposal allows post-tenure reviews of faculty with cause, requires the Board of Governors to "align universities' missions to education for citizenship of the constitutional republic," and "prohibit[s] higher education institutions from using any funding, regardless of source, to support DEI, CRT, and other discriminatory initiatives" (Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, 2023, para. 1).

Jones and Kao (2019) discussed the impact of the Equality Act on school curriculum and parent rights in a piece for The Heritage Foundation (2022), a conservative thinktank that boasts 500,000 members and argues for conservative values to be "advanced in Washington, in the Media, and across this great nation." The authors noted that activists

> argue that inclusion and non-discrimination toward students who identify as gay or transgender require radical revision of curricula. Schools across the country and around the world have attempted to implement curricula that teach students the nonscientific belief that gender is fluid and subjective, and that traditional beliefs about marriage and family are rooted in bigotry. (Jones & Kao, 2019, p. 1)

The authors contend that, based on landmark legal battles like *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) and *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), it remains the "prerogative of parents, not the state, to determine what children are taught about fundamental moral, religious, and philosophical issues" (Jones & Kao, 2019, p. 2). Their argument maintains that when sexual orientation and gender identity are added as protected classes within the educational setting,

> federal courts could wrongly apply the same reasoning they used to mandate Black history curricula to require curricula on sexual orientation and gender identity [and force schools to] propagate the view that traditional beliefs regarding marriage, sexuality, and gender are bigoted and discriminatory, regardless of objections from parents. (Jones & Kao, p. 4)

If this is true, maintaining the status quo of traditional gender roles promotes certain intolerance as well. The argument is specious at best.

As liberal thinkers lead the charge to (re)examine U.S. history and culture, they become targets of conservative ire and educators and their students are wedged into the middle of the struggle. Theories abound about why social sciences curricula are so controversial. It could be a fear that a revelation of uncomfortable truths could set into motion the progressive upending of perhaps the most beneficial conservative institution: White privilege.

From White Privilege to Extremism

DiAngelo (2018) noted that "White people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race, and White people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality" (p. 1). Furthermore, Whites are "insulated from racial stress, at the same time that we come to feel entitled to and deserving of our advantage" (p.1). However, White privilege is a concept that encompasses so much more. The United States has a long tradition of reserving seats at the decision-making table for "White, male, middle- and upper-class, able-bodied" Americans and "the decisions made at those tables affect the lives of those not at the tables" (p. xiii). Additionally, Whiteness once had a legal definition, carrying with it "legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others" (p. 24).

Mueller and Washington (2021) underscored the function of ignorance and apathy in Whites' responses—or lack thereof—to racism: "White people rely on ignorance and apathy to neutralize practical obstacles to racism…[allowing them] to execute and abide by racism without having to look and feel 'racist'" (p. 2). Cabrera and Corces-Zimmerman (2017) pointed out that ignorance among Whites "allows [them] to dismiss claims of racism or view them as isolated or individualized [and] encourages [them] to ignore and discredit claims of racism, as if closing

their eyes and covering their ears to the possibility that systemic racism still exists will make it disappear" (p. 302).

This ignorance allows White people to dismiss claims of racism or view them as isolated and individualized. It also encourages White people to ignore and discredit claims of racism, as if closing their eyes and covering their ears to the possibility that systemic racism still exists will make it disappear. Weaponizing this ignorance is another problem, as with Derek Black, a White nationalist who disguised himself at college but spewed hate online, believing that he was "oppressed and victimized by a lifetime of anti-White discrimination" (Saslow, 2018, p. 65). Other White nationalists from all over the world—Wales, Australia, Europe, and Canada—devoured his vitriol online and in person at anarchist conferences. Fortunately, Black's complete story is one of redemption and revelation through experience and understanding: he went from justifying a mass shooting at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012 by White supremacist Wade Michael Page to publicly renouncing White nationalism. Once praised as the "Next David Duke," Black changed his tune as he became educated. Incidentally, this change began with his enrollment in college and exposure to a diversity of ideas and people he had not known before.

Apathy, Ignorance, and Legitimation of Oppression

Further to the point, White people rely on ignorance and apathy to neutralize obstacles to overcoming racism. An example of this phenomenon lies in immigration control: immigrants become commodities that affect the United States' economic structure, making privatization of immigration control an acceptable way to deal with a societal problem. In fact, Ebert et al. (2019) defined the framing of immigration issues as the apathy strategy, specifically the "active avoidance of discussing immigrants and inequality, as if the oppressed or oppressive practices do not matter or exist" (p. 2). This "legitimation strategy" "rarely involve[s] the explicit vilification

of immigrants," allowing problem-solvers to ignore institutions in their solutions and actually "sustain and reinforce controversial institutional practices" (Ebert et al., 2019, pp. 2-3).

Knowing that bias is natural and inevitable, education about racial issues is imperative: "Nothing in mainstream US culture gives us the information we need to have the nuanced understanding of arguably the most complex and enduring social dynamic of the last several hundred years" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 8). It is that history, and the cultural awareness that comes with it, that many educators are attempting to present in schools.

Along with racial oppression, socioeconomic and gender oppression are very real and intertwined with racism. Even the definitions of discrimination, prejudice, and racism must be dissected so that society can know how to overcome the historical and institutionalized maltreatment of its citizens (DiAngelo, 2018). Out of White privilege comes White supremacy, an aspect of "culture that positions White people and all that is associated with them (Whiteness) as ideal" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 33). Indeed, if "deviation from that norm" of Whiteness is occurring, it could signal a challenge to Whiteness as the ideal in the future, which, to the holders of privilege, would potentially be catastrophic (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 33). Lindsey et al. (2019) clarified that, "in much the same way that people do not appreciate their liberties until they are threatened, most privileged White men do not appreciate the power of their privilege because they have never experienced the systematic absence of power" (p. 92). For instance, "White high school dropouts have higher average household wealth than Black people who've graduated from college" (McGhee, 2021, p. 43). This is only one example of the invisibilities of White privilege.

Furthermore, racism (and other means of oppression or exclusion, whether deliberate or unintentional), are uncomfortable topics for many Whites, who, due to either a lack of awareness

or denial, are insulated from the inequities that progressive thinkers seek to address and correct (Lindsey et al., 2010). However, halting the conversation, especially when our nation's children are paying attention, is not the way to handle the discomfort; rather, "awareness and self-reflection" are the goals of the discussion (Lindsey et al., 2010, p. 92).

Many in opposition to critical race theory foresee a dismantling of the familiar narrative that American society is now post-racial. Kendi (2017) wrote of a "dueling duality" of racial progress (pp. x-xi), a phenomenon wherein antiracism increases, but so does overt racism, begging the question: is there real racial progress? Or, put another way, what is the net value of racism in the United States? More than half of Americans reported experiencing hate speech and harassment online and for a third of Americans, online abuse was in response to their sexual orientation, religion, race, ethnicity, gender identity or disability (Guynn, 2019). Threats are included and can result in deadly violence, as with Robert Bowers, alleged killer of 11 people in a synagogue in Pittsburgh who "regularly posted anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi propaganda" on the right-wing extremist network Gab.

The Southern Poverty Law Center tracks at least 1,600 extremist groups in the United States and has reported on terrorism, plots, and "racist rampages" since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, including

> plans to bomb government buildings, banks, refineries, utilities, clinics, synagogues, mosques, memorials and bridges; to assassinate police officers, judges, politicians, civil rights figures and others; to rob banks, armored cars and other criminals; and to amass illegal machine guns, missiles, explosives and biological and chemical weapons. ("Terror from the Right," n.d., para. 7)

Privilege, Conflict, and Violence in Educational Settings

In all the conversations happening around the nation, educators sometimes speak up, but the volume of other stakeholders' voices tends to drown them out. Three Black faculty members on a predominantly White campus recounted their frustrations with White privilege (Hill et al., 2019). They were disillusioned by the fact that their university was not engaging in "changing campus traditions, acknowledging injustices in institutional history, and revamping operational policies and procedures to account for differences in cultures, nationalities, abilities, and other identities" (Hill et al., 2019, p. 102). They acknowledge that "transformational change is a long, difficult process," and viewed their institution as taking the easy road when problems arose:

> It is easier for institutions to schedule a room; invite those who feel marginalized to gather; hire an external speaker, one who will leave the area shortly after speaking truths that may awaken belonging and purpose within those listening; and hope that any residual activist tendencies will dissipate after the speaker's departure from campus. (Hill et al., 2019, p. 102)

The superficial response by their institution and others spurred the formation of the Mobilizing Anger Collective (MAC), primarily because talking as the sole tactic was not working.

Even fewer perspectives illuminated in the news include those of students themselves. A meta-analysis of the controversy surrounding critical race theory—confused with culturally relevant teaching—would suggest that the resistors are the very ones upholding the systems they wish to shield from critique. It is likely that many adults outside of or on the periphery of education have little trust in young people not only to handle sensitive topics, but there is an apprehension about which topics young people might choose to study, should they have the opportunity to decide.

While adult stakeholders wrest for control of what students are exposed to in their

schools, the fact remains that our youth see bigotry and violence play out daily on their smartphones, televisions, and tablets. Students know about Tyre Nichols' violent homicide committed by five African American police officers. They see images or hear details of the protests that happen each time a White police officer kills a Black human being. Now, they must be wondering about this new dynamic, one of power and, potentially of racism, as Van Jones (2023), commentator for CNN, stated in an opinion piece:

> One of the sad facts about anti-Black racism is that Black people ourselves are not immune to its pernicious effects. Society's message that Black people are inferior, unworthy and dangerous is pervasive. Over many decades, numerous experiments have shown that these ideas can infiltrate Black minds as well as White. Self-hatred is a real thing. (para. 9)

Indeed, hundreds of years of unrelenting depictions of African Americans in society as inferior have had their desired, detrimental effect and may have contributed to this recent event. Educators must be hearing questions from their students; those educators must be wondering how to respond, if they can, or what may happen if they do.

This author's generation shares a collective cultural bank of knowledge, in which Rodney King appeared on television asking if Whites and Blacks could "get along" (Krbecheck & Bates, 2017). Images of the five days of riots in Los Angeles and adults' comments about the events are seared into the author's personal memory as a pivotal moment for racial conflict in the United States. The O.J. Simpson murder trial and verdict appear as crisp, clear images in memory, as if they did not occur nearly 30 years ago. Although the author's teachers did not necessarily know exactly what to say, they were certainly not prohibited from addressing the topics at all. Students who witnessed 9/11, George Floyd's death and related protests, and other events play out on live

television may or may not have had access to support in understanding and dealing with hatred and violence in their world. Thus, educators and community and political stakeholders must ask themselves whether curricula can support students' experiences with the barrage of violence and conflict or if educators should act like it does not exist and has no historical or social context. With access to technology, students will inevitably find answers and they may not be the kinds of answers parents approve of either.

It is time to inquire of the teachers and students themselves how they feel about what they have been taught and what they would prefer to learn. A study on student agency and teachers' attitudes about student agency and social science teaching is essential to understanding all sides of the controversy over critical race theory's role in education. With this dive into student agency, it will eventually be beneficial to ask the students themselves if their schooling has served them in civic and social preparation for adulthood. One might wonder if recent graduates consider themselves intellectually prepared to participate actively in a democratic citizenry. It is possible that their education has not adequately addressed the inequalities they or their peers have faced, if it has at all. Perhaps a dive into their perception about the purpose of their education could be fruitful for future practice and teacher preparation.

Vaughn (2020) pointed out two particularly relevant definitions of agency: it is "how individuals contest institutional norms and sanctioned practices to support their agency" and/or "rooted in how individuals reshape their worlds and construct identities" (p. 110). While some communities have less access to opportunities for "contest[ing] norms" and "construct[ing] identities" (Vaughn, 2020, p. 110), young people throughout the nation's history have been able to make their voices heard. New research into student agency is necessary, since the belief that controversial issues about history and culture are not appropriate for young people flies in the

face of the progress initiated by the Civil Rights Movement:

> In the late 1960s, teenagers rebelled in public schools across the United States. From the Mississippi Delta to East Los Angeles and Columbus, Ohio, young people spoke out about injustices they witnessed at school and in American society…Black and Latino students seized the moment to speak out against…racial discrimination at school and advocate for practices and policies that would make education more equitable for students of all races and ethnicities. (Schumaker, 2023, p. 1)

Although college students and other young adults protested, there is little doubt that students still in high school were able to perceive and understand the injustices surrounding/affecting them and their peers and had sufficient agency to organize "peaceful silent protests and, at other times, [disrupt] classes with walkouts, picket lines, sit-ins, marches, and rebel assemblies," facing punishment by school officials for their advocacy (Schumaker, 2023, p. 1). Perhaps a reduction over the decades in this type of activism by high school students suggests to some adults that students do not possess the agency to advocate for themselves, their families, or their communities. At the other end of the spectrum lies apathy, which is dangerous for democracy.

Beyer and Apple (1998) predicted the need for thinking about education "as being integrally connected to the cultural, political, and economic institutions of the larger society, institutions that may be strikingly unequal by race, gender, and class" (p. 4). Schools are places that not only "embody and reproduce many of these inequalities… [but also] may alleviate some of them" (p. 4). Ultimately, race cannot be extracted from education:

> Race will influence whether we will survive our birth, where we are most likely to live, which schools we will attend, who our friends and partners will be, what careers we will have, how much money we will earn, how healthy we will be, and even how long we can

expect to live. (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 5)

Beyer and Apple (1998) discussed the control, accessibility, selection, and distribution of knowledge and the "ideas of moral conduct and community" (p. 5) that can lead to curricula that promote true freedom and equity. It is arguable that this cannot be accomplished if only one type of voice is heard over all the rest when stakeholders make curricular decisions. The current framework for curricular decision-making may not reflect the desire to teach young people "to negotiate the tensions and contradictions of the wider society… within the relatively safe and protected climate of a school community" (Shields, 2018, p. 86). Unfortunately, when students made their voices heard in the 1960s, they were punished and, "even as [they] secured certain constitutional rights…litigation [about those rights] often did little to strengthen the ability of young people to challenge the persistent racial discrimination at school through the courts" (Schumaker, 2023, p. 3).

Statement of the Problem

This phenomenological/grounded theory study explores the ways in which secondary-level (middle- and high-school) students' voices are generally missing from or at least inconsistently included in the curricular decision-making process. The problem is that current political discourse about curricula in American public education tends to disregard the student's agency in contributing to the discussion about what is learned, how it is learned, and why. Schumaker (2023) cited two assumptions about young people that deter adults from seeking out their voices: the first assumption is that the age of majority is the proper age to engage in advocacy or activism (p. 3). The second assumption is that "young people cannot or do not have the competence to form their own political beliefs" (Schumaker, 2023, p. 3). Both assumptions impede substantive discussions about what students need, what they opine about their world, and

how they can learn to improve their society.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological/grounded theory study is to understand attitudes of teachers regarding student agency in potentially influencing curricular decision-making. The phenomenon is the current politically charged and highly publicized national discussion surrounding culturally relevant teaching and critical race theory in American public schools. The goal for this study is to obtain a baseline for what is (really) being taught and how teachers and students perceive student agency in making curricular decisions.

Research Questions

This study explores the following research questions:

- **Primary Research Question:** What are secondary teachers' current attitudes towards student agency in terms of curricular decision-making in social science courses at the secondary level?

  - **Secondary Research Question 1:** How have past and current battles for adult stakeholders' control over decision-making in public education influenced the current polemics regarding the teaching of potentially controversial concepts?

  - **Secondary Research Question 2:** How do secondary teachers view the teaching of social sciences and, more specifically, the handling of controversial topics?

  - **Secondary Research Question 3:** How do secondary teachers view student agency and the potential right for students to participate in curricular decision-making?

  - **Secondary Research Question 4:** How do secondary teachers view the purpose of public education in the United States, specifically as it relates to the teaching or

censorship of controversial topics?

    o **Secondary Research Question 5:** How are respondents' demographics related to

        attitudes surrounding student agency, curricular decision-making, and the

        teaching of controversial topics in secondary social sciences courses?

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory provides the framework through which this study will analyze history, civics, and other social sciences education. Critical race theory contains a body of scholarship that emerged from an academic movement to examine the way the laws and policies in the United States developed into institutions that oppress people of color (Alexander, 2020; Bell, 1989; Crenshaw, 1985; Delgado et al., 2017; Rothstein, 2018). Bell (1998) proposed an interest-convergence theory, which suggests that there is little incentive to overturn (or even begin to dissect) these institutions because White privilege might be disturbed in the process. The reality is that altruism is simply not enough to motivate a society to reflect upon itself and engage in change (Delgado et al., 2017). In fact, "sympathy, mercy, and evolving standards of social decency and conscience amounted to little, if anything" in the fight for social justice (Bell, 1998, p. 22). Not until Whites locate a substantial benefit in promoting equity and tolerance will real change occur.

While critical race theory begins with race as a social construct with no bearing on higher-order traits based on biology or genetics (Delgado et al., 2017), the framework allows scholars to deconstruct any potentially oppressive institution. Critical race theory has since expanded to include critical reviews of how class, gender, race, language, and disability are woven into U.S. laws, policies, and institutions that oppress certain segments of society. The concepts of intersectionality and anti-essentialism purport that "[n]o person has a single, easily

stated, unitary identity" (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 10). The intersectionality of class, gender, race, language, and disability, among other sociocultural identifiers, is crucial for understanding, say, a disabled, middle-class Black lesbian's experience as compared to an able-bodied, upper-class White cisgender, heterosexual man's experience.

Critical race theory is mainly controversial for its activist roots. The discomfort CRT causes likely comes from the threat of White-dominant society's interests being targeted for change, scrutiny, or eventual elimination. Critical race theory, whether as a scholarly pursuit or alluded to as a suggestion for more open discussion and debate, is a dangerous prospect because once light is shed upon an egregious situation of oppression, change must follow (Hill et al., 2019). Critical race theory "tries not only to understand our social situation but to change it, setting out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarches but to transform it for the better" (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 7). Critical race theory questions and critiques the foundations of our society, from social to legal structures. Deviation from the status quo will be uncomfortable for those who enjoy its privileges.

Critical race theory (CRT) provides the ideal framework and language for this study. Dixson (2017) stated it this way:

> Although CRT scholars in education typically engage CRT constructs to analyze an educational issue, policy, practice, or event to understand and/or theorize on why racialized educational inequities persist, the ultimate end, whether realized or not, is the fight for social change. (p. 233)

Critical race theory is an appropriate lens for this study, since the study itself could not exist outside the political turmoil caused by the idea of CRT itself. Once CRT is identified appropriately as a theoretical framework rather than a set of concepts or teaching strategies, said

framework can be utilized to demystify the teaching of controversial topics, to suggest a purpose for public civic education, and to promote culturally relevant pedagogy as an appropriate method for teaching students to critique their world and the institutions that allow it to function.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it sheds light not only on the history of political controversy over public education and the mandates within it, but how teachers and/or students might exercise their agency to become part of the process of (re)building public education. Additional significance lies in the identification of a variety of beliefs about the purpose of public education, as well as the difference between CRT and culturally relevant and responsive teaching. Finally, proving student agency may alert current adult stakeholders to new ideas from the students themselves and add to the literature for future topics of study.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined.

Autonomy is the feeling of influencing or taking part in decisions that affect us. It requires support and/or respect of our opinions, decisions, and actions from others in our lives (Zacarian & Silverstone, 2020). Autonomy also "increases as our unique and innate interests, strengths, and talents are acknowledged and valued, and when we are recognized for our competence and skill" (Zacarian & Silverstone, 2020, p. 25). For schools to incorporate skill development for being a successful learner—and eventually adult citizen—teachers must be attuned to students' needs, skillsets, skill deficits, and unique abilities and interests in order to respond with constant adjustments. It stands to reason that teachers must have permission to engage with students about these needs, abilities, and interests, as well: autonomy is also an essential element for teachers in their work.

Culturally relevant/responsive teaching/pedagogy (also CRP) is a methodology for (1) approaching controversial issues to allow for critical thinking and potential critique of history and culture and/or (2) responding to diversity in the classroom with intentionality and appropriate sensitivity. Castro et al. (2020) noted that because students from differing socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds view democratic society differently (in terms of opportunity, race, equity, etc.), "teachers ought to begin civic instruction by attending to the unique civic identities and lived experiences of their students" (p. 3).

In the context of this study, CRP is the actual reason for controversy surrounding public education in the United States, whereas media sources often highlight CRT as the issue or quote people who do so. According to Shields (2018), culturally relevant teaching involves thoughtful and intentional facilitation of learning experiences that allow young people "to negotiate the tensions and contradictions of the wider society…within the relatively safe and protected climate of a school community" (p. 86).

Critical race theory is not being taught in schools, as it is not a curriculum, nor is it appropriate content for K-12 education. It is, however, a way for scholars to study aspects of society (law, education, economy, etc.) within the historical context of race relations within United States history and culture until the present. Critical race theorists "have built on everyday experiences with perspective, viewpoint, and the power of stories and persuasion to come to a deeper understanding of how Americans see race," beginning with the ways in which trial lawyers might tell stories in their work to help a jury see their legal point of view (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 44). One reason this plays out in public education—particular in the social sciences—is that educators understand that "members of this country's dominant racial group cannot easily grasp what it is like to be non-White" (p. 46), leading them to attempt to include as many

relevant perspectives in the historical or social narrative so that students come away with a true cultural awareness about the country in which they live, play, and eventually work.

Critical race theory is important in informing educational reform campaigns and legislation because it uncovers issues of intersectionality and social and class hierarchy for a diverse group of students whose current and future interests lie in their rights (a legal concept). As Delgado et al. (2017) pointed out, "[i]n our system, rights are almost always procedural…rather than substantive….Moreover, rights are almost always cut back when they conflict with the interests of the powerful" (p. 29). Critical race theorists' likely interest in education is to teach a new generation to navigate a system in which "civil rights gains for communities of color coincide with the dictates of White self-interest [since little] happens out of altruism alone" (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 22).

Institutional racism, institutional oppression, and structural racism are all terms that suggest the systematic and systemic oppression of people, particularly people of who are non-White, poor, alternately gendered, or not heterosexual, by the institutions and practices in American society. Those institutions include but are not limited to government and social policies, including the public education system.

Student agency as it is used in this study refers to the varying levels of maturity of students and the rights inherently or socially bestowed upon them at certain ages to participate in decision-making about what and how they learn. Agency is linked to empowerment, in that, students who use their agency to "[take] initiative, acting with confidence and autonomy," assume the power to move away from the traditional student role of "obediently following a set of explicit and implicit expectations, rules and directives handed down by authorities" (Zacarian & Silverstone, 2020, p. 9). Many more nuances of this term are discussed throughout this text. In

this study, what and how students learn refers to social sciences curricula at the secondary level,

most specifically, history and civics education.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

History, Civics, and Social Studies Curricula in the U.S.

Influence of Parents, Community, and Politics on Education

Compulsory Education

As early as the 1640s, Puritans in New England believed that parents had an obligation as Christians to raise their children properly so as not to threaten the commonwealth's "moral and economic well-being" (Katz, 1976, p. 11). To create more urgency for this task, "the Puritan elders on June 14, 1642, passed what might be viewed as the first compulsory education law in American history, transforming a moral obligation into a legal one" (Katz, 1976, p. 11). The basic requirements were learning a trade and studying the Bible, and the responsibility of these belonged to parents. In 1647, the law expanded to require the community to contribute to the education of the commonwealth's children, requiring "communities of fifty households or more to provide a teacher to instruct children in reading and writing and communities of a hundred or more households to set up a grammar school" (Katz, 1976, p. 11). Enforcement of these early laws was slow-going and attendance at community schools was required much later, in the second half of the 1800s (Katz, 1976).

Among the many challenges to compulsory attendance laws over the past two hundred years, one of the central conflicts is over who should control education: parents or the state? Parents and communities have challenged everything from the teaching of foreign languages in school to saluting the flag as an infringement upon their rights as the primary directors of their children's moral upbringing (Katz, 1976; Mickelson, 2003; Salazar et al., 2019). Today's arguments are simply another episode in the fight against the state's efforts at educating young people. Parents carry signs to board meetings, informing elected officials that they will not co-

parent with the government. In fact, in a comedic news spoof for *The Daily Show* at a conservative rally in North Carolina, interviewer and comedian Jordan Klepper asked attendees about their anxiety over "co-parenting with the government," among other topics like vaccine mandates and mask requirements (Byers, 2021). Klepper cleverly solicited a contradiction as the parent admitted that their child attends public school, which he replied is "kind of co-parenting with the government" (Byers, 2011). The parent replied: "No, it isn't…We have a board of education; we also elect who our officials are. We get to have a voice." The conversation continues:

> Klepper: 'Right. So, you work with the government.'
>
> Parent: 'We do.'
>
> Klepper: 'In parenting decisions.'
>
> Parent: 'Yes.' (Byers, 2021)

This exchange, published by the John Locke Foundation, highlights the influence of parents who simply cannot (or will not) articulate what they are truly angry about.

Schools, districts, and politicians at the local and national levels typically put forth good-faith efforts to involve stakeholders in decision-making for K-12 public education. Those efforts may vary by state, district, and school; however, some rights are prescribed by law. Legal cases like *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923), *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), and *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), along with the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 1975) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA, 1975), have codified parents' rights to involvement in their children's education. A myriad of other legal cases over the years have addressed everything from Mexican American studies (Strauss, 2017) to charging students for participation in athletics (Chen, 2019; Eyler et al., 2018).

Parents' involvement in decision-making can be challenging, yet engaging parents thoughtfully in the process is important, considering the barriers already keeping too many parents from engaging in their children's education, such as access to technology, language barriers, cultural barriers, parents' attitudes toward education, and education level (Baker et al., 2016). Political implications of decision-making create additional challenges.

As Cumming et al. (2006) later noted, the complexity of working with parents as stakeholders can ultimately lead to conflict: "While parent involvement is generally viewed as synchronistic with, and supportive of, the education provided their children in schools, such involvement can also constitute legal challenges to school decisions considered to be detrimental to their children's best interests" (p. 44). Once we add other community members and politicians into the mix, interactions can become volatile and unproductive. Social issues, for instance, often overshadow academic concerns.

In America's not-so-distant past (1960), Ruby Bridges lived out her first school experience in the public eye as U.S. Marshals escorted her to a newly integrated school. The U.S. government charged the Marshals with protecting the first grader from an angry White mob railing against the imminent, nationwide racial integration of public schools. Even more recently in Americans' collective memory is *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), a case that upheld busing as a strategy to integrate schools in Charlotte, North Carolina. A lawsuit followed in 1997, brought by a White parent whose child was unable to attend a magnet school, purportedly because of her race (Mickelson, 2003). This case unfortunately led to trends of resegregation in Charlotte that are still in play today (Mickelson, 2003).

There is an abundance of controversy within public education in the United States: Transgender student bathroom and locker use is a polarizing issue that requires legal

intervention, with a strategy to secure the right of a child to free speech under the First Amendment and equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment (Wuest, 2018). Comments made at a school board meeting by high school students regarding diversity in reading assignments led to heckling from a disdainful adult public in attendance (Simone-Bednarski, 2021). These issues point to a potentially well-intentioned public with an interest in protecting students, but one could also ask if the adults in these debates are focusing more on the protection of their own traditions, beliefs, and values, values that do not apparently include respect of discordant opinions. These adults could be depriving the children they wish to protect of robust educational and civic experiences.

Defining the Purpose of Education

At the heart of education/indoctrination debate is the function of school. Prominent individuals throughout history have highlighted the possibilities associated with a strong universal education: Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Lyndon B. Johnson, Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, and many others have championed education as a sacred privilege, a precious opportunity for changing oneself and becoming a change agent for an imperfect world. Each of these individuals, however, speaks from a different context and their personal meanings of education can be interpreted differently. In fact, Salazar et al. (2019) pointed out that Horace Mann's insistence that education "is the greatest equalizer'…was founded on the notion that schooling would instantiate White culture and values," through policy, teacher preparation, and even evaluation standards and practices (p. 463). Like Edward Bellamy, author of the Pledge of Allegiance, Mann was an early crusader for public education as a vehicle for assimilating immigrants and ridding the country of social "evils of ignorance, crime, vice, and aristocratic privilege" (Katz, 1976, p. 11).

Two other definitions, highlighted by Grewal et al. (2022) suggest that education is "big business" (p. 3). The authors noted that the first of the formal definitions of education by Merriam-Webster "conceptualizes education as a process and a set of activities, whereas the second views it as an outcome generated for the recipient" (Grewal et al., 2022, p. 1). The authors further define education, in relationship to marketing, as "a set of activities, institutions, and processes for exchanging offerings that include but are not limited to pedagogical content, knowledge, and ideas that provide value for its consumers, stakeholders, and society" (Grewal et al., 2022, p. 1). Viewing education as a commodity gives its "consumers" (parents, students, and community members) access to the process to ensure satisfaction with the product. As early as colonial times in the United States, university students in Boston "mocked any institution that based admission on parents' purses rather than merits" (Schiff, 2022, p. 46).

Aside from its economic ties, scholars argue that education is an institution that upholds the status quo of White privilege. In a study on how White teachers deal with racism and White privilege, Hawkman (2020) noted that "despite hopes that the United States has moved toward a post-racial society, race/ism and Whiteness continue to shape every interaction, particularly within education" (p. 3). The author further stated:

> With more than 50 million students enrolled in U.S. public schools, the education system is one of the largest structural enterprises capable of shaping race relations. However, to date, public schools have been largely defined by Whiteness—White middle class norms, Whitewashed course content, and White teachers and policy makers. (Hawkman, 2020, p. 3)

In fact, an entire body of scholarship explores the ways in which race-evasiveness and race-visibility show up in classrooms with White teachers (Jupp et al., 2016).

Kohli et al. (2017) pointed out that schooling in the United States has not served students of color well: historically, Americanization and Native American boarding schools of the late 1800s and early 1900s, as well as segregated schools subjected non-Whites to "institutionalized conditions that contradict[ed] their interests and their humanity" (p. 184). In today's schools, deficit thinking is often the culprit behind inequities, alongside the belief in meritocracy (Kohli et al., 2017, p. 184), which is irrelevant to many children. Kohli et al. pointed out the tendency to "[blame] students of color and their families for a lack of academic success, promoting a shift in their behavior as the solution…, rather than suggesting shifts to structures or policies that systematically fail" these students (2017, p. 186). Indeed, "often without reflecting, we accept that if people fail to achieve, they just did not try hard enough—and worse, we blame them, thinking that there was something inherently wrong with them or their approach in the first place" (Shields, 2018, p. 30). More egregious is the blame adults place on some children for circumstances they were born into. Beliefs and denials about those who fail or struggle "are supported by curricula that are silent about the pluralistic nature of our country's history and development" (Lindsey et al., 2019, p. 94). In fact, through current pedagogy, especially in teaching history, "privilege is reinforced by experience" or by a lack of representation of salient cultural figures and events in textbooks and lessons (Lindsey et al., 2019, p. 94).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Kohli et al. (2017) argued that well after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), a "new racism" emerged in education, which effectively "disrupts the educational opportunities of students of Color in K-12 schools" (p. 186). The three patterns they found in their review of the scholarship included evaded racism, antiracist racism, and everyday racism. An antidote to this new racism is culturally relevant pedagogy.

Ladson-Billings (1995) noted early on that culturally relevant pedagogy had the potential to "produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order" (p. 474). Ladson-Billings highlighted the fact that African American students did, in fact, achieve academically, but that they did so "at the expense of their cultural and psychosocial well-being" (1995, p. 475). In fact, Ladson-Billings noted that culturally relevant pedagogy could strengthen students' chances of achieving academically without compromising their "cultural integrity" (1995, p. 476).

Despite efforts to include multiculturalism in curricula, White teachers, who make up 80% of all public-school teachers as of 2017-18 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a), can unwittingly uphold racism. In a study of White teachers' production of a reenactment of Atlantic Black slavery, Bery (2014) found that the teachers of an overwhelmingly White population of students, which was 86.1% of the New England-area school "re/produced and re/enforced, instead of interrogating and dislodging, White supremacy, even though the teaching of slavery, paradoxically, made them minimize and (seemingly) abdicate White self-ascribed moral superiority" (p. 335). Minimizing White responsibility does no favors for anyone, least of all White people.

In another example, Brown and Brown (2010) studied fifth- and eighth-grade social studies textbooks to ascertain how racial violence was treated in the curriculum. The authors studied the portrayal of racial violence or the threat thereof in these texts, along with the effects on African Americans, including "the loss of life, property, educational opportunities, and overall quality of life and livelihood" (Brown & Brown, 2010, p. 141). Representations of African Americans in contemporary textbooks point to "one-dimension, herofication [sic]

narratives…[and]...overgeneralized representations of African American experiences" (Brown & Brown, 2010, p. 141). The authors point out that students' and teachers' sociocultural knowledge can originate with texts like these, warranting a closer look at their contents (Brown & Brown, 2010). Deficiencies in history and social studies textbooks have led to corrective scholarship, popular trade books, and social media content intended to fill in the gaps of what is consistently taught in schools (Hannah-Jones, 2019; Kendi, 2017; Loewen, 2018; Rothstein, 2018; Zinn, 2015).

Social studies teaching has traditionally centered on creating civic competence in students in order to "[develop] a citizenry that will internalize and exhibit democratic ideals" (Demoiny, 2017, p. 25). In an interview about work in education, Sardoc emphasized the

> seismic civic and political shifts we are witnessing even in some of the most democratic nations around the world—trends toward tribalism, sharply polarized partisanship, retreats from civic-mindedness, and resurgent specters of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Islamic rhetoric [as reasons to] revisit the importance of the democratic goals of education. (2018, p. 247)

Sardoc further highlighted the need to clearly define education's purpose: future citizens will need to possess a particular skill set that will allow them to think critically about society and ultimately upend the aforementioned trends:

> The cultivation of truth-seeking and truth-telling, tolerance and mutual respect, the skills and virtues of robust yet reasoned debate, a willingness to forge and support beneficial compromises in decision-making, and a basic understanding of the value of deliberation—as well as its limits—all are keys to improving pluralist democratic societies. (2018, p. 248)

While public education could potentially teach these skills to future global citizens, missing pieces of history in prescribed curricula may well affect what kind of citizenry is achievable in the United States through education. Tannebaum (2020) showed that schools are more equipped to teach students to reason about challenging issues, especially since the school itself tends to be more diverse than places a child will be when outside of school. Schools are places where students can encounter, process, and learn to respect a variety of beliefs, perspectives, and opinions about critical issues (Tannebaum, 2020).

By 2015, seven U.S. states had passed laws requiring high school students to pass a citizenship test as a requirement for graduation (Hess et al., 2015), and other states followed their lead in the following years. Some states require the same citizenship test that prospective citizens take. Because the United States Naturalization Test consists of 100 factual questions about U.S. history and civics, some wonder how requiring students to pass a fact-recall test could create a more active and engaged citizenry. Hess et al. (2015) suggested other ways to encourage students to be more civic minded, like "assessing policy proposals from opposing political parties, volunteering in a significant way, or analyzing a problem in their community and identifying ways to respond" (p. 176). In fact, the authors concluded that "democracy thrives when citizens think critically and deeply about civic and political issues, when they consider the needs and priorities of others, and when they are engaged in informed action—not when they have memorized a few facts" (Hess et al., 2015, p. 176).

Controversy and Public Control of Education

Public schools have faced decades of criticism over the function of public schools. Parents, politicians, and community members have voiced their concerns regarding practices they want to see in schools, as well as those they believe have no place in the classroom. The

public has demanded, for instance, that religious practices like prayer either remain in or be removed from schools and over time, support for and rejection of religion in schools have ebbed and flowed with the cultural and political/legislative climate changes in the United States (Schwadel, 2013). Disagreements over the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance have erupted at board meetings. The fight over creationism and evolution as academic topics has lasted over a century (Salazar et al., 2019). The list of polemical issues is lengthy.

Schools have been derided as being havens for indoctrination of young people into liberal or even Marxist ways of thinking and behaving. Today's parents, community members, and politicians are particularly concerned about how sensitive issues like race, gender, and class are managed in schools, especially within the context of history, civics, and social studies curricula. Vehement responses to CRT in education suggest that critiquing U.S. history and culture endangers sacred beliefs about the greatness of the United States in terms of its Christianity and freedom (Holder & Josephson, 2020; McInerney et al., 2022).

Evangelicals and the non-Evangelical Right

Scholars are leading the charge to (re)examine U.S. history and culture and have become targets of conservative ire (McInerney et al., 2022). This anger may stem from fear: fear that the assertion of new ideas and the revelation of uncomfortable truths could set into motion the progressive loss of White privilege and its many advantages. For example, Barack Obama's historic election to the U.S. Presidency in 2008 sounded an alarm for conservatives: Reflecting on the unanticipated record voter turnout (particularly among African Americans and youth), U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham said, "We're not generating enough White guys to stay in business in the long term" (Anderson, 2017, p. 139). Efforts voter disenfranchisement a shift back to voter suppression thought to have been abandoned decades ago. This is already apparent in states like

North Carolina, where Supreme Court involvement is necessary to determine if extreme

gerrymandering is legal process or racial discrimination (Savitzky & Graunke, 2022).

Some scholars point to economic discontent as the deciding factor in 2016, while others

point to White evangelicals as carrying the tide, as 80% of this group voted for Trump (Pulliam

Bailey, 2016). However, White evangelicals had already been influencing politics for decades

through organizations like Falwell's Moral Majority, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, and

James Dobson's Focus on the Family (Fitzgerald, 2018). Consequently, researchers had a hard

time determining if these voters were truly religious or simply part of an assumed "ethnic,

cultural, and political designation" (Holder & Josephson, 2020, pp. 541-2). What may, in fact,

have happened is that a swath of White conservatives joined the voting frenzy as "a backlash

against the Obama administration's efforts at a post-racial and post-partisan government" in

which White conservative values were seemingly endangered (Holder & Josephson, 2020, p.

542). What evangelicals had in common with non-evangelical conservatives was that they

viewed themselves as minorities—or at least they would be by 2050—in need of the protection

of the state. Donald Trump's sympathetic stance appealed to both groups, even though he was

not ostensibly pious (Holder & Josephson, 2020). Perhaps interest-convergence theory applies

here in a twisted way: White Evangelicals favored racial over religious values when they elected

a non-religious, dishonest, unethical, White supremacist with little moral standing, qualities

which evangelicals themselves pointed out (Hartig, 2021).

Using issues of morality as their political beacon, evangelicals and non-evangelical

conservatives do not have to admit their fear that White privilege could be undermined by a

liberal-leaning shift in American democracy. Republicans found the "power of the Black vote"

was more dangerous than Trump's threat to democracy (Anderson, 2017, p. 163) and chose their

path.

Another potential fear is that they will be perceived as racists or perhaps they are afraid they will see something in themselves that they do not like, once current and future generations expose historical realities. Perhaps Whites who are opposed to critical race theory foresee a dismantling of the familiar narrative that the U.S. is a post-racial society and its inhabitants have made enough progress to declare all races equal in the United States, when the opposite may be true. Take, as an example, the fact that 48% of African American families, at all income levels, have lived in poor neighborhoods over at least two generations, compared to 7% of White families (Rothstein, 2017, p. 187). Even more telling is the refusal of Baltimore officials to implement four decades' worth of proposals to connect African American neighborhoods to more opportunity, citing lack of funding, but spending the funding on suburban transportation at the same time (Rothstein, 2014). Consider also that African American children suffer from asthma at twice the rate of White children, yet they continue to live in environments with high pollution and vermin infestation. Whether due to nature, environment, socioeconomics, or generations of policies, race is still a factor in the United States (Euronews, 2023).

Questioning CRT in Public Education

Magee (2021) pointed to at least 165 community and political groups that are working to prevent CRT from finding a place in the K-12 public education curriculum. One commonality in the fight against critical race theory in education is the idea that curricula are imposed upon students. This may be true, whether liberal or conservatives enact national, state, or local curricula or policies in education. Policy decisions that interrupt the status quo are not necessarily taking away freedom; rather, they can be perceived as dangerous for producing new ideas, new ways of thinking, and changes in a community's accepted way of life.

Some see education, especially public education, as a critical precursor to citizenship in a democracy. Kelley (2002) highlighted the importance of education for African Americans during the Reconstruction era as one example:

During Reconstruction, African Americans led the fight for free universal public education in the United States, not just for themselves but for everyone. After being barred from reading and writing while in bondage, newly freed people regarded education as one of the most basic rights and privileges of citizenship. Education was so important, in fact, that they were willing to pay for public schools or start their own. (p. 130)

Indeed, thoughtful confrontation of controversial public issues in the K-12 classroom effectively "can serve as a means for developing citizens who are knowledgeable about topical issues, open to the opinions of others, and capable of participating in rational dialogue about open-ended and complex topics" (Tannebaum, 2020, p. 7). Further, students "are expected to graduate from their formal schooling with an understanding of complex social issues and the various ways in which these ideas can be thought of in an autonomous and critical manner that will help society evolve through evidence-based logic and collective action" (Tannebaum, 2020, p. 7). This is an achievable goal for K-12 public education if stakeholders can agree on how—or even if— teaching/discussion should take place.

One of the more polarizing ideas about public education is whether teachers work within prescribed curricula to indoctrinate young people with liberal political ideologies, despite an undercurrent of indoctrination of a more conservative—or, at least, traditional—bent in historical and modern policies. The tradition of saying the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of the academic day or to open a school event is one example. Although the Pledge is not compulsory de jure,

tradition, nationalism, and social pressure often create situations of de facto compulsion of

recitation (McCorkle & Schenck, 2017). Even a shallow investigation of the history of the

Pledge reveals its political and social complexity, especially in the context of public education.

That the Pledge is isolationist and xenophobic is clear if one simply reads the words of its author,

Edward Bellamy (McCorkle & Schenck, 2017); yet, in a modern, multicultural society, the

Pledge still has a revered place. The pledge began as an effort to assimilate/indoctrinate "every

alien immigrant of inferior race" (McCorkle & Schenck, 2017, p. 64).

One might inquire of parents what they want for their children: indoctrination or

education? Is right-wing indoctrination permissible, while leftist indoctrination is prohibited?

Sears and Hughes (2006) addressed the differences between indoctrination and education and

offer a clear distinction. They explain that indoctrination is the "closing down of alternatives

through the promotion of single, unassailable views and the shunning of evidence," while

education is "the opening up of possibilities through the exploration of alternative

understandings, the critical application of evidence and argument and the development of the

skills and dispositions necessary to act on the possibilities" (Sears & Hughes, 2006, p. 4).

Notably, their research did not qualify indoctrination or education as belonging to one political

belief system. Equally interesting is the possibility that denying students opportunities to explore

controversial public issues could be worse than leaving the door open to leftist indoctrination.

The first possible consequence would be a populous inculcated with conservative views,

misinformation, and Whitewashed, unoffensive (to Whites) history. The other possibility is a

country wherein constructive dialogue vanishes from society, as arguments over what is fact and

what is not leaves parties unable to find any common ground at all (Kruse & Zelizer, 2023).

Many of the stakeholders with a voice in educational decision-making are particularly

concerned about indoctrination when it comes to issues like race, gender, class—and critical race theory as an umbrella for such offensive topics. Conservatives interchange the terms critical race theory and "wokeness" to define potentially offensive, racially charged, or liberal leaning content in the vicinity of their children. When asked to define the term "woke," *Stolen Youth* author Bethany Mandel famously "went viral" when she stumbled over an answer. In another interview, in which she complains about the dearth of conservative "heroes" (read: Churchill and Reagan) in children's literature, she gave a more coherent definition:

> So, in terms of children, it's the idea of turning them—I think my best example is the board book *Antiracist Baby*, and it is … hold on. I have it. I have the text somewhere. The idea that you cannot be neutral, that this is a fundamental reshaping of our society. In the lens of anti-racism, in the lens of sexuality, that is not what we've traditionally thought. It's the idea that we're trying to turn our kids into modern warriors in these political battles about CRT and about sexuality and climate change and all of these things. (Ismail, 2023, para. 1)

While Mandel is correct in asserting that there are far more children's stories about Ruth Bader Ginsburg than Amy Coney Barrett, the debate lies in the purpose of the stories. One story honors the first Jewish woman—and second woman ever—to serve on the Supreme Court, after a long career fighting for women's rights while she struggled to find work because she was a Jewish woman and mother, even though she was top of her class at Columbia in 1959 (Alexander, n.d.). Ginsburg's father was an immigrant to the United States and she attended public school in New York. The other story would highlight Barrett's private-school education in Louisiana, along with her upbringing as the daughter of an attorney for Shell Oil. She was later invited to clerk for Antonin Scalia, an opportunity that would likely not have been available for

her had she started her career in Ginsburg's time (Oyez, n.d.).

Using public education to further ideas and strategies either for social justice or preservation of conversative values is at the heart of the debate. Parents, politicians, and community members have latched onto the argument that critical race theory is dangerous and the nation's young people may not be able to handle sensitive issues of societal import. The expectation is that critical race theory could introduce anti-Christian, anti-government, or anti-White ideas, if it exists unchecked in curricula. White conservative beliefs, traditions, and values are so sacred that a perceived attempt to shed light on the faults and flaws embedded in the legal and societal norms of the country are an affront to their values and character (DiAngelo, 2018).

Culturally responsive pedagogy and cultural and linguistic responsiveness are all versions—or "remixes" (Hollie, 2019)—of Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant teaching from the 1990s. Ladson-Billings (1995) referred to culturally relevant teaching as "just…good teaching." Proponents of these methodologies would argue that educators have a unique opportunity to "empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 2022, p. 19). Educators can use these practices specifically to help young people

- become aware of the meaning of current events;
- identify themes and patterns throughout U.S. history that explain today's societal structures and struggles;
- become more civic-minded;
- gain and retain pride and meaning in their personal histories; and
- prepare themselves for future participation in their democracy.

In fact, even exposure to sensitive topics can inform students about the world around

them and how to navigate it. Social constructs like race are critical for preparing students for adult life. If race influences every aspect of life (DiAngelo 2018), educators must confront it in the place where all young people have a chance of exposure to their society's reality. Young people of color—and White youth, for that matter—deserve a chance to understand social institutions, examine their limitations, and make plans for how to confront these realities as adults. Dixson (2017) asked if "our children end their K-12 educational careers committed to participating in an economic and political system that has historically disenfranchised all but the 1%" (p. 243). While the purpose of education is perhaps too complex to pin down, it is still beneficial to understand who decides what education looks like.

Achieving Equity Through Education

If the true purpose of education is to realize the founding ideals of the United States by creating competent, active participants in democracy, then changes to the institution are not only necessary; they are unavoidable. The concept of active participation in democracy implies engagement in social justice, since knowledge of the damage that institutions can do awakens people to the change that must take place. Brown and Brown (2010) pointed out that "education has played a central role in efforts to achieve social justice and equity by providing a platform to make sense of and critique existing conditions and to envision and create a new reality" (p. 139).

One argument for institutional examination and change comes from critical race theory, the recent topic of controversy at school board meetings, on social media, and in legislative sessions. Critical race theory is frequently misunderstood, and opponents assert that its nefarious purpose is to insert Marxist and racist ideology into K-12 public school classrooms.

Critical Race Theory: An Overview

Critical race theory is an academic framework for analyzing legal and societal institutions

and policies that directly or indirectly oppress certain swaths of the American population.

Although critical race theory (Alexander, 2020; Bell, 1989; Crenshaw, 1985; Delgado et al.,

2017; Rothstein, 2018) encompasses a body of academic scholarship, there is an activist element

that makes it controversial. Critical race theory could be defined as a framework for

deconstructing—and reconstructing—inherently and historically oppressive institutions in the

United States to create a society that reflects the integrity of its populace and promotes/demands

equity and/or equality for all citizens, residents, and visitors. While the most basic argument

begins with race as a purely social abstraction with no bearing on higher-order traits based in

biology or genetics, the framework allows for the deconstruction of any (potentially) oppressive

institution. Critical race theory originated from a review of societal institutions through a Marxist

lens by largely White neo-Marxists, counter-culturalists, and others (Crenshaw et al., 1996).

Critical race theory has since expanded to include nearly every type of gender, race, language,

and disability issue embedded in U.S. culture, institutions, and law. Oddly, current scholarly

detractors of critical race theory have complained that some intellectuals are focusing so much

on race that class has taken a back seat (Dixson, 2018).

Critical race theory-related discomfort appears to sprout from the threat of the potential

alteration or elimination of the White-dominant society's unique social privilege. Critical race

theory, whether as a scholarly pursuit or alluded to as a suggestion for more open discussion and

debate, is dangerous in its potential for the shedding of light on oppression, the exposure of

which would presage change. An examination (if not dismantling) of the status quo will

undoubtedly be uncomfortable for those who enjoy the privileges therein.

The sad reality is that altruism is simply not adequate motivation for a society to reflect

upon itself and engage in change. As Hill et al. (2019) pointed out, talking about issues and then

moving on does not equate to lasting, substantive change. Accordingly, a mandated curriculum based on the truths of our collective history is necessary for K-12, along with training and guidelines for teachers for how to approach these topics in a fair, balanced way. This process should outline which information is taught at which grade level and how culturally relevant pedagogy can be effective for different ages. Perhaps if these mandated curricula begin with the positive, uplifting stories that indeed glorify America and its ability to overcome adversity, other lessons—or lessons within those lessons—can be more palatable to the opposition.

Opposition to Critical Race Theory

Ray and Gibbons (2021) stated that critical race theory's opponents fear that critical race theory admonishes all White people for being oppressors while classifying all Black people as hopelessly oppressed victims. Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) identified postmodernism (and thus, critical race theory) as "ultimately a form of cynicism," since it "took the modernists' relatively measured, if pessimistic, skepticism of tradition, religion, and Enlightenment-era certainty…to extremes" ("Postmodernism" section). In another example of current opposition to the counternarratives that emerge from critical race theory, MacDonald (2020) posited the theory that American Blacks are shot more often by police than Whites, but not because biased police are systematically killing Black Americans in fatal shootings. Rather, MacDonald suggested suggests that Blacks' own behavior causes their communities to have a heavier police presence, leading to more (violent) interactions.

It is imperative to distinguish critical race theory, which is taught at the university level, primarily in a legal context, from critical thinking, which most educators would likely agree should be the cornerstone of education from kindergarten forward. Critical thinking is a foundational skill in the learning process, since this skill leads to other vitally important skills

that help students learn: the acquisition of knowledge is transformed into skills and competencies (Renatovna & Renatovna, 2021). Perhaps the most important of these competencies are "organization, rationality, purposefulness, reflexivity, analytics, and logic" (Renatovna & Renatovna, 2021, p. 4891). A review of multiple frameworks for 21st-century skills for students identifies critical thinking and associated skills time after time (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022). Critical thinking, and its association with creativity, collaboration, flexibility, communication, problem-solving, digital competency, adaptability, self-direction, social and intercultural skills, systems thinking, and scientific thinking, among many others are associated with culturally responsive pedagogy, as this type of teaching offers students to exercise curiosity, debate ideas with their peers, and think critically and creatively about the world around them.

Public school educators continue to insist that critical race theory is not a part of the K-12 curriculum in the U.S.; rather, culturally responsive pedagogy frames the work teachers do, helping them not only to present a diverse curriculum but to be cognizant of and sensitive to a diverse group of learners and their needs. Greene (2021) pointed out that, whether critical race theory is the right term for what is happening in schools, the issue is still an issue: "Parents are upset about something; telling them they're using the wrong name for it doesn't really further the conversation." Defenders of culturally relevant pedagogy may insist that the whole debate is a conservative smokescreen for political gain. Admittedly, the originator of the critical race theory-in-schools debate, Rufo, acknowledged that the movement to turn the critical race theory brand toxic came from nothing (Green, 2021).

As to the cynicism of critical race theory or culturally responsive pedagogy, perhaps the real cynicism is the belief that young people do not have enough agency to decide for themselves which information is likely true and how (or if) they want to act upon it now or in the future.

Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) made the case for critical race theory as a necessary framework in education: They point out that the work of scholars like W.E.B. DuBois and Winthrop Jordan should have been sufficient to expose racism for the unfounded ideology that it is, but belief in the racial supremacy of Whites survived nonetheless (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). This statement seems to justify the need for a more critical, current review of racism and racist institutions in the United States. The authors then admit that racist ideology outlasted the emancipation of slaves and turned into Jim Crow laws, racial redlining, and legal segregation persisting into the mid-1960s and, in some ways, beyond (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020).

Pluckrose and Lyndsay (2020) also explained Bell's (2008) interest convergence theory and call Bell's scholarship a dismal view that denies the possibility that any moral progress had been made since the Jim Crow era. Rather than cynicism, Bell offered a realistic view that White people consciously or unconsciously do all in their power to ensure dominion and maintain their control (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). When questioning the traditionally understood "objective reality," the agenda is not cynicism, but a dive into a newly discovered, ever-changing reality that reflects the complexity of history, race, gender, and class on our world.

Next, in MacDonald's example, the claim that police shootings of Black Americans are not truly problematic leaves much of the context and nuance out of the issue:

> Minority populations are disproportionately exposed to conditions such as concentrated poverty, racism, limited educational and occupational opportunities, and other aspects of social and economic disadvantage contributing to violence…These disparities are sustained, in part, due to the persistence of unfavorable social conditions, and because exposure to childhood trauma and adversity is associated with increased risk for victimization and perpetration of violence, both within one's own lifetime and across

generations. (Sheats et al., 2013, p. 2)

An ethical, honest review of this issue provides evidence not for blame, per se, but for ways to comprehend and address multi-generational oppression on a different level and in a variety of contexts.

An acknowledgement of the pendulum's swing toward so-called "cancel culture" is in order. A cadre of journalists, legal scholars, teachers, professors, and activists submitted a letter to *Harper's Magazine* tackling the belief that "the free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted" (Ackerman et al., 2020, para. 2). They recognized that while many expect this "censoriousness" from the radical right, liberal values are producing less tolerance of opposing viewpoints, leading to "a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty" (Ackerman et al., 2020, para. 2). They claimed that "calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought" (commonly observed as "cancel culture") are a threat to democracy (Ackerman et al., 2020, para. 2). Indeed, this extreme reaction to bigotry can turn reasonable people away from the more profound and complex cause of social justice.

An article appearing on the website for the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression buttresses the argument against extreme reactions against perceived offenses by highlighting a response by Stanford University (2023) to an alert received via the Protected Identity Harm alert system (2023). The system purports to provide a process to address incidents where a community member experiences harm because of who they are and how they show up in the world. A student affairs representative could promote resolution by engaging in or facilitating mediated conversations, restorative justice sessions, or Indigenous circle practices. Piro and

Morey (2023) argued that Stanford's efforts to respond to a picture of a student reading Mein

Kamf is inappropriate not only because the book is available the Stanford library and appears on

a humanities course syllabus, but because

> administrators with disciplinary authority formally notifying students they've been
>
> accused of 'harm,' when they've done nothing more than read a book, and asking them to
>
> 'acknowledge' what they've done and 'change' their ways through restorative justice-
>
> type exercises undoubtedly chills student speech. (para. 1)

Further opposition from legal scholars appears in the transcript of a panel discussion at

the 2020 National Lawyers Convention. McGinnis (2021), noted that "capacious liberalism" has

distorted society's understanding of rights and responsibilities. McGinnis claimed that far-left

ideology is more of a dogma that asserts that "all that has gone before is tainted, and society

should be completely remade to reflect this essential truth" (2021, para. 2). This may be an

extreme claim as well, since social justice activists claim society needs improvement, not

complete remaking.

Racism and Social Science

Racism is an arbitrary construct based on "immutable traits" to maintain a caste system in

which individuals with certain characteristics have a place and a value with society (Wilkerson,

2020, p. 17). However, opponents to the presentation of sensitive historical topics may believe

that the idea of racism is too offensive or even outdated. However, this would depend on the

definition of racism, which has shifted over time, making the term "one of the most contentious

and misunderstood in American culture" (p. 68). While social scientists define racism as bias and

power, it has come to signify to many whether a person is good or not. This, in turn, leads

liberals to identify racists and conservatives to take offense at being pegged as something they

believe they are not. The problem with this dichotomy is that it is false; it is such an extreme reaction on both sides that society remains distracted from seeing the bigger picture and rooting out institutionalized racism. Wilkerson compared the current racial landscape to an old house inherited from a family member: "We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now. And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands" (p. 16). Finally, critical race theory

> does not attribute racism to White people as individuals or even to entire groups of people. Simply put, Critical race theory states that the U.S. social institutions (e.g., the criminal justice system, education system, labor market, housing market, and healthcare system) are laced with racism embedded in laws, regulations, rules, and procedures that lead to differential outcomes by race. (Ray & Gibbons, 2021, para. 2)

Therefore, when White people perceive CRT as an attack on their personal selves, it indicates that "many Americans are not able to separate their individual identity as an American from the social institutions that govern us—these people perceive themselves *as* the system" (Ray & Gibbons, 2021, para. 2). While critical Whiteness (Matias et al., 2014) could be perceived as an alarming proposition for changing how race is taught in public schools, it does not have to be the central element of change; nor does it have to happen right away. It certainly does not have to be an attack on Whites.

Secondary Social Studies Curricula

When North Carolina's State Board of Education approved new "unpacking documents" for the state's social studies standards for grades 6-12, pushback was immediate. First, opponents feared that the standards were not specific enough to prevent districts from implementing different curricula (Granados, 2021). Republican Board members voted against the standards,

saying that they painted America in too much of a negative light without celebrating the country's achievements, while proponents said that the standards gave a more accurate view of the country's racial history (Granados, 2021). State Superintendent of Public Instruction Catherine Truitt commented that critical race theory is the "idea that every aspect of American society is racist ...[and that] proponents also believe that…our nation will always be flawed" (Granados, 2021).

Lintner (2018) described controversy being about authentic topics, "raising compelling questions that are approached and answered from different perspectives premised on one's social, cultural, regional, and political values, beliefs, and biases" (p. 14). Controversy is a personal endeavor that "piques curiosity; the desire to dig a bit deeper, to learn a bit more" (Lintner, 2018, p. 14). Educators often speak of authenticity: the importance of using realia over recitation in language classrooms; the need for project-, problem-, or passion-based learning to develop critical thinking skills and motivate students to learn; and the effect that teacher-student relationships can have on learning if they are, indeed, authentic. The social studies curriculum can provide students with authentic critical thinking tasks that will prepare them for adult life, but if the curriculum does not require—or permit—true authenticity, the development of these additional, crucial skills may be lost.

While Lintner (2018) celebrated constructive uses of controversy in the classroom, he also warned against the presentation or identification of "stark divisions" such as "winner vs. loser, good vs. evil, right vs. wrong" (p. 15). In fact, these types of categories for historical events and cultural concepts can only hinder critical thinking. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) encouraged educators to lead students in studying controversial issues "without the assumption that they are settled in advance or that there is only one right or wrong

answer in matters of dispute" (Lintner, 2018, p. 15). Students may come in with fixed or malleable points of view about topics; therefore, multiple perspectives are important in promoting critical thinking.

National Standards

National history, civics, and social studies standards come from organizations like the National Center for History in the Schools, the National Council for the Social Studies, and the Center for Civic Education. These are frameworks that provide themes for educators to consider as they plan. The social studies standards, initially published in 2014, include 10 themes or strands:

1. Culture

2. Time, Continuity, and Change

3. People, Places, and Environments

4. Individual Development and Identity

5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

6. Power, Authority, and Governance

7. Production, Distribution, and Consumption

8. Science, Technology, and Society

9. Global Connections

10. Civic Ideals and Practices (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.).

These "highly interrelated strands" are meant to "thread through a social studies program, from grades pre-K through 12, as appropriate at each level" (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.).

The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) developed their national history

standards in 1994. Their text is available online and in print and contains information about history's significance for education citizens and standards for historical thinking, U.S. history content, and world history content (National Center for History in the Schools, n.d.). The "historical thinking standards" include the following skills:

1. Chronological Thinking

2. Historical Comprehension

3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation

4. Historical Research Capabilities

5. Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making (National Center for History in the Schools, n.d.).

U.S. history content standards are divided into eras, with names like "Three Worlds Meet," "Expansion and Reform," and "Postwar United States" (National Center for History in the Schools, n.d.). A sampling of topics includes the American labor movement; religious and social reform in the antebellum period, American federalism, "the struggle for race and gender equality" (National Center for History in the Schools, n.d.), all of which constitute key ideas in American history and culture.

The Center for Civic Education organized their content standards around five questions:

1. What are civic life, politics, and government?

2. What are the foundations of the American political system?

3. How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?

4. What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs?

5. What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy? (Center for Civic

Education)

The constancy of the themes embedded in each organization's standards suggest that states' adopted standards would be similar.

State Standards

North Carolina

North Carolina's new social studies standards (2021) include unpacking documents that, they warn, are not exhaustive lists of topics or concepts. Some objectives—categorized under behavioral science, civics and government, economics, geography, and history—seem to mirror the themes presented in the national standards:

- AH.B.1.1 Critique multiple perspectives of American identity in terms of American exceptionalism (p. 3).

- AH.B.1.3 Critique multiple perspectives of American identity in terms of oppression, stereotypes, diversity, inclusion, and exclusion.

- AH.B.1.6 Explain how the experiences and achievements of minorities and marginalized peoples have contributed to American identity over time in terms of the struggle against bias, racism, oppression, and discrimination.

- AH.B.1.7 Explain how slavery, xenophobia, disenfranchisement, and intolerance have affected individual and group perspectives of themselves as Americans.

- AH.B.2.2 Distinguish religious beliefs and human reasoning in terms of their influence on American society and culture.

- AH.C&G.1.2 Critique the extent to which various levels of government used power to expand or restrict the freedom and equality of American people.

- AH.C&G.1.4 Explain how racism, oppression, and discrimination of indigenous

peoples, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups have impacted equality and power in America.

- AH.C&G.2.2 Explain the development and realignment of political parties as reflected in key elections.

- AH.E.1.1 Deconstruct multiple perspectives of American capitalism in terms of affluence, poverty, and mobility (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021, pp. 1-53).

California

In grade 11, students in California study American history and geography. In grade 12, they study principles of American democracy and economics. Of their history standards, the California Department of Education (CDE) states that eleventh graders

> trace the change in the ethnic composition of American society; the movement toward equal rights for racial minorities and women; and the role of the United States as a major world power….They learn that…the rights and freedoms we enjoy are not accidents, but the results of a defined set of political principles that are not always basic to citizens of other countries. (CDE, 2000, p. 47)

Some eleventh-grade standards include:

- 11.3 Students analyze the role religion played in the founding of America, its lasting moral, social, and political impacts, and issues regarding religious liberty.

- 11.6 Students analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the federal government.

- 11.9 Students analyze U.S. foreign policy since World War II.

- 11.10 Students analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights.

- 11.11 Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society (California Department of Education, 2000, pp. 48-53).

Ethnic Studies Curriculum in California

Although California is not immune to the culture wars that have been taking place across the nation, the state did propose and pass a bill that requires students to take an ethnic studies course to fulfill graduation requirements (Fensterwald, 2022). For now, the state has created an ethnic studies curriculum that is optional for districts to use and although the requirement begins in 2025, many high schools already have such courses or their districts have chosen to begin offering ethnic studies now (Fensterwald, 2022). A 2016 study of 1,405 at-risk students in the San Francisco Unified School District suggested that ethnic studies participation had a positive effect on student attendance, cumulative grade point average, and credits earned (Dee & Penner, 2016). One potential reason for this success could be that culturally responsive pedagogy attacks stereotypes head on, creating a stereotype-threat buffer to address how students feel about how others perceive their academic competency, thus offering more room for authentic engagement.

The ethnic studies example of culturally relevant pedagogy in practice is "theorized to positively affect student outcomes through the creation of a relevant and meaningful curriculum that affirms students' identities, draws from their funds of knowledge, and builds students' critical intellectualism" (Dee & Penner, 2016, p. 5). However, other elements of culturally responsive pedagogy cannot be discounted: teachers "utilize a classroom structure in which teachers work to promote engagement by structuring collaborative, equitable, reciprocal relationships between themselves and students," which are best practices for student engagement and achievement (Dee & Penner, 2016, pp. 5-6).

Still, California is not necessarily a beacon of hope just yet. In June of 2022, a faculty committee for the University of California "shelved a draft policy to require criteria for high school ethnic studies courses that critics characterized as narrow, ideological and activist" (Fensterwald, 2022). The curriculum draft has been rewritten multiple times, with no agreement in sight. Hong (2020) pointed out that perhaps 70% of the UC governance structure is White, so educators and scholars in ethnic studies practitioners are disproportionately not at the table when decisions are made, thus bringing the problem full circle by continuing to exclude the teachers themselves from curricular decision-making, especially those teachers of color.

Attitudes on Teaching Controversial Topics and Student Agency

This brief investigation of state standards on opposite sides of the country illustrates the variations in social studies curricula. What is likely more varied is what is actually taught in the classroom. A closer look at the standards shows that teachers have a lot of room to teach a particular concept. For instance, North Carolina's Objective AH.B.1.1 for high school American history is laid out in Figure 1. Example topics listed are only a fraction of what a teacher could choose from when teaching helping students "demonstrate the ability to evaluate the extent to which individualism and conformity have influenced American identity of various groups" (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021, p. 7). Two teachers in the same building may choose to talk about "hobo culture" over the "cult of domesticity" if time does not allow for both topics.

Figure 1

Layout of Objective AH.B.1.4

Objective	Mastery of the Objective	Students Will Understand	Students Will Know	Example Topics	Examples of Formative Assessment
AH.B.1.4 Critique multiple perspectives of American identity in terms of individualism and conformity	Students must be able to demonstrate the ability to evaluate the extent to which individualism and conformity have influenced American identity of various groups. Students must be able to make these evaluations by using material that expresses views from multiple perspectives.	Groups within a nation may conform, work towards change and reform, or flee to avoid persecution A nation's identity may be expressed through acts of conformity or individual independence and self-reliance Groups and individuals' idea of a nation's identity may be based on the extent to which they conform or stand out from cultural norms A nation's identity may be viewed through multiple perspectives by how the individuals within it express their individualism or conformity to the ideals and values it holds	How ideas of conformity influenced American identity How ideas of individualism influenced American identity Multiple perspectives of American identity	Yeoman farmer "Rugged Individualism" Cult of Domesticity Entrepreneurship Suburbia Transcendentalism Flappers Roaring 20's Hobo culture Utopian societies Harlem Renaissance Booker T. Washington vs. W.E.B. Du Bois Baby Boomers Development of free public education Beatniks Counterculture Anti-Vietnam protests	Students critique the perspectives of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Du Bois in terms of how each of their views conformed or conflicted with America's identity. Students read lyrics and listen to several Civil Rights era and Vietnam War protest songs. With the understanding that protest is typically an example of non-conformity, students are asked to critique the lyrics in terms of conformity to the ideals of the American identity.

Note: This figure is a screenshot from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's American history unpacking document (2021, p. 7).

In their study on social studies teachers' attitudes toward teaching race and gender, Martell and Stevens (2018) began by describing how educators teach race and gender through social studies. First, history textbooks depict racial violence as accepted by African Americans and perpetrated by a "a few bad people rather than a large system of violence" (p. 276). Women—especially women of color—are underrepresented in social studies lessons (Martell & Stevens, 2018). Students appear to be interested in hearing more about women and people of color in history and become frustrated when their social studies classes are "race invisible" and

their textbooks are "inaccurate" (p. 277). Conversely, proactively race-conscious teachers have a positive impact on students (Martell & Stevens, 2018).

The authors also surveyed 1,868 high school social studies teachers from 127 school districts in Massachusetts, finding the following:

- Teachers reported feeling comfortable teaching race and gender.

- Teachers agreed that "race and gender inequity should be addressed in the social studies classroom".

- Teachers reported that they regularly cover these topics in their classrooms.

- Teachers in moderate-poverty schools were more likely than peers at low- or high-poverty schools to teach about Latinx, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Indigenous people.

- Teachers agreed on the inadequacy of the curriculum concerning race and gender, as well as the need/desire for more professional training surrounding teaching these topics.

- Teachers agreed that Whites and males were the most frequently taught groups of people.

- The most frequent race-related current events included the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Native American sports mascots, immigration policy, and Hurricane Katrina.

- Teachers reported that their teaching would include more on race and gender if they had more time (Martell & Stevens, 2018, pp. 277-283).

Tannebaum (2020) investigated novice-level teachers' attitudes in the United States regarding teaching controversial political issues in the secondary classroom. Tannebaum found that novice teachers believe in preparing students for the "real world"—they view these issues as

belonging in the classroom; they consider these issues to be more related to citizenship than to social justice; and they "do not willingly include [controversial public issues] within their pedagogical decision-making without prompts to do so" (Tannebaum, 2020, p. 15).

Byford et al. (2009) suggested that "many social studies teachers neglect teaching controversial issues through discussion and interaction because of school and district policy, lack of classroom control, or discomfort with students openly discussing and debating the issues at hand" (p. 166). Teaching these topics can be seen as a "'no-win' situation," since teachers may lack the experience or ability "to harness the emotional contexts or dilemmas the students are trying to realize" (Byford et al., 2009, p. 166). These authors also suggest that teaching controversial issues combats the impact of confirmation bias, when students are more often exposed to ideas on the Internet that reflect their own ideas, many of which originate from parents and other relatives (Byford et al., 2009).

A study of Jewish-Israeli teachers, parents, and students indicated that gender, age, religiosity, level of education, and political affiliation were all closely related to attitudes about controversial classroom discussions (Gindi et al., 2021). Participants were doubtful about teachers' abilities to effectively engage in sensitive discussions, including the teachers themselves (Gindi et al., 2021). Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the authors found that "students were much more inclined toward political education in schools and want teachers to disclose their opinions much more than adults" (2021, p. 145). In short, teachers' perceptions about their readiness and/or willingness to engage in deliberate teaching of controversial issues in the classroom appear to be as diverse as the students and communities they serve. Students, though, exhibit a need for these discussions in their classrooms. Teachers' attitudes are essential to consider, but students' opinions about what they learn are equally important.

Student Agency

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Within the arguments on student agency exists a document that binds world governments to protect children's rights. With 54 articles, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted in 1989 by the UN General Assembly and "is the most widely adopted international human rights treaty in history" (UNICEF UK, 2021). The treaty establishes the "civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that all children everywhere are entitled to" and provides ways in which adults can work to ensure the observation of these rights (UNICEF UK, 2021). Article 29 of the treaty, titled, "The aims for Education," outlines the function of education in securing and protecting the rights of children. In Comment 11, the Committee recognizes the "struggle against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance," noting that these "phenomena thrive where there is ignorance, unfounded fears of racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic or other forms of difference, the exploitation of prejudices, or the *teaching or dissemination of distorted values*" (Office of Research-Innocenti, UK, 2021, 11, emphasis added).

The UNCRC further establishes the importance of education, recognizing that the primary way of combatting intolerance is to educate children with the understanding that it is their right to understand the world around them:

Education should thus be accorded one of the highest priorities in all campaigns against the evils of racism and related phenomena. Emphasis must also be placed upon the importance of teaching about racism as it has been practiced historically, and particularly as it manifests or has manifested itself within particular communities. Racist behaviour is not something engaged in only by 'others'. It is therefore important to focus on the

child's own community when teaching human and children's rights and the principle of

non-discrimination. Such teaching can effectively contribute to the prevention and

elimination of racism, ethnic discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. (Office

of Research-Innocenti, 2022, p. 11)

Respect for parents' input and influence on their children's education is paramount, but not at the

expense of the child's rights (29, 1.c.).

Finally, Comment 12 pinpoints the specific reason for ensuring such a robust education

surrounding strong cultural values: "The overall objective of Education is to maximize

the child's ability and opportunity to participate fully and responsibly in a free society" (29, 12).

In the view of the UNCRC, the child's right to "participate fully and responsibly" depends on an

education that covers controversial issues and submits to "national-level monitoring…to ensure

that children, parents and teachers can have an input in decisions relevant to Education" (29, 22).

Student Agency/Efficacy

Currently, research appears to center on two aspects of student decision-making: one is

the civic participation and curricular decision-making in higher education and the other is the

effect of education on decisions students make in their lives after the education takes place

(Brotman & Mensah, 2021). This study highlights the importance of student capacity and agency

in students' secondary school experience. To assume that students are or are not ready for a

particular issue is to ignore the diversity of the life experiences they bring with them to the

classroom. That said, with proper training, teachers can consider students' level of readiness and

differentiate this type of learning for them as they do other types of learning. If one of the goals

of teaching sensitive topics is to "engage, enrich, and challenge the student," teaching should be

intentionally designed to reach all students (Lintner, 2018, p. 17).

One way the research addresses human agency involves efficacy, or "people's beliefs about their ability to control events" Moses et al., 2020, p. 213). Efficacy is defined as:

- the ability to exercise careful consideration, or "the ability to think carefully and examine the possible effects of different options/choices before making a decision";

- self-regulation, or "the ability to manage one's emotions, behavior, and body when faced with adversity"; and

- self-reflection, or the management of "personal capabilities, quality of performance, and the meaning and reason for one's life pursuits. (Moses et al., 2020, p. 214)

While the idea of human agency has been assigned a clear definition by sociologists, scholars and educators may not have a solid grasp on the concept. Vaughn (2018) questioned whether agency is a psychological concept (motivation and confidence); a matter of social or personal development (identity); a political concept (power negotiation between students and adults); or a language use issue (speaking freely and with authority in the classroom). Although curricula are planned with students' ages and emotional/intellectual readiness in mind, there appears to be no official framework for judging or predicting student agency within the K-12 context. Instead, the literature largely contains suggestions for teachers that include gauging student readiness and teaching them the skills needed to become better at exercising agency as they grow (Moses et al., 2020; Vaughn, 2018; Williams, 2017; Zacarian & Silverstone, 2020). Within the constructivist pedagogical context, teachers can support student agency by serving as the facilitator or guide of knowledge acquisition rather than the "dispenser of knowledge" (Moses et al., 2020, p. 215). Within this model, teachers and students are co-creators of curriculum, assessments, and other aspects of learning, including classroom logistics. With restrictions on controversial or sensitive topics in school curricula, teachers may have fewer

opportunities to teach students how to own their learning and become productive citizens after all.

Finally, noting the lack of a specific framework for determining student agency, this study will attempt to add to the literature by examining teachers' attitudes about student agency in their secondary years and how the presentation or integration of controversial public issues impacts students' ability to practice exercising their agency. This information, in turn, may lead to more student voice in terms of what and how they learn, which could be especially critical within the current political climate.

The Reality of Students' Rights

North Carolina's State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Catherine Truitt, weighed in on the 2021 change in social studies curricula, stating that students, especially young students, cannot examine relationships among events or explain historical causality without a strong sense of chronology (Granados, 2021). To put Superintendent Truitt's beliefs about student agency into context, she spoke about critical race theory as an affront to her Christian values and even accused teachers of "bellyaching" about requirements to post lessons online (Granados, 2021).

Not everyone agrees with Truitt's commentary. According to the National Youth Rights Organization, some districts support student involvement in decision-making at the school or district levels (Mandal, 2020). Mandal highlighted the adoption of restorative practices in schools in Oakland, which allow students to work together to create solutions when others have hurt them. This approach has lowered the suspension rate by fostering relationships between students and adults and offering a healthy alternative to zero tolerance policies that treat students like criminals rather than giving them the tools and resources to be successful both inside and outside the classroom.

While students often serve on panels to contribute to decision-making or at least observe the process, one new phenomenon is taking root in the United States: Schools like Sudbury Valley School in Framington, Massachusetts are called "democratic schools" because students and staff share decision-making on vital issues and structures. The school's decision-making framework grants its students complete control over rules and how they are enforced (Mandal, 2020). Students are directly involved in the hiring and re-hiring of teachers, simply because students benefit from or suffer directly due to teachers' capacity.

When it comes to agency, leaders' beliefs about adults and children may affect their own decision-making and limit opportunities for students to offer input for decisions about education. However, as seen in democratic schools, a "citizenship perspective" leads adults to treat students as citizens with rights rather than "citizens 'in the making," an essential distinction in the debate on student agency (Solhaug, 2018, p. 2). Schools are fundamental in the maintenance of societies; yet, local and national governments vary in the power they exercise in determining educational policy:

> When there are tensions between the political state's interest and the interests of various groups (e.g., what subjects to teach and what knowledge to learn), the government certainly has the power to limit the influence on school outcomes from non-state actors. (p. 3)

Logically, if a citizen has rights, they have a right to information or knowledge. They have a right to think.

Finally, democratic schooling is one way to address equity in education. However, the focus of the conversation often centers upon providing an education that includes marginalized students, teaching them how to navigate certain spaces of inequity and inequality. The focus,

instead, should include—and perhaps lean heavily toward—strategies and knowledge that will allow students with societal privilege to critique, deconstruct, and rebuild institutions in such a way that democratic, equitable values are the norm in society. Anderson (2017) shared ways in which "Black respectability or 'appropriate' Black behavior doesn't seem to matter" (p. 159). In fact, "Black achievement, Black aspirations, and Black success are construed as threats" (p. 159), meaning that, despite the education a person of color receives, their success in society still depends upon what the privileged caste has internalized.

This goes for socioeconomically disadvantaged students regardless of race (although race and class often intersect for a more intense set of disadvantages. Loewen (2018) described the power of knowledge, which can change the way students of different social classes view poverty:

> Knowledge of the social-class system also reduces the tendency of Americans from other social classes to blame the victim for being poor. Pedagogically, stratification provides a gripping learning experience. Students are fascinated to discover how the upper class wields disproportionate power relating to everything from energy bills in Congress to zoning decisions in small towns. (p. 211)

Loewen (2018) blamed high-school curricula for college students who are "terrible sociologists … [who] blame the poor for not being successful" (p. 204). If social class (especially when intersected with race) correlates with access to education, health, medical care, nutrition, and more, it should be addressed beyond the middle-class phenomenon in America. Instead,

> We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class of necessity in every society, to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks. (Loewen, 2018, p. 208)

In an effort to connect the ideals of the UNCRC to student agency/efficacy in curricular decision-making in present-day public education in the United States, it is imperative to review beliefs about the purpose of education, what and how students are taught, and how equity and equality are addressed in schools. If society does not share the values of the UNCRC and if governing bodies see education as a perpetuation of the status quo, students will never gain a voice in decisions about what and how they learn. In fact, if students are never allowed to address the racist or classist underpinnings in American society, they may not see the need for expressing their views.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

Topic Development: The Pandemic, Social Inequity, and School Responsibility

This study centers largely on intersectionality to "counter hegemony, cultural domination, and master narratives" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021, p. 21). Specifically, the intersectional qualitative methodology of the study serves to raise the consciousness of the public to educational issues, contribute to the literature, and inform educational practices that illuminate the "true purpose of education…[which is] to educe or bring forth one's true power" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021, p. 21).

Student and School Agency

Part of the aim for this study was to highlight how adults take over the discussion about what and how students learn. Adults believe they know what is best for children, and that concept has merit. However, adults' voices cannot be the only ones educators listen to as decisions are made for the nation's children. Students' experiences and thoughts matter, too, but, ultimately, their role in these discussions has remained undetermined, and this study sought to clarify that. Schools' autonomy cannot exist only when the public is satisfied with their provision of service; rather, implicit trust is necessary for all decision-making that occurs regarding the education of young people. The topic of student agency was essential for contributing something new to the field and study it from a new angle. The political climate has only worsened since the study began; therefore, the topic is more relevant now than before.

A personal belief that education can change one's trajectory in life, regardless of where they start, led this researcher to investigate the purpose of public education and its connection to social justice. If the study could show that the purpose of education is (or should be) to advance

social justice and "counter hegemony," perhaps a cogent argument could emerge that would convince others of the righteousness of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Concurrent Transformative Design and Data

The study uses both quantitative and qualitative data from surveys to construct a composite description of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenon is the unique experience of existing at the center of teaching and learning as teachers and students during a time when political controversy surrounds the way teaching and learning occur. Because this study is framed within critical race theory, intersectionality is also a focus. Because "interlocking and mutually reinforcing systems of domination sustain themselves," (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 5), analyzing attitudes about student agency in curricular decision-making requires a look a race, gender, and class as (1) the underlying cause of institutional oppression throughout United States history; (2) topics for discussion in social sciences courses in the secondary grades; (3) reasons for controversy surrounding curricula in public schools; and (4) the potential source of attitudes of teachers themselves.

Successful identification of the phenomenon required analysis of participants' responses regarding their experiences and develop a narrative of the commonalities of the experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, qualitative research can be challenging because of some subjectivity required to identify "conscious and dysconscious happenings" and to understand how a variety of cultural forces can impact people's behaviors, interactions, values, and attitudes (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 7).

The intersectional analytical framework, while providing strength for the researcher's conclusions, is more about finding more causality questions for further research than for identifying causality in the current study (Almeida, 2018; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

Still, finding and explaining particular themes is not always a clean, bias-free process when working qualitatively; quantitative data were collected to help offset this challenge and make patterns easier to identify and explain. Further, the concurrent transformative design of the study allowed for simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data, with the objective of integrating the data as it was interpreted, supported by the critical race theory framework (Kroll & Neri, 2009).

Setting and Participants

This study is politically important and employs stratified purposeful data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants include secondary social sciences teachers across the country, from 35 states, with the majority hailing from California and North Carolina. Teachers learned of the survey through social media posts and word of mouth from other educators. Initial survey responses indicated a less diverse representation of the population of educators in the United States, but more time and more social media postings helped to foster more diversity in respondents.

States of Interest

North Carolina and California are of particular interest to the researcher because of time spent as an educator in both. As a literacy coach, extensive work with schools in Texas has been insightful as well; however, the main interest for this study remains within North Carolina and California. School leadership experience in both states prompted design for a study that might answer questions about the differences and similarities observed in educational policy and political ideology surrounding public education. For instance, an ethnic studies curriculum has been implemented in voluntarily in some regions in California with some initial success (Dee & Penner, 2016; Fensterwald, 2022) while, in stark contrast, North Carolina's educational system

still struggles with segregation (McClain, 2014). That is not to say that California does not experience issues of inequity; rather, it highlights some of the educational priorities and deficiencies of each state.

Differences like these do not necessarily suggest a great chasm in pedagogy and politics in the two states, but there appear to be factors that affect teaching and learning within different political milieux. Admittedly, voices against critical race theory and similar topics are loud in each state; however, the educational systems differ in everything from English Learner legislation to unions. Leadership in public education varies as well: Catherine Truitt (North Carolina Superintendent of Education) strongly opposes teaching history with critical race theory in mind (Granados, 2021). Tony Thurmond (State Superintendent of Education in California) has not openly complained of "bellyaching teachers" (Granados, 2021b); rather, the California Teachers Association supports him (Freedberg, 2022). A comparison of attitudes from both states can provide unique insight about comparing a limited number of responses, predominantly from North Carolina and California, but from 35 states in total.

Sampling Procedures

The survey respondents are criterion-based. The researcher's interest lies in the attitudes of current teachers of social sciences at the secondary level. The researcher shared the surveys on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and solicited responses by tagging or posting in groups with such themes as social sciences teaching. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, a smaller sample size is appropriate (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

The National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.-a) lists the number of social sciences teachers in the United States in 2015-16 as 108,800. This would suggest a sample size of 383 for a confidence level of 95% with an interval of 5 (Creative Research Solutions, n.d.), which was

not achieved in this study. Because the teachers who responded were fewer than expected, and they reported teaching a variety of grade levels and subjects, the sampling size of 144 was not adequate for the desired confidence level and some correlations were present in the data. However, qualitative data strengthened the study.

Instrumentation and Measures

This study used one survey instrument, a Web-based questionnaire with quantitative and qualitative questions that sought to gather information from teachers of secondary-level social sciences courses at the regular and advanced levels. Quantitative questions covered demographics and some aspects of attitudes. The qualitative piece included open-ended questions. The survey corresponded well to the mixed-methods design, allowing for the "[systematic and purposeful combination of] fixed and flexible design components" (Kroll & Neri, 2009, p. 37). Moreover, a survey was appropriate for the participant sample for ease of data collection and analysis, as well as contributing to the sense of anonymity in responses. The survey was piloted by non-participants who took the surveys and responded with commentary about the study, as well as minor edits for readability and time commitment of the respondent.

Reliability and Validity of the Study

Triangulation or Crystallization

Validity and reliability appear to be a moving target in research, especially when the topic is a relatively new or less explored one: Creswell and Poth (2017) mentioned "evidence of evolving thinking" and a scarcity of canons in the area of reliability and validity (p. 254). Triangulation of several strategies is a highly effective way to produce reliability and validity in a research study, as it fosters confidence in the results (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Triangulation suggests that "multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes" provide a foundation for

reliability and validity (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 256). However, one might consider

crystallization of data, especially if the study lends itself to a more complex narrative with

nuances that might "converge, diverge, reflect, refract, [or] bounce" off one another to generate

that narrative (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, pp. 154-155).

In a study like this one, it is tempting to follow Wolcott (1990) in trying to "understand

rather than convince," since data in this study is largely based upon the perceptions and opinions

of those surveyed; quantifiable data is reserved mainly for the demographics side of the survey

(Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 257). However, it is essential to understand *and* convince, requiring

more work on the interpretation of the data, paired with examination of connections between

quantitative and qualitative data, and triangulation to prove those connections. In this study, there

is room for interpretation and evolution of ideas as the research within is likely to "raise new

possibilities, open up new questions, [and] stimulate new dialogue" (p. 257).

Bias is a challenge in this study, simply because of the controversial nature of the topic

and the passion with which this researcher approaches the work. Gibbs (2012) pointed out that a

researcher should have a good rapport with research participants. Indeed, because this study is

"based on subjective, interpretive and contextual data," there is a suggestion of potentially

differing levels of reliability if there is not balance among them the different types of data used

(Thomson, 2011, p. 78). Thomson described the balance of qualitative and quantitative results

with precision:

> Quantitative results provide me with hard facts and figures to validate and generate
>
> theory. However, a qualitative analysis uncovers a subjective viewpoint at the very heart
>
> of these facts and figures….When dealing with issues that involve the human thought
>
> process that is affected by the beliefs and values of the individual we as researchers must

understand that there's more to the answer than a number between one and seven. (2011, p. 80)

Qualitative responses in this section offered respondents a chance to explain their attitudes in their own words, while quantitative responses homed in on quantifiable data that could more easily represent patterns of thought. Each type of question was essential to the study. However, qualitative research appears to require more triangulation of data to make up for the potential skepticism about the "trustworthiness" of storytelling, as opposed to an acceptance of quantitative research as straightforward, accurate, and replicable (Stahl & King, 2020).

Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography necessitates a fairly comprehensive understanding of institutional privilege and oppression in society; however, it is essential for the researcher to engage in reflexivity, or critical reflection, regarding such controversial issues, conscientiously avoiding bias when possible (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). One consideration is the researcher's own stance toward the purpose of the research. As these authors suggested, however noble it may be to want to "give voice" to the marginalized, it is more appropriate to treat research as a "making space for perspectives that differ from what has been historically centered as 'normal'" (p. 155). "Giving voice" requires researchers to allow participants into the decision-making process for what is studied and how (p. 156).

Data Collection

In order to answer the overarching questions about the who, what, and why of decision-making regarding culturally responsive teaching—specifically in the social sciences—this study asked teachers to respond to statements about student agency, controversial topics in the classroom, and the preparedness of their students. Teachers then respond to open-ended

questions about the purpose of public education, their thoughts on student agency, and beliefs and experiences surrounding the critical race theory debate. Teachers also shared quantitative data about the frequency with which they employed certain teaching methods and strategies in their classrooms, such as engaging students with primary texts, using technology, and implementing inquiry-based learning. The analysis of the data collected revealed that this series of questions created too broad a scope for the study, outside of the original goal of studying attitudes. These data points are not reported.

The data collected provided a launching point for later study, based on implications for moving forward with more student and teacher voice in the decision-making process. Further study could potentially extrapolate these ideas and lead to questions about teaching other subjects as well, particularly since there is a push to integrate multiple subjects, and some research suggests that even math instruction can either reproduce or disrupt race, class, and gender inequities and hierarchies within education (Martin, 2019). The survey questions were carefully constructed to provide insight into attitudes about social sciences teaching and learning; however, the intent was not to reveal causality (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021).

Combining Paradigms

Sandelowski (2000) suggested that inquiry paradigms could be combined to target the same phenomenon. In this study, some features of the "ontological (view of reality), epistemological (view of knowing and the relationship between the know and to-be-known), [and] axiological (view of what is valuable)" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 247) are apparent in questioning and data analysis.

<div align="center">

Data Analysis

</div>

The researcher extended the opportunity to participants to complete surveys and follow-

up interviews when possible; however, few additional interviews were conducted and those were by email. Then, the researcher described experiences and rationale for the study to preempt bias in interpreting survey and interview data. Following this was an examination of the responses and a coding of the results by question and responder. Next, the researcher identified nonrepetitive, significant statements, grouping those statements into themes, listing textural descriptions of the phenomena, identifying structural descriptions of the phenomena, and creating a composite of the textural and structural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This led to the development of themes. Employing transcendental phenomenology for the study allowed for a "convey[ance of] an overall essence" of those experiences reported by secondary teachers and recent graduates during a time of political controversy. Tools including Excel, JotForm, and StatPlus were used to process and compare data and create visual representations.

Expected Outcomes

The expectation was to find correlations between answers in the demographics section and those in the open-ended and Likert-scale questions regarding perspectives and beliefs. For instance, it was conceivable that teachers' years of experience and whether they teach advanced classes would correlate with their comments about student agency in curricular decision-making. Another possibility was a correlation between a teacher's religious and political affiliations and their beliefs about the teaching of controversial topics. Neither of these emerged, nor did other expected connections between attitudes, demographics, and experience.

The researcher was prepared to confront emergent design in this study, specifically after collecting and analyzing survey data and forming some initial conclusions (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Since emergent design presupposes discovery of how to conduct the study as the study is conducted, there was an expectation that some questions would not be fruitful

(Hammersly, 2022). While there was not necessarily an emergent design, some data about how teachers taught information in class (through textbooks, primary sources, debates, etc.) were excluded from the study. This information added more to the study than the original scope required for answering research questions.

Ethical Issues

Research, especially qualitative research, ultimately cannot be completely objective, even though some researchers believe that a theory should emerge from the data without influence from other theories (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Indeed, being a methodologist does not preclude doing "research without considering some fundamental philosophical issues" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, p. 25). If a researcher neglected this aspect, what would be the purpose driving the research and who would care about it?

Researcher's Perspective

The researcher's experience as an educator introduced the potential for influencing the research, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). Bracketing these experiences allows readers to "learn about the researcher's experiences [so they] can judge for themselves whether the researcher is focused solely on the participants' experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 76). Personal experience in education led this author to believe that education was a potential route out of poverty because it proved true on a personal level. Extensive study of Spanish American history, language, politics, and culture during undergraduate and master's programs set a baseline for questioning government, especially that of the United States. Within this study, epistemology plays a crucial role: the questions raised are about knowledge. How is knowledge constructed? How is it distributed and to whom? Who has a right to knowledge? How does knowledge create identity? How does it influence power? (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021)

University experiences encouraged the researcher to teach controversial topics in International Baccalaureate courses at a North Carolina high school. Students had opportunities to debate same-sex marriage and read Columbus's original Spanish-Genoese ideas about the "Indians" and his plans for them. They watched films like *La Historia Oficial*, a film the researcher's own high school teacher showed to illustrate aspects of Argentina's Dirty War. The researcher also presented at conferences so that other teachers could develop lessons for teaching controversial topics like Archbishop Óscar Romero's assassination by government-run death squads in El Salvador, simply because he fought for the impoverished and threatened the privilege of those already in positions of power and wealth.

Clearly, the researcher favors incorporating social justice into education. However, it remains unclear what that may mean and how it can be achieved. A personal belief that students have a right to develop critical thinking skills and engage in curious debate about the world around them has affected this author's educational practice. Schools should indoctrinate children; however, there does have to be some discussion of right and wrong when talking about history, even if it causes discomfort to some, and there are ways to teach children to be good human beings without indoctrinating them politically or spiritually. Moreover, schools are not the only source for social reform. Schools should not be alone in shouldering the burden of feeding, clothing, healing, and disciplining children. Instead, society must prioritize taking care of its children, especially if they plan to critique schools' implementation of strategies to do so.

A personal tendency toward searching for patterns that tie the past to the present day led to an interest in White privilege, institutionalized racism, and the possibility that older White males on school boards could potentially see danger in teaching controversial topics in schools. Additionally, based upon the nature of qualitative research—which examines people's behaviors,

beliefs, and conduct—it was essential to tread carefully in terms of ethics, in order to protect human subjects of the research. While suspicions about teachers' views on student agency and participation in the curricular decision-making process were confirmed or disproved, further study will be necessary for gaining more understanding of attitudes surrounding student agency and curricular decision-making.

Participation in this study was voluntary, as stated at the beginning of the survey. There was no inherent risk in the study and the participant was permitted to withdraw participation at any time. The website used for the study, Jotform.com, is a data collection and analysis web service. All of the site's standalone form links and embed codes are secure (SSL) by default Jotform adheres to strict European data protection laws (Jotform, 2021).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Quantitative Data Analysis

A survey was developed with qualitative and quantitative questions to gather information about secondary-level social sciences teachers' beliefs surrounding student agency in the secondary social sciences. The researcher used social media to attract participants to the survey. During the months that the survey was posted in a variety of education-related Facebook groups and on TikTok, 144 entries were submitted.

Demographic Information

All participants agreed to the conditions of the survey. The consent screen appeared first on the electronic survey, informing participants about the purpose and conditions of the survey. Participants who clicked a statement of understanding and advanced to the first question agreed to the conditions of the survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time during the survey. There was no penalty or loss of benefit to a subject if the subject chose to discontinue participation in the study. There were no inherent risks associated with participation in the survey.

The survey could be completed with complete anonymity, but the participant had the option to add contact information at the end if he or she consented to be contacted for further interviews. The contact information was available to the researcher only. Participants' responses were collected through Jotform.com, a reputable and secure service that encoded responses with encrypted transmission of data. Jotform.com observed European data collection laws to ensure privacy for participants and their data. Upon publication of the study, the data will be deleted permanently. Until that time, only the researcher will have access to the data through a secure Web portal on a secure network through a password-protected personal laptop.

Level of Education

The majority of participants (63%) reported a master's degree as the completed level of education, as seen in Figure 2. A total of 70% of respondents reported having a master's or doctoral degree. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.a.), during the 2017-18 academic year, 58% of teachers reported having earned a post-baccalaureate degree, a figure that increased from 47% since 1999-2000. In comparison with teachers at the elementary level, the national figure was higher for post-baccalaureate degrees among teachers at the secondary level, at 61% (NCES, n.d.a.). This tracks with participants in this study and could be explained by the fact that the study was targeted toward secondary teachers.

Figure 2

*Distribution of Participants' Completed Level of Education*
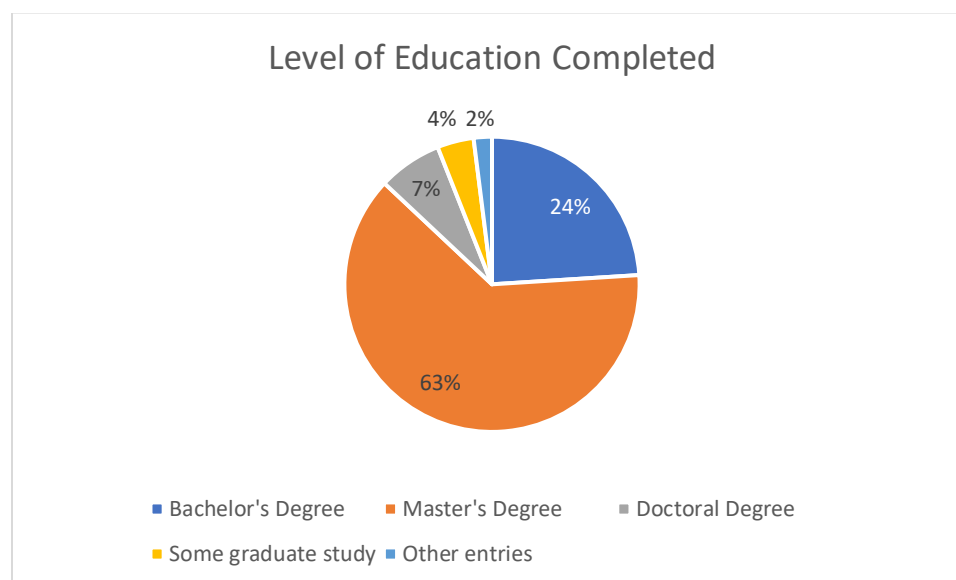
Ethnic Identity

The majority of participants (88%) chose Caucasian as their ethnic identity, while African American/Black (3%), Latino/Hispanic (4%), and other ethnicities were evenly distributed, as seen in Figure 3.

Based upon census data from 2020, this percentage seems to be skewed toward one race. In 2020, Whites made up 59.3% of the population in the United States, a drop from 10 years earlier, at 63.8% (USAFacts, 2023). The data support the well-known fact that teachers of color are underrepresented in schools in the United States. As of 2017-18, White teachers comprised 79.3% of educators in all schools and 80% in traditional public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.b.). As of 2017, teachers of color make up "just 18% of educators who serve more than 50% students of color" (Kohli, 2018, p. 40). These figures cannot be overlooked in this study, particularly because race and the competent teaching of race-related topics are at the heart of the study. However, the scope of the study only allows for the generation of future research questions regarding how the race of the teacher and their competency for teaching race and/or other controversial issues are linked. Further, not only is racial literacy for students at issue, but so is racial literacy in teacher education programs (Kohli, 2018).

Figure 3

*Distribution of Participants' Ethnic Identity*
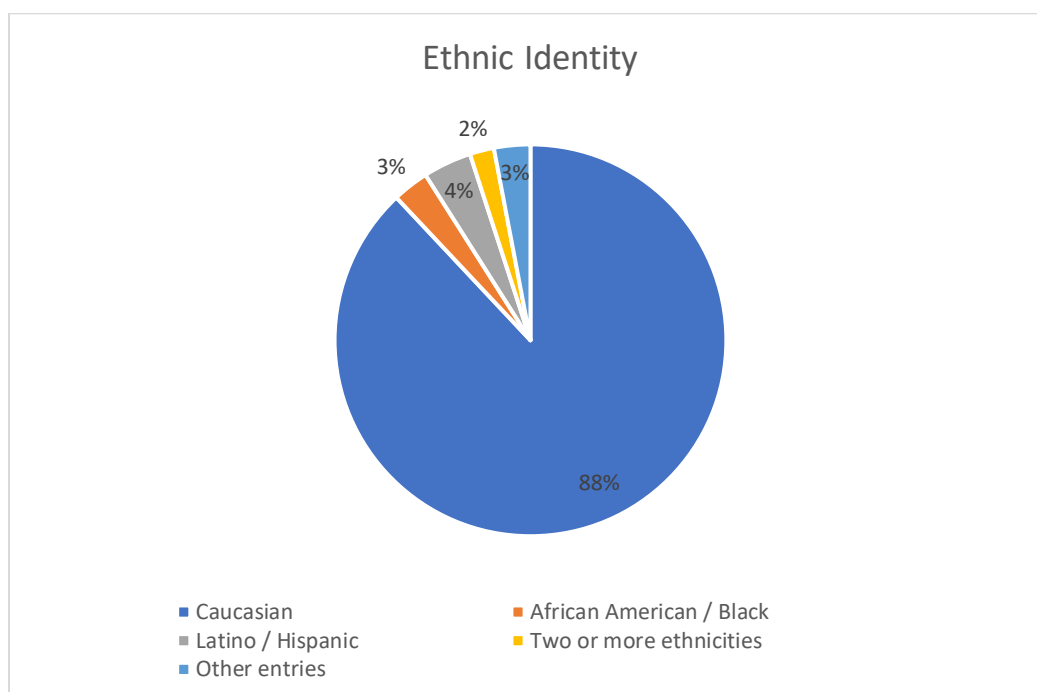
Gender Identity

When asked about gender identity, 13% indicated they were male and 85% indicated they were female, as shown in Figure 4. The National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) indicates that 76% of teachers were female in the 2017-18 academic year in all grade levels, with 89% reporting as female at the elementary level and 64% reporting as female at the secondary level. These figures are not equally comparable to this author's figures, because the survey asked about gender identity and offered several entries aside from the binary male and female for participants to select. However, the figures align in that most participants were female. One potential explanation for the number not being lower for secondary teachers is that the participants were mainly found through Facebook groups that also had much larger numbers of women as their members.

Figure 4

Distribution of Participants' Gender Identity
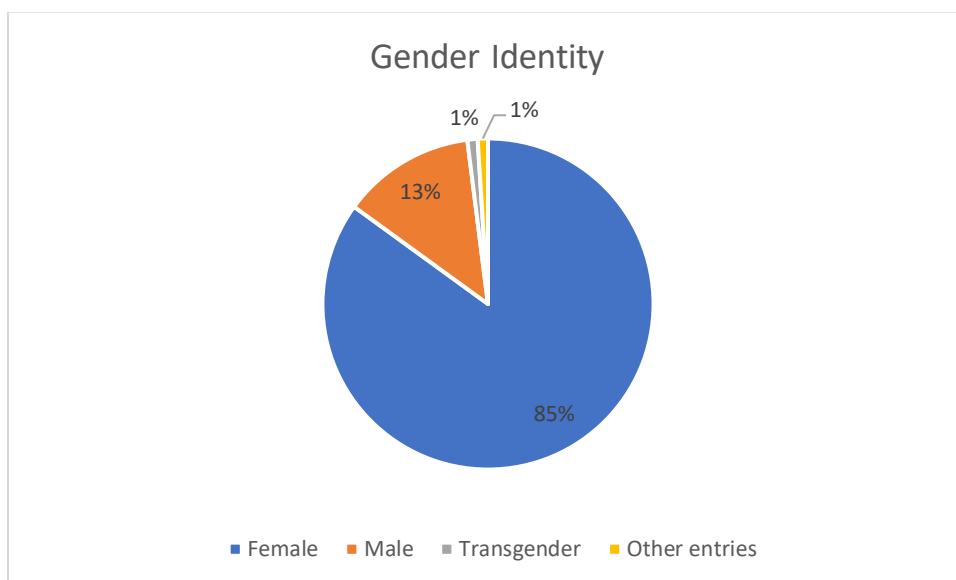

Family Background

This question was included in the survey to find out if certain conditions of participants'

upbringing could affect their attitudes and practices in the classroom. The question asked how long the participant's family had been in the United States. This question was designed to reveal whether there was any correlation between the children or grandchildren of immigrants and their willingness to tackle controversial issues in their classrooms with more frequency. This question also could have potentially led to more information about the underlying biases of participants whose families were established in the United States with enough distance in time to not be as relevant an issue in their own lives, attitudes, and teaching decisions.

As shown in Figure 5, most participants (77%) indicated their families had been in the United States for at least three generations, while 20% of participants were either the child or grandchild of immigrants. This question had 155 responses because the instructions read, "Check all that apply." The data for this question were a bit more challenging to parse out, simply because of the multiple options and the inclusion of all parents and grandparents in the answers.

Figure 5

*Distribution of Participants' Family Background*
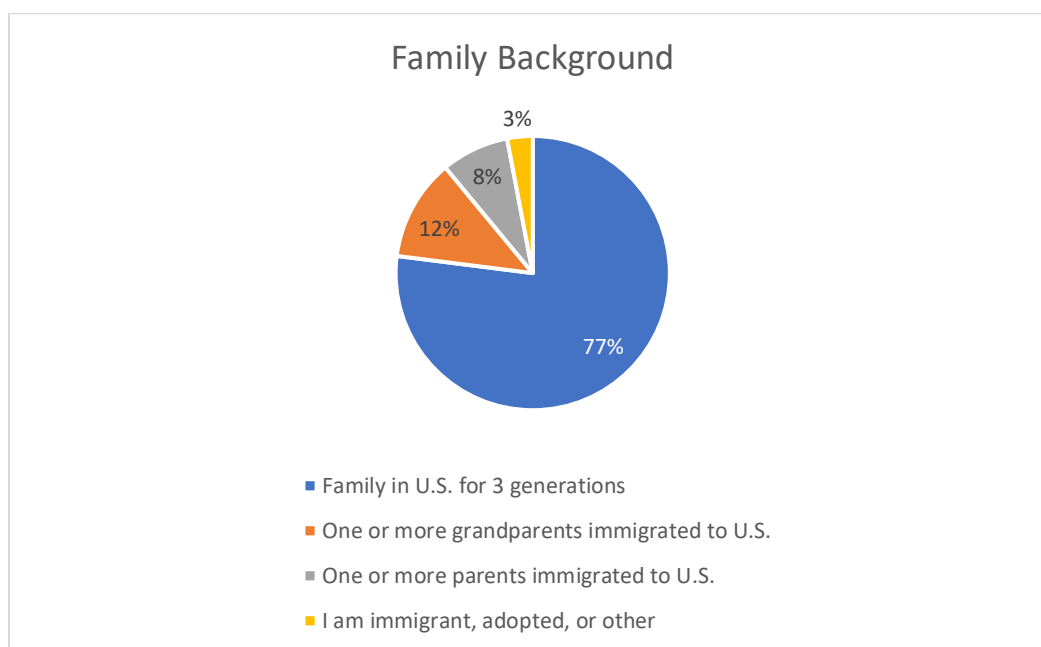
Socioeconomic Upbringing

This question was included in the survey to determine whether or not a participant's socioeconomic experiences growing up could potentially affect their attitudes and practices in the classroom. For instance, if a teacher grew up in relative poverty, perhaps he or she would be more open to discussing issues about class and economic oppression in their classrooms.

This comparison requires some math and some educated guesses about teachers, especially since age was not collected in the demographics section of this survey. First, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.c.), the average age of teachers in 2017-18 was 42.4 and the median age was 41.4, with 56.9% of teachers falling into the category of 30-49 years. This suggests that at least half of teachers in the United States were born in the mid-1970s. With this in mind, a dive into socioeconomic distribution in the United States in the 1970s reveals that 61% of adults fell into the middle-class income tier, while 25% were low-income and 14% were upper-income (Kochlar & Sechopoulous, 2022).

Figure 6 illustrates participants' responses about the socioeconomic status they experienced growing up. Nearly half of the teachers who responded to this study indicated they grew up in a middle-class background, while the next largest group was lower-middle class at 32%. According to the Pew Research Center, if one factors in the shrinking of the middle class and the expansion of the other two major classes over time, the information collected in the survey seems to line up: The middle class dropped to 50% in 2021, while the lower class increased to 29% (Kochlar & Sechopoulous, 2022). One issue with comparing this data directly is that the survey offered more options, so not all data will line up. Still, it seems to be a fairly representative sample of the population. Admittedly, not everyone in the study grew up in the United States, so this may skew the figures a bit more.

Figure 6

Distribution of Participants' Socioeconomic Upbringing

Socioeconomic Upbringing

1%
9%
13%
32%
45%

■ Lower   ■ Lower-middle   ■ Middle   ■ Upper-middle   ■ Upper
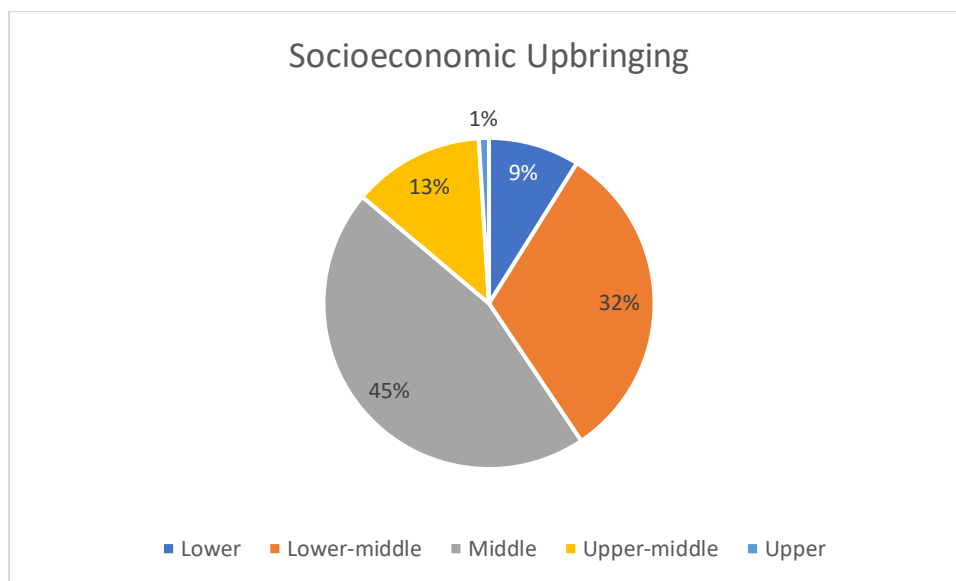
Religious Upbringing or Experience

Participants also shared the religion they experienced in childhood. This was also a question with the directions to "check all that apply." The purpose of this question, again, was to identify any correlation between participants' upbringing and their attitudes and teaching practices. Figure 7 shows that 79% of participants checked "Mainstream Christianity (Catholicism, Protestantism)," and other choices were more evenly distributed. Non-mainstream Christianity referred to Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, or other similar religions; this distinction was indicated in the answer choice.

When the Pew Research Center produced statistics regarding religious affiliation in the United States, they offered somewhat different categories than this question did. A comparison shows that the results seem similar: Pew reports that 70.6% of Americans are Christian, including Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Historically Black Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox Christian, Jehovah's Witness, and Other Christian (*Religion in America*,

2022). The participants in this study would total 83% had their responses been coded to align with Pew's statistics. This could be an interesting question for additional research: what percentage of teachers are affiliated with which religion, or any at all? How has that number changed and does their religiosity exceed that of the public? What does that have to do with median teacher age?

Figure 7

Distribution of Participants' Religious Upbringing or Experience
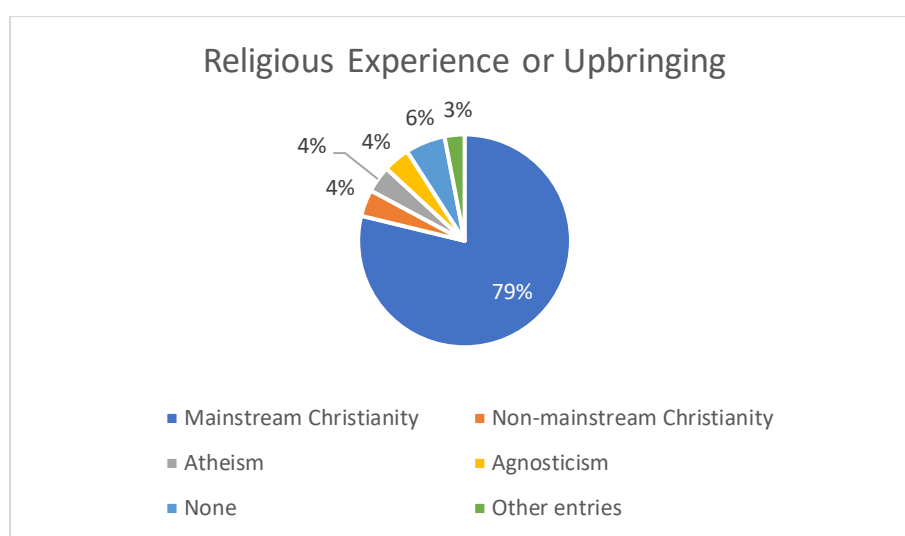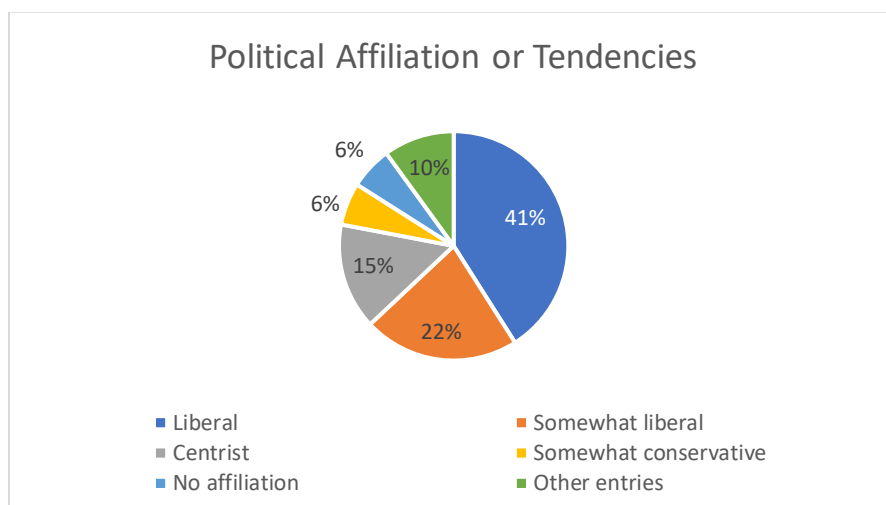

Political Affiliation

Political affiliation was more varied. As displayed in Figure 8, 41% of participants reported liberal values or beliefs. Other top entries were "Somewhat liberal" and "Centrist." While Gallup, Inc. (2022) collected political affiliation data in the United States on a regular basis, one chart showed that the data change monthly. Political affiliation is a moving target, so there may be no way to know for sure how representative this study's participants were for the greater population. That said, right around the time this survey was circulated to teachers across the U.S., Republicans were at 30% of the population, Independents were at 42%, and Democrats were at 26% (Gallup, Inc., 2022). These were the only three categories in this particular poll,

while the survey contained more.

Figure 8

Distribution of Participants' Political Affiliation or Tendencies

Political Affiliation or Tendencies

- Liberal 41%
- Somewhat liberal 22%
- Centrist 15%
- Somewhat conservative 6%
- No affiliation 6%
- Other entries 10%

States

Participants from 35 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey. As shown in Figure 9, teachers from Texas, California, and North Carolina were the most frequent respondents and other states had too few respondents to be represented individually on the chart.

Figure 9

Distribution of States in which Participants Currently Teach

State Currently Teaching

- Texas 13%
- California 11%
- North Carolina 8%
- Virginia 6%
- Illinois 6%
- Other 56%
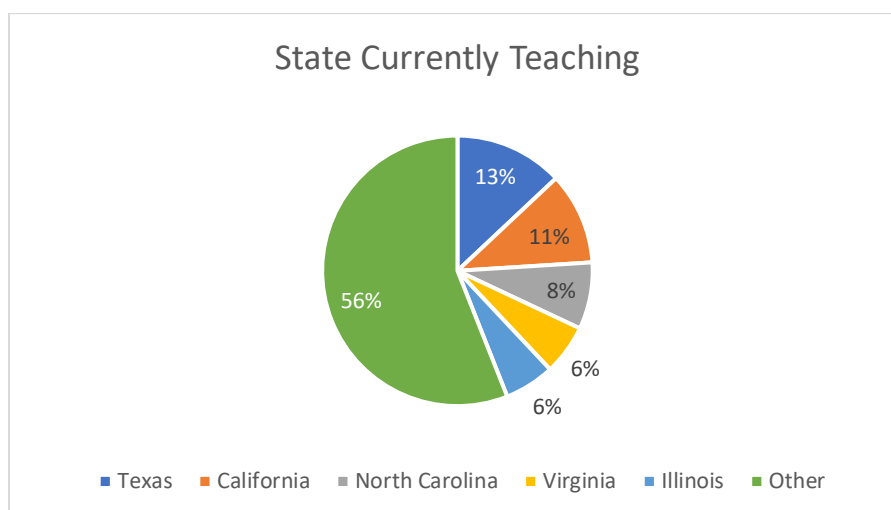
Years of Experience

Participants reported years of experience in education showed some variety but were evenly distributed in general. The greatest figure for participants was those who had been teaching for 20 or more years (29%). The lowest percentage belonged to participants who had been teaching one year or less, as seen in Figure 10.

In 2018, national statistics revealed that 9% of teachers had been teaching for less than three years; the figure was 28% for 3-9 years; 40% for 10-20 years; and 23% for over 20 years (NCES, n.d.a.). The results in the study are not as easily compared because of the ranges of years that the researcher listed as choices. However, the figures for those with more than 20 years of experience were somewhat close, and perhaps this larger figure comes from the age of Facebook users, as this was the most successful platform for finding participants.

Figure 10

Distribution of Years of Teaching Experience
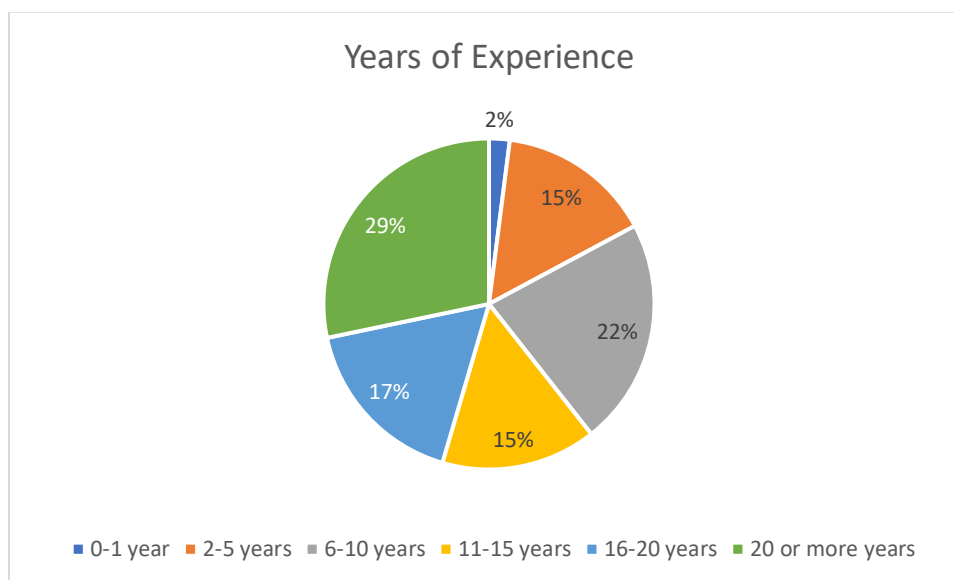
Exposure to Controversial Issues

The next question was multi-pronged and inquired of teachers how often they either

exposed their students to or engaged their students with certain topics. This question was designed to display on the screen as one question with multiple facets.

The question read: "In your history, civics, social studies, or other social science course(s), at what level did you expose students to or engage them with the following?" These answers were based on a Likert scale of one to seven, where one indicated a low frequency and seven indicated a high frequency. To guide participants in their answers, the note in this question gave these details:

- The lowest rating was 1 and the highest rating was 7.

- "Low" referred to information recall, teacher-centered instruction, mention(s) of the concept, and/or reading a passage.

- "Medium" referred to class discussions, multiple connections with the content, some assignments or presentations associated with the content, and/or group work.

- "High" referred to student-centered instruction, inquiry-based activities, discussions/debates, and/or reading/research involving primary resources.

Participants shared the frequency with which they exposed students to or engaged them with the role of race, sex/gender, and class in U.S. history and culture. Figure 11 indicates how often teachers reported that their students engaged with or were exposed to the roles of race, sex/gender, and class in U.S. history and culture. Distribution of frequency was fairly even; however, the role of race in U.S. history and culture was most consistently addressed in class, according to respondents' answers.

Figure 11

Frequency of Exposure to or Engagement with the Roles of Race, Sex/Gender, and Class in U.S.

History and Culture
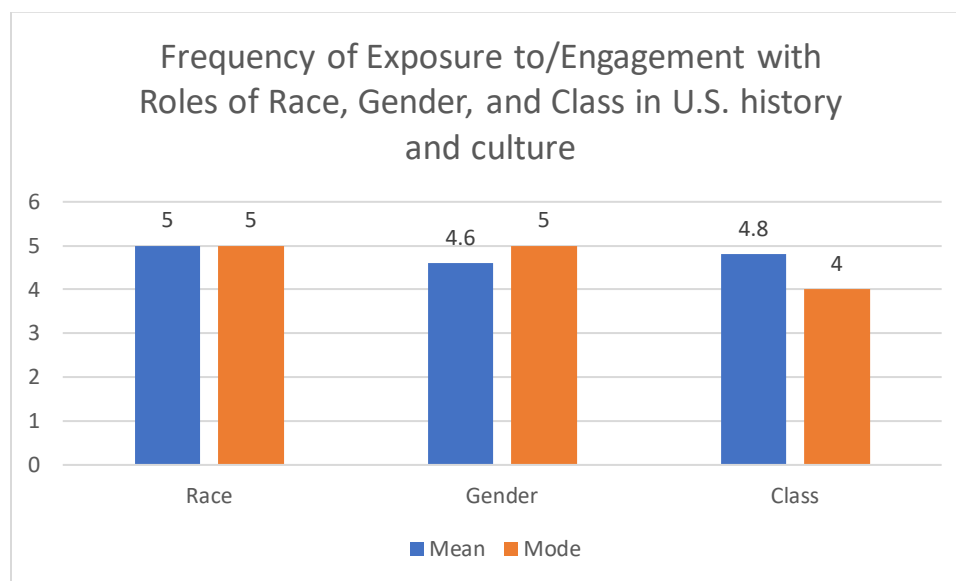
Participants indicated how often students were exposed to or engaged with the role of

race, gender, and/or class in the U.S. legal system, as well as the role of the U.S. legal system in

the oppression of people of color and the lower class. Figure 12 indicates a moderate level of

exposure to or engagement with the role of race, gender, and/or class in the United States legal

system. Meanwhile, similar results appeared in Figure 13, indicating a somewhat moderate level

of exposure to or engagement with the role of the U.S. legal system in the oppression of people

of color and the lower class.

Figure 12

Frequency of Exposure to or Engagement with the Role of Race, Gender, and/or Class in the
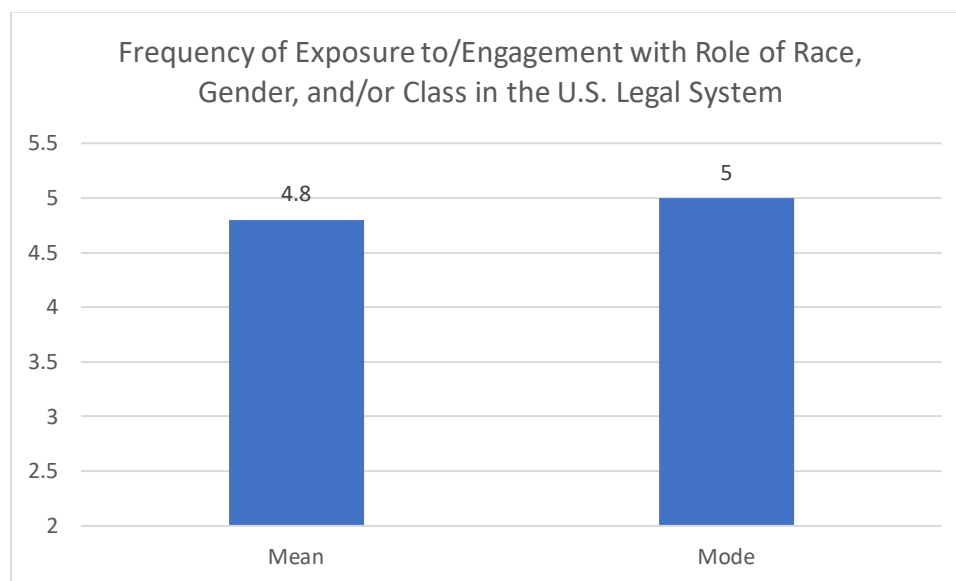
U.S. Legal System

Figure 13

Frequency of Exposure to or Engagement with the Role of the U.S. legal system in the

Oppression of People of Color and the Lower Class
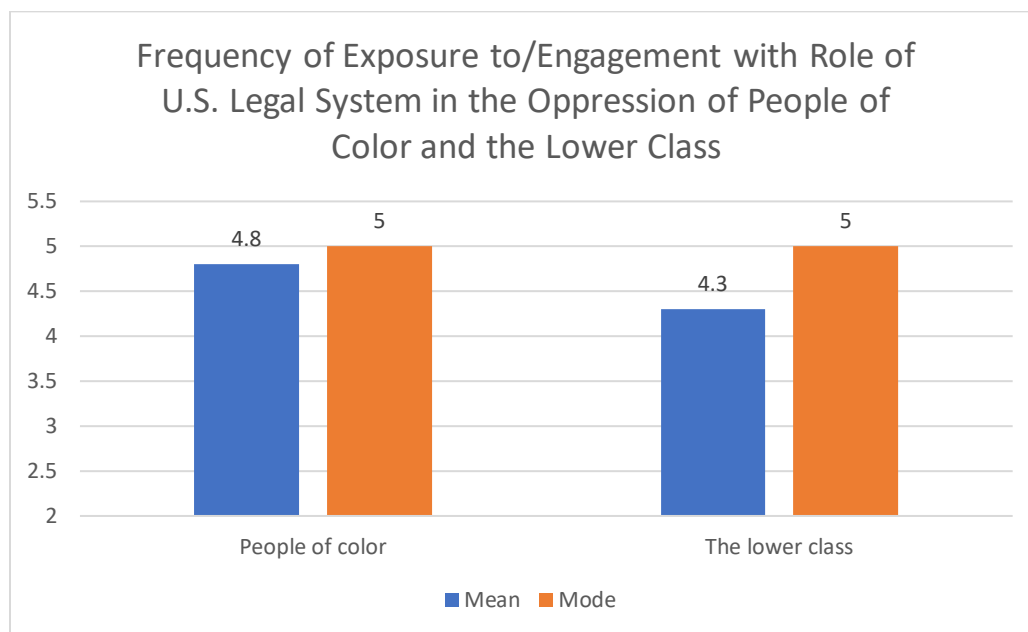
Participants shared the frequency of engagement with and/or exposure to the role of the (American Judeo-Christian) Church in slavery and the role of religion in U.S. politics, laws, history, and/or culture. Figure 14 illustrates a tendency not to address the role of the (Judeo-Christian) Church in slavery; however, the role of religion in U.S. politics, laws, history, and/or culture was sometimes addressed.

Figure 14

Exposure to or Engagement with the Role of the Church in Slavery and the Role of Religion in

U.S. Politics, Laws, History, and/or Culture
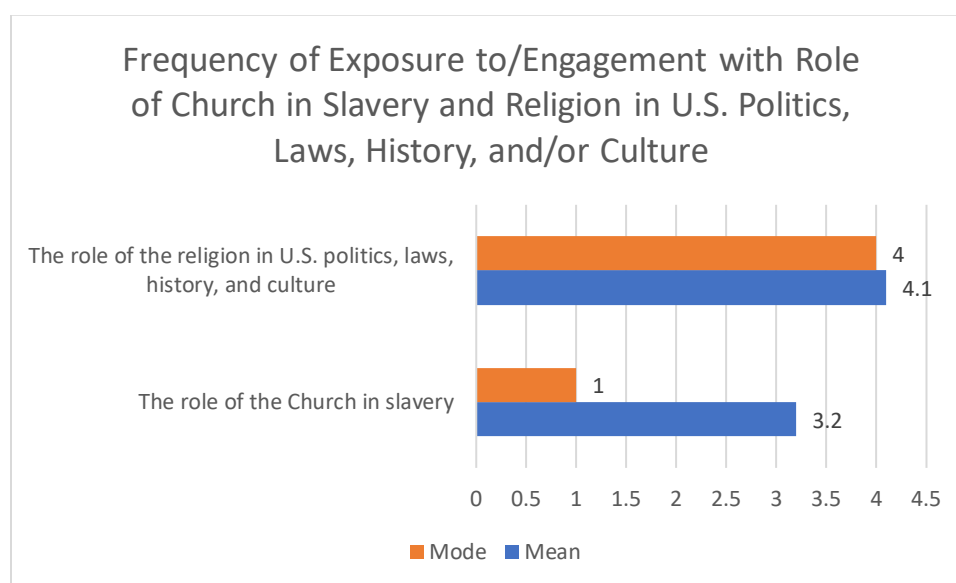
Participants indicated the frequency with which they exposed students to or engaged them with the concepts of gender identity, sexuality, and classism. Gender identity and sexuality were rarely addressed, as seen in Figure 15.

Figure 15

Frequency of Exposure to or Engagement with the Concepts of Gender, Sexual Identity, and

Classism
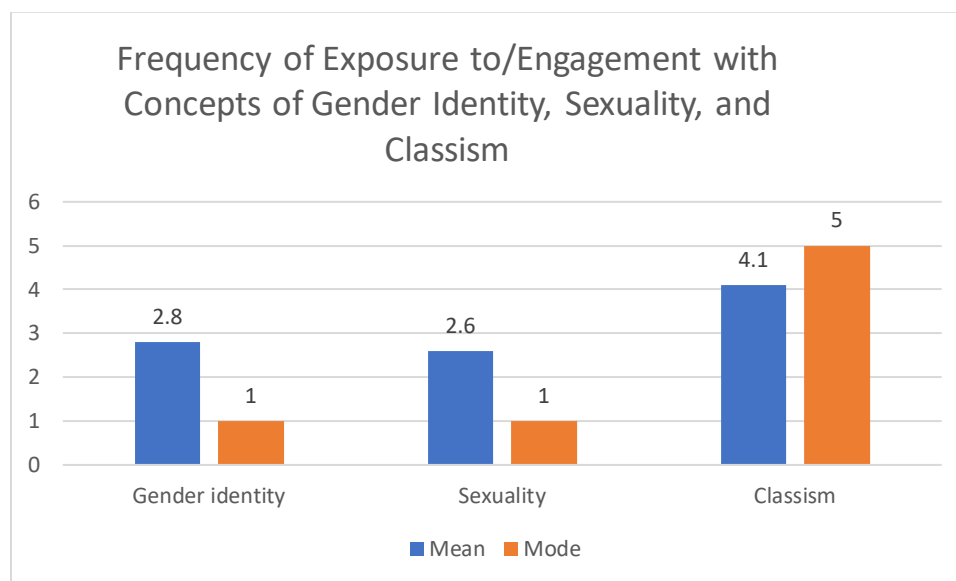
Level of Agreement with Statements

Participants read a series of statements based on attitudes about teaching controversial

topics and student agency. They rated their level of agreement with each statement on a Likert

scale from one to seven. A response of one represented strong disagreement while a response of

seven represented strong agreement with the statement. A response of four was considered

neutral. First, teachers responded to statements about attitudes surrounding the teaching of

controversial issues and critical thinking. As seen in Figure 16, teachers tended to agree with

statements about the efficacy of what they taught and what students learned.

Figure 16

Level of Agreement with Statements about Learning Opportunities

Agreement with Statements about Learning Opportunities

I offer(ed) my students opportunities to think critically about controversial issues in U.S. history and culture. — Mode: 6, Mean: 6

My students learn(ed) an adequate amount about U.S. history to understand the past and present. — Mode: 5, Mean: 5

Mode / Mean
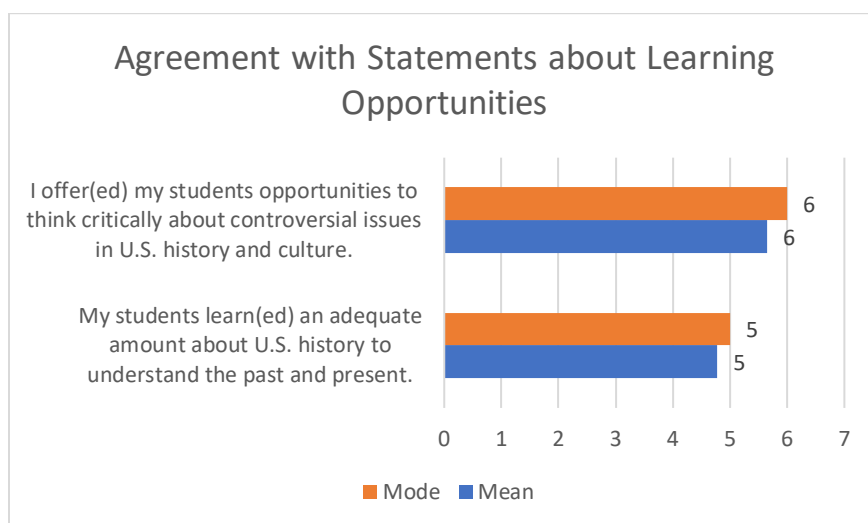
Teachers rated their level of agreement with statements about learning opportunities and citizenship. Teachers agreed that students must learn about controversial ideas to be good citizens (Figure 17). They also agreed that they have confidence in students' ability to engage in a democratic society based on what they have learned in high-school social sciences courses.

Figure 17

Level of Agreement with Statements about Learning Opportunities and Citizenship

Agreement with Statements about Learning Opportunities and Citizenship

Students must learn about controversial ideas to be good citizens. — Mode: 7, Mean: 6

I am confident my students are competent to engage in a democratic society based on their high-school social sciences learning. — Mode: 5, Mean: 5
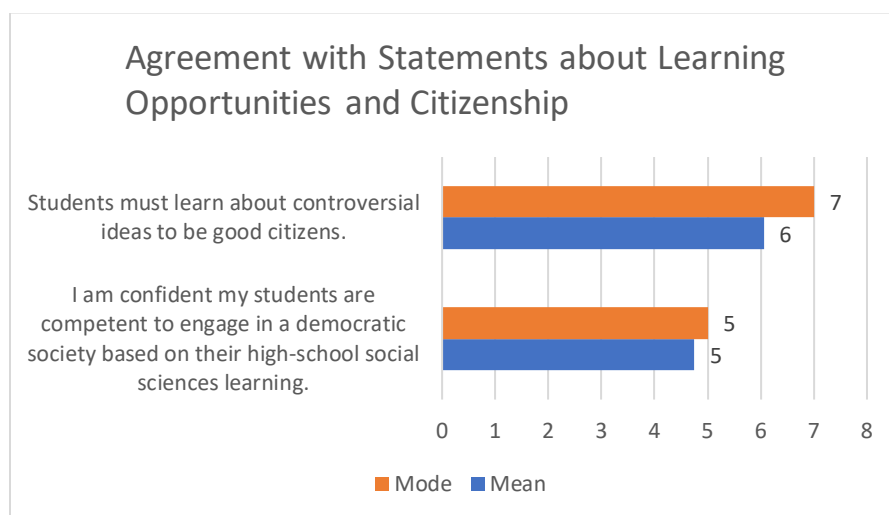
Mode / Mean

Figure 18 illustrates that teachers disagreed significantly with the idea that controversial issues should be optional for teachers to address in class. They also tended to believe that teachers are capable of presenting two opposing viewpoints without pushing their personal opinions in class. When confronted with the idea that teachers could be responsible for indoctrinating their students with liberal-leaning ideals, participants disagreed significantly. Furthermore, participants tended to agree that teachers can present opposing viewpoints without inserting their personal politics into a lesson.

Figure 18

Level of Agreement with Statements about Teaching Controversial Topics
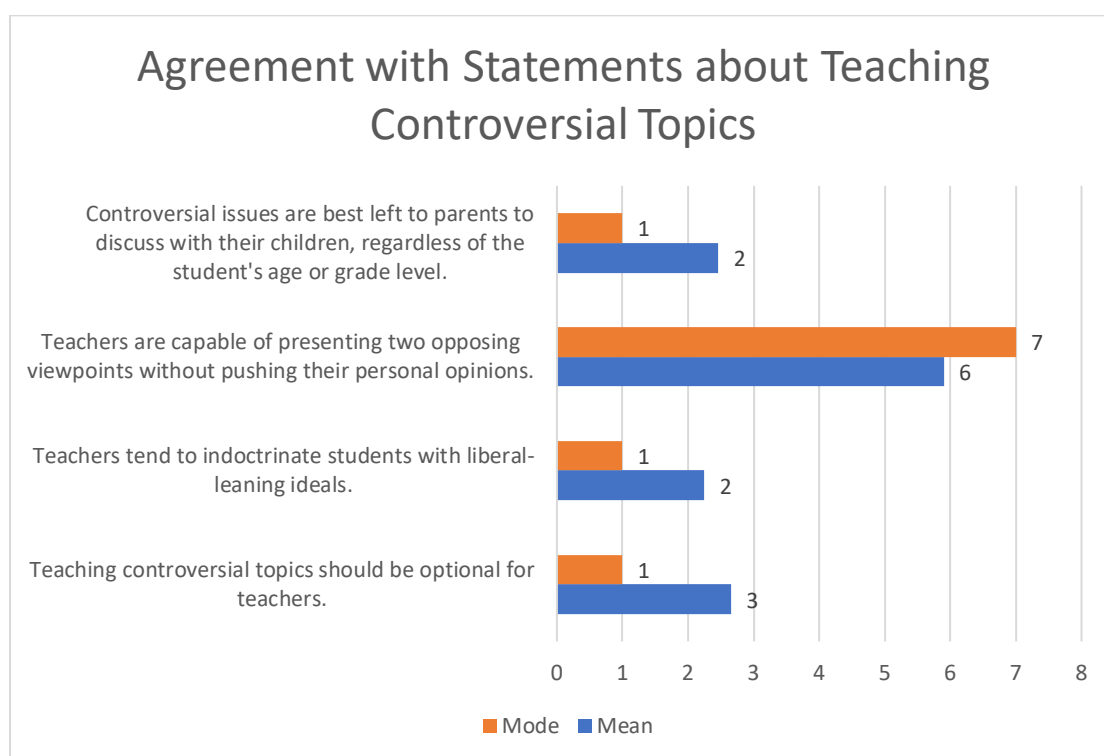
Participants chose their level of agreement with statements about student agency. In this group of questions, participants appeared to agree most with the idea that secondary-level students have enough agency to think critically about their world and that they should be exposed to potentially controversial topics like institutionalized oppression. Participants were

slightly less sure student participation in the decision-making process; however, the rating was fairly high, as seen in Figure 19.

Figure 19

Level of Agreement with Statements about Student Agency
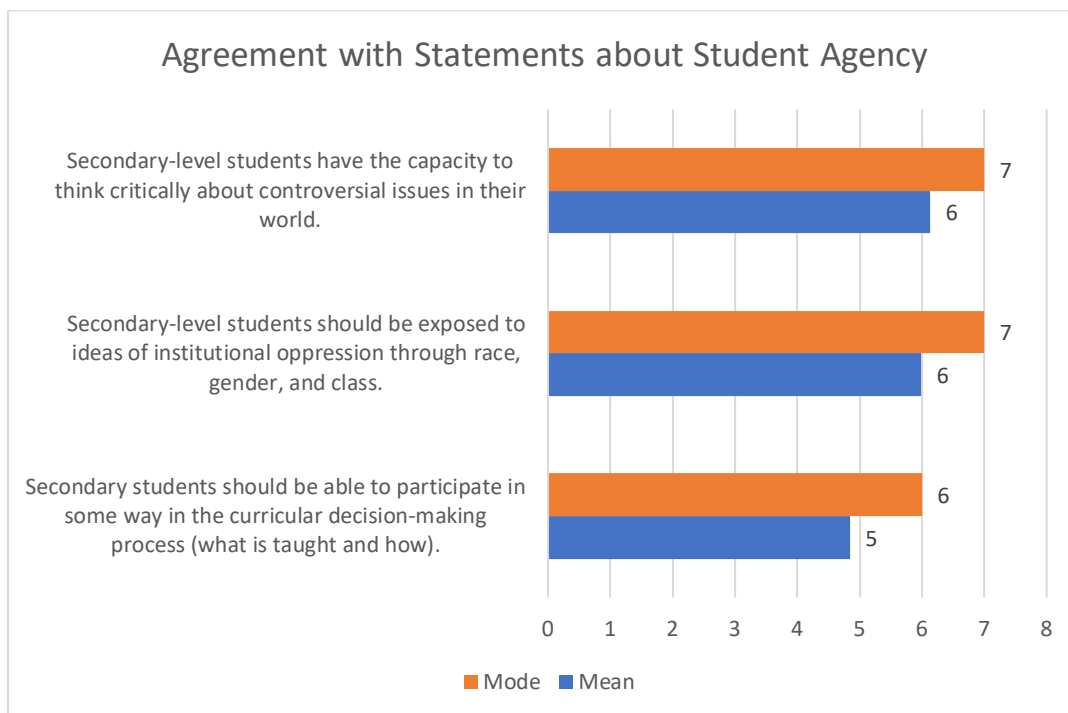
Survey submissions indicated a mix of opinions about students' age and agency. In general, teachers were in favor of the idea of exposing elementary-aged children to stories and ideas about race, gender, and class. Figure 20 indicates that responses were similar regarding exposure to these issues within children's stories like *Henry's Freedom Box* and *It's OK to be Different*. In general, teachers were likely to encourage the teaching of controversial issues in lower grades.

Figure 20

Level of Agreement with Statements about Students' Appropriateness of Age
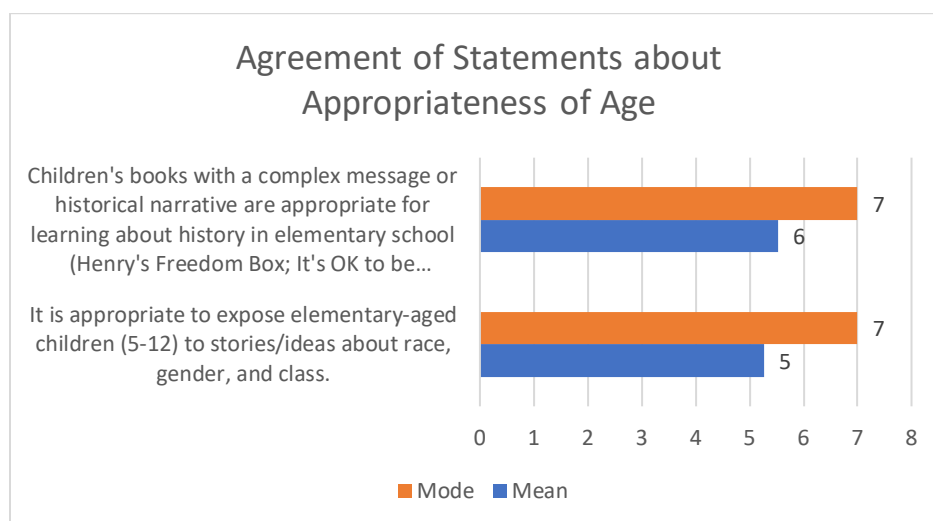
Figure 21 shows that participants tended to believe that school has a role in teaching students about controversial issues. The mean and mode of these answers indicate that teachers do not believe that all controversial issues should be covered only by parents and that teaching controversial issues should remain a requirement for teachers.

Figure 21

Level of Agreement with Statement about whether Parents Should be in Charge of Teaching Controversial Issues
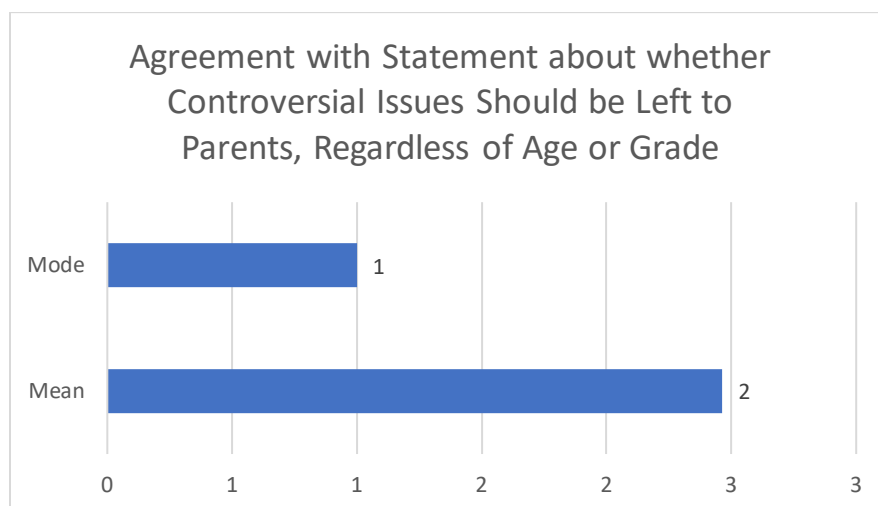
Statistical Analysis

As shown in Table 1, an initial, negative correlation was identified between the participants' reported political affiliation and the rate of exposing students to the roles of race, gender, and class in the U.S. legal system. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was performed with participants' political affiliation or tendencies as the independent variable and classroom exposure to or engagement with the role of race, gender, and/or class in the U.S. legal system. Although the initial correlation was identified, results of the ANOVA in Table 2 did not bear out a particular relationship between these two variables, $F(7, 127) = 1.89$, $p = 0.075$ (Figure 22).

Table 1

Relationship between Political Affiliation or Tendencies and Level of Classroom Exposure to or Engagement with the Role of Race, Gender, and/or Class in the U.S. Legal System

VAR vs. VAR	r	n	p-value
Political affiliation vs. Exposure to roles in legal system	-0.1708	135	0.0476

Table 2

ANOVA Measuring Political Affiliation or Tendencies and Level of Classroom Exposure to or Engagement with the Role of Race, Gender, and/or Class in the U.S. Legal System

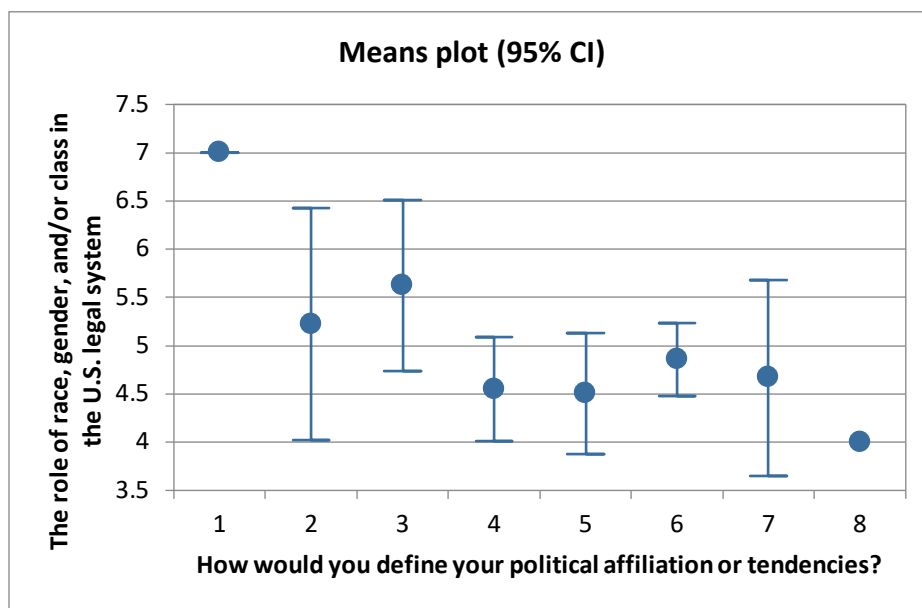| Source of Variation	d.f.	SS	MS	F	p-value	F crit	Omega Sqr.
Between Groups	7	26.3646	3.7664	1.8927	0.0759	2.0824	0.0442
Within Groups	127	252.7169	1.9899				
Total	134	279.0815					

Figure 22

Relationship between Political Affiliation or Tendencies and Level of Classroom Exposure to or Engagement with the Role of Race, Gender, and/or Class in the U.S. Legal System

Note: In this figure, the numbers represent political affiliation as follows: 1 is libertarian; 2 is conservative; 3 is somewhat conservative; 4 is centrist; 5 is somewhat liberal; 6 is liberal; 7 is no affiliation; and 8 indicates the participant did not share the information.

Years of experience had significant relationships with agreement statements, as shown in Figure 23. Table 3 data indicate a negative correlation between the participants' years of teaching experience and their agreement with the statement, "Secondary students should be able to participate in some way in the curricular decision-making process (what is taught and how)." There was no correlation found between years of experience and exposure frequency answers, however. It stands to reason that years of experience may correlate to age of the teacher, but not necessarily. Teacher age and attitudes about student agency and exposure to controversial topics could be an interesting question for further research. Table 4 further details the relationship between years of experience and agreement with the statement: "Secondary students should be

able to participate in some way in the curricular decision-making process (what is taught and how)." The analysis suggests that teachers with more years of experience are less likely to agree that secondary students should take part in the decision-making processes surrounding what and how they learn.

Table 3

Negative Correlation between Participants' Years of Teaching Experience and Agreement with a

Statement about Secondary Students' Participation in Decision-Making

VAR vs. VAR	r	n	p-value
Secondary students should be able to participate in some way in the curricular decision-making process (what is taught and how). vs. How long have you been teaching?	-0.2951	128	0.0007

Figure 23

Relationship between Participants' Years of Teaching Experience and Agreement with a

Statement about Secondary Students' Participation in Decision-Making

Note: Answer choices in this question are as follows: 1 is 0-1 years; 2 is 2-5 years; 3 is 6-10 years; 4 is 11-15 years; 5 is 16-20 years; and 6 is 20 or more years.

Table 4

Relationship between Participants' Years of Teaching Experience and Agreement with a

Statement about Secondary Students' Participation in Decision-Making

Source of Variation	d.f.	SS	MS	F	p-value	F crit	Omega Sqr.
Between Groups	5	30.7182	6.1436	2.5480	0.0313	2.2886	0.0570
Within Groups	122	294.1568	2.4111				
Total	127	324.8750					

In Table 5 and Figure 24, a negative correlation appears between the year of teaching experience reported by respondents and their agreement with the statement that students have the capacity to think critically about their world. Fewer years of experience appear to correlate with a stronger belief in secondary students' capacity to engage in critical thinking about the world around them. Table 6 confirms this relationship; $F(5, 123) = 2.44$, $p = 0.038$.
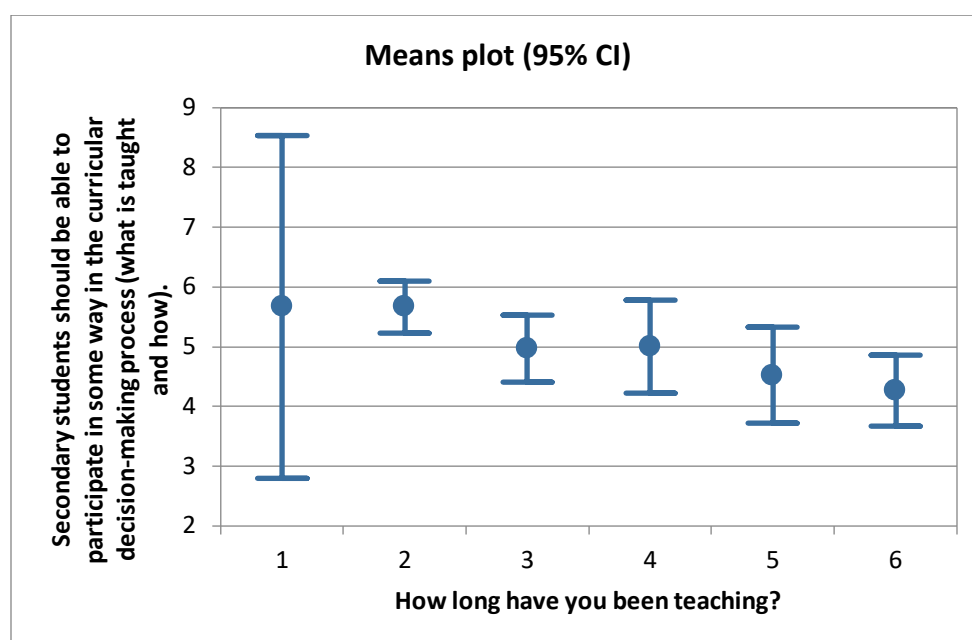
Table 5

Negative Correlation between Participants' Years of Teaching Experience and Agreement with a

Statement about Secondary Students' Capacity for Critical Thinking

VAR vs. VAR	r	n	p-value
Secondary-level students have the capacity to think critically about controversial issues in their world. vs. How long have you been teaching?	-0.2190	129	0.0127

Figure 24

Relationship between Participants' Years of Teaching Experience and Agreement with a

Statement about Secondary Students' Capacity for Critical Thinking
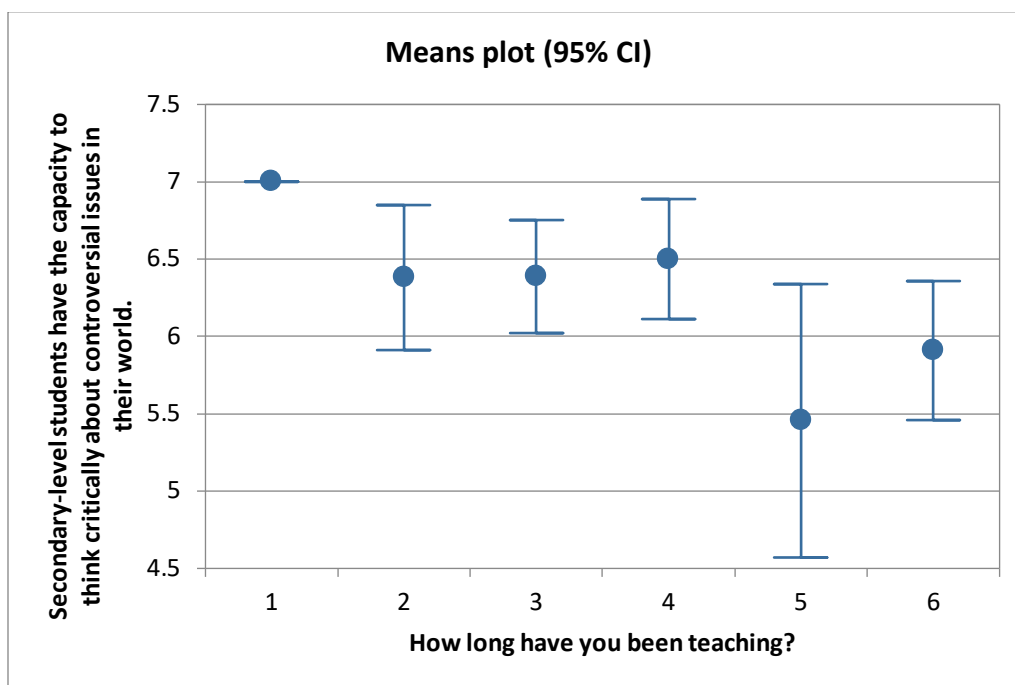
Table 6

Relationship between Participants' Years of Teaching Experience and Agreement with a

Statement about Secondary Students' Capacity for Critical Thinking

Source of Variation	d.f.	SS	MS	F	p-value	F crit	Omega Sqr.
Between Groups	5	19.7626	3.9525	2.4431	0.0378	2.2880	0.0530
Within Groups	123	198.9971	1.6179				
Total	128	218.7597					

No significant data were gleaned from comparing demographic responses with statement

ratings. For instance, one may expect a participant's socioeconomic experience to influence their

teaching about institutional oppression of the lower class. There were no significant links

between participant gender and the teaching of gender issues; nor were there correlations

between self-described political affiliation and ideas about student agency, decision-making, or the teaching of controversial topics. Additionally, one may expect to see some relationship between ethnic identity or religion and agreement statements or exposure frequency; however, this was not confirmed in the data. With these challenges in mind, it is imperative to reveal participants' thoughts in the qualitative section of the survey.

Findings of Qualitative Research

Because this study was primarily about attitudes, the responses provided for the open-ended questions were much more revealing in terms of attitudes and beliefs.

Open-Ended Questions

Certifications, Experience, and Career Impetus

Participants' lists of certifications revealed no discernible pattern: some participants had standard state certifications and others reported Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and national certifications. Additional certifications or endorsements included Special Education, Physical Education, Career and Technical Education, English as a Second Language, counseling, bilingual education, and administration. Respondents did not necessarily report their certifications in a systematic way in this survey; therefore, it could be fodder for future research to examine relationships between certifications and attitudes.

Table 7 illustrates the distribution of responses for the certifications or endorsements listed for this open-ended question. Nearly all participants (130) listed a state-level certification or endorsement. The top certifications or endorsements were in Social Studies; Google (Level 1, Level 2, and Trainer); None, N/A, or no answer; and National Board Certification. Following closely were Special Education and English as a Second Language (ESL/ESOL).

Table 7

Distribution of Certifications or Endorsements

Number of Responses	Certification or Endorsement
130	State-level certification or endorsement
34	Social Studies
19	Google
13	None, N/A, or no answer
13	National Board
11	Special education
10	ESL/ESOL
9	Principal/Leader/Administrator
6	AIG/Gifted
5	English
4	IB/MYP
3	Counselor
3	Library/Media
3	AP

Becoming a Teacher

When asked why they chose to become teachers, participants responded with a variety of reasons: (1) desire to help young people; (2) inspiration by their former teachers; (3) hope for a better educational experience or system than they experienced; (4) history of educators in the family; and (5) financial implications (scholarships or tuition agreements).

In particular, Table 8 shows how many times a variety of reasons were mentioned for becoming a teacher. The most popular answer (33) was that the respondent was led to the profession because of their love of children, a desire to have positive relationships with students, to empower students, or to inspire them to become critical thinkers. Other popular answers indicated that the love of the subject was a motivator, as was the desire to have an impact on the next generation, in support of a healthy or tolerant society/democracy.

Table 8

Reasons for Becoming a Teacher

Number of Mentions	Reasons for Becoming a Teacher
33	Love for kids/Relationships/Student empowerment/Encourage critical thinking
27	Loved subject (Social Studies/History)
24	Help society/Future impact/Change system/Support democracy
21	Other reasons
19	Inspired by teacher or positive school experience
18	Experience prior to teaching/College course/TFA/Volunteerism
15	New career/Life change
14	Schedule/Workload/Stability/Perception of profession
7	Family members were teachers
4	Negative school experience
2	Don't know/Unsure

Many responses were passionate and inspiring, like the following:

When I was in school, I struggled through significant life challenges and believed there was no one to help me. I'd like to be a support for youth as they become adults. Inspire kids to overcome difficulties. Encourage them to believe in themselves, define success through their own lens—not based on how others define them or recognize them. I love history and politics. I believe an educated citizenry is essential to our society. I want to help create that by helping people understand the complexities of our past and the need to understand the motivations for and impacts of choices.

Other responses included:

- "Good profession for working moms."

- "I was a police officer and combat medic before teaching and wanted to work with kids before they hit the streets."

- "My grandfather's love of history."

- "Because I'm good with kids and didn't know what else to do."

- "I love the energy in the classroom and nothing else I have tried has provided this."

- "I love teaching and needed job stability in the 90s."

- "It used to be a respected profession." and

- "I wanted to tell stories…so students wouldn't just have facts spewed at them."

Participants reported a variety of courses and levels that they were teaching at the time of the survey or had taught before. Participants reported having taught Sociology, Psychology, World History, United States History, World Geography, Human Geography, Economics, Macroeconomics, Civics, Government, Theory of Knowledge, and Personal Finance. Descriptions of schools also varied widely and were challenging to quantify because of the question format. School demographics also seemed to be beyond the scope of the study, but would serve as a fascinating future topic.

Purpose of Education

Participants were asked, "In your opinion, what is the purpose of public education?" Responses were varied, but themes emerged: participants tended to mention the shaping of a generation of young people who are productive citizens, critical thinkers, contributors to society, and participants in a functional democracy. Answers included the following statements about the purpose of public education:

- "Preparing students to be…effective and productive scholars and workers."

- "To equip students with the tools that they will need to [succeed] later in life."

- "Provide equitable opportunities for students to develop their minds and reach their potential as human beings, [leading] to improved society, communities, and businesses/organizations."

- "To provide every student with the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that [they] need to promote and continue our democracy."

- "To provide a baseline level of education and teach children how to think critically and be good citizens."

- "To create an educated and tolerant society."

- "To develop critical thinkers that will be able to actively participate in their communities. Social studies provide a great opportunity to develop skills and have at least a basic knowledge of history, which is crucial to being an active, responsible citizen."

One participant stated:

Public education was developed to improve the workforce during America's Industrial Revolution. Today, it is still an institution that tries to even the playing field for those that are born to parents who are not part of America's 'rich and famous.' It provides the masses an opportunity to escape poverty. It is also key to our nation's chances of preserving our democracy.

Another participant expressed other ideas about public education and its purpose, adding personal convictions as a parent of a school-aged child:

The purpose of public education is to provide children with a basic understanding of how the world works, how our history and foundational documents herald in a form of government that was enlightened but not perfect, and how the principles of our government [protect] individual rights above the rights of the state. [The purpose] is NOT to indoctrinate children on popular cultural, political, or social constructs by biased people pushing agendas. I send my child to school so they can learn how to work, how to

earn a living, how to be an active participant in their society and government. I don't want anyone telling my child they are anything but an American citizen and a worthy individual.

In a different vein, another participant viewed the purpose of education this way:

I think public education should build a well-rounded child that is culturally competent. Children should be exposed to all of the required content, plus foreign languages/cultures, music, art, drama, etc. Also, I see the need to incorporate more life skills, since many students are not learning these at home. Public education must prepare students to be digitally competent in order to participate globally as well.

Participants' Final Thoughts on Study Agency

Participants were asked, "How did your students voice their opinions, either in your class, on an advisory panel, or before the school board, regarding their preferences for what and how they learn? Please explain." One participant stated that students were "more inclined to voice their opinions, listen to others' opinions, and engage in discussions" if they trust their teacher not to impose a personal agenda and if they believe they will be graded fairly regardless of their position. Another participant iterated the idea that students can and do use their voices to bring about change, but that "most students do not know how powerful their voices can be." Finally, two participants reported that they consider students' opinions about the course content and learning activities when planning.

On the other hand, multiple respondents claimed that students were either "passive" or disinterested in the process of deciding what and how to learn in social science courses. One participant reported that students were very involved in the process of decision-making, even at the Board level, but others viewed their students' contributions to curricular decision-making as

a comment on a survey or in a discussion that does not reveal much interest or intellectual effort.

One participant was reluctant to ascribe enough agency to students be part of the curricular decision-making process: "At some level, this is appropriate, but to assume that kids KNOW what should be taught is a poor assumption." The participant goes on to say that including parents in the decision-making process must be done with great care, lest the "basic target of public education" be lost as educators try to tailor individual curricula to what parents and students want. Yet another participant acknowledged that students "want to know the truth about the nation's history," and, like a fellow participant, noted the tendency toward social media sites like TikTok to satiate their eagerness "to learn about dark periods in our nation's history." Along these lines, another teacher said:

> Sometimes it feels like my students are hearing two sides of history in my classroom and they are blown away. I try to present ideas without bias (even when I have a very strong opinion on most things) to allow my students to see all sides and make decisions for themselves. Most students ask questions about why they have never heard or learned about these things."

Unfortunately, many respondents stated that their students simply do not have the opportunity to be heard concerning what and/or how they learn. However, many responses inspired hope about the state of social sciences education:

- "Students are offered a list of topics that interest them at the beginning of a unit, and I develop my curriculum around those interests and the state standards. I have 'temperature checks' at the end of every week for socio-emotional check-ins and for students to provide feedback for the lessons that week. 'What helped you learn? What lessons did you enjoy? What could have been done better?'

- "Students express their opinions through discussions, debates, and participation in The Leader in Me, which includes the 8th Habit: 'Find your voice and inspire others to find theirs.'

- "We have a state mandated curriculum for all classes taught that we are not allowed to deviate from. In my classroom students are allowed to freely discuss their opinions as long as they are respectful of the opinions of others."

- "There are some student reps on the school board."

- "My students design the curriculum with me. They look through the state requirements identify as a class what they deem important in order and then generate topics to learn from that."

- "Establish norms, use parliamentary procedures for deliberation. Student selection of current and controversial issues for mock legislative session."

- "Student representation on the curriculum committee, surveys by both individual teachers and the school."

- "I do semester surveys, give choice of topic for final project, and hold quarterly town halls."

Additional Thoughts on Controversy in the Classroom

A final question was posed to participants: "Do you have any final thoughts to share about the current polemics regarding teaching controversial topics in schools?" Table 9 illustrates the distribution of topic mentions, as coded from the open-ended answers. Over one-third of participants skipped this question, wrote N/A, or gave an ambiguous or unrelated answer. Thirty respondents mentioned the necessity for students to learn how to think or see their teachers modeling discussion, critical thinking, and tolerance. There were 24 instances where

barriers to teaching controversial issues were mentioned: these barriers included racism, censorship, political affiliation or conservatism, ignorance, and legislation. Several teachers believed it was the teacher's duty to impart two sides of an issue to students and allow them to come to their own conclusions, with the teacher as facilitator. Lack of support was another popular response, as was the question of how "controversial" should be defined in the classroom setting. Some teachers were willing to lose their jobs or leave their current state in order to teach these topics and avoid parent or community pushback.

Table 9

Distribution of Topics Mentioned in Final Thoughts

Number of Mentions	Concepts in Final Thoughts about Controversial Topics
51	Not applicable/Blank/Ambiguous
30	Necessary to teach thinking/Model and practice discussion and tolerance (Teacher as Facilitator)
24	Barriers for Teachers include Racism/Political Affiliation/Ignorance/Legislation/Censorship
21	Teachers feel fear/Discomfort/Disappointment/Parent pushback
21	Teachers must remain unbiased
19	Duty to teach controversial topics/Job requirement/Require controversial topics in schools
12	Lack of administrative support/Incompatible district policy/Lack of training
11	Student age/Maturity/Students have right to know
9	What makes it controversial? How do we respond?
5	Leave or left state or profession/Wiling to Lose job
3	There should be no or little coverage of sex or gender
1	Involve parents when possible

A few teachers mentioned parents' behavior as a deterrent in teaching controversial topics:

- "I don't like talking about controversial topics in my classes because of the fear of having to go to the office because of an angry parent."

- "It is a very big challenge for teachers…These new times have put education in the crosshairs for political gain. It has made me more careful in how I plan and implement my teaching of controversial subjects."

- "I do not mind teaching controversial topics, but like every other teacher, I fear the blowback from parents."

- "The labeling of teaching ideas is an easy way to confuse the public and draw the ire of those who do not study social sciences. I would honestly be happy for someone to challenge the content I teach."

Other teachers made mention of the benefits of including controversial topics in class:

- "Teachers should be the facilitators of learning and healthy, appropriate discussions of controversial topics."

- "We need to include controversial topics to be discussed, showing both sides and allowing students to determine a position to be on."

One response simply stated: "Tell the truth!" Another response indicated that "students have the right to learn the truth about history. Just because it is hard does not mean we should avoid it." Like tough topics in science and math, "we don't avoid those topics," the teacher said.

Finally, a few answers revealed strong views. One participant suggested that the age and population of a school or district determines whether these topics can be covered: "There is no universal answer to your question because every school, district, and community has a nuanced concept about what is 'controversial.'" The participant suggests that even the topic of slavery has differing levels of controversy: "Is slavery controversial? Not in some communities, if we accept it as historical fact. In some, it may be considered controversial but only from a political perspective." Another teacher admitted to focusing on a "base knowledge" before getting to the

controversy, or giving glimpses of those controversies to engage students in the content: "Without a base of knowledge, the discussion has little footing, and I find that many of my students need to focus on that base first." One teacher said they were prepared to lose employment because they refuse to lie about the facts of history. One strong view about controversial topics in the classroom follows:

> Fear of teaching controversial topics serves to chill debate and discourage intellectual thought. Some of it is driven by an authentic pushback from the movement to encourage more tolerance and diversity. We have not successfully introduced new elements of perspective on race, ethnicity, gender identity, while protecting some students' ability to express hesitancy or opposition to ideas which are based on genuine religious, ideological, or cultural beliefs. There is a tendency to label things as racist, sexist, or phobic instead of engaging in a discussion where sides can express themselves. There are boundaries where people go too far in these debates. And it is to be expected with teenagers, whose tendencies are towards contrarian.

One teacher commented that a safe space—for teachers and students alike—is key to having these discussions: "If there is even a chance a teacher will lose their job over discussing controversial issues, it is less likely to be taught." There were multiple comments about state and district restrictions, as well as community dynamics that prevented the treatment of certain topics:

> I am a huge advocate for teaching controversial topics in a delicate way, but my county has made it very clear the topics that we are not allowed to even speak of, including LGBTQ topics, gender identity, and they even have rules about how we teach racism and who is to blame for racism.

Another strong view focused on sexuality as a topic in classrooms:

When did educators think it was appropriate to teach children about sexuality? Nowhere else around the globe do people think so little of children and the harm it does in child development. Parents should be in charge of that topic. A school can teach sex education in fifth grade to help stop STDs and that should be it. As for all the other topics that have hijacked education, we as a nation are falling behind because we are more focused on pushing agendas than teaching students the importance of harnessing their talents to be productive citizens and understanding that everyone has the right to self-determination and respect. More students should read Thomas Sowell, Frederic Bastiat, and the late Walter Williams, economist.

Yet another teacher said, "I'm not in favor of them being discussed in elementary classrooms and limited to facts only in high school classes."

Summary

While most teachers likely attempt to remain neutral in class discussions, there is no doubt they have their own opinions about society, government, history, and other topics. Teachers may have a variety of reasons for pursuing a career in education, but none in this study reported "political indoctrination" as one. Teachers and students find themselves at the center of a heated political debate surrounding what is taught, by whom, and how. Student agency is a topic that deserves much more attention in the literature. One way to delve into the reality of education is to question practitioners who face these challenges daily, and this study was a way of accomplishing that task, with much more research on the horizon about where the field of education goes from here.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Summary of the Study

This study sought to reveal teachers' attitudes about student agency, specifically within the social sciences classroom at the secondary level. One hundred forty-four practicing teachers took the detailed survey and shared their views on the current climate in education, the purpose of public education, how curricular decisions are made, and what role students and parents do and should play in making those critical decisions. The study explored these attitudes through the lens of critical race theory, with a look at the historical challenges educators have faced since the inception of public education in the United States.

Teachers revealed fears associated with teaching controversial topics and remained somewhat divided on who should be involved in making decisions about student learning. Teachers mostly agreed that the purpose of public education is to maintain or strengthen American democracy by fostering skills and knowledge among its young citizens. While teachers varied in the frequency with which they engaged their students with controversial concepts, it was clear that gender identity and sexuality were off-limits for most practitioners. Religion was also a subject that did not receive as much attention, according to teachers' level of agreement with statements about the role of the Judeo-Christian Church in the United States.

This study provided insight into how teachers think about the curricula they teach, as well as how they view their students' capacity of agency at the high-school level. They also provided insight into how they view the appropriateness of controversial topics in the elementary and middle-grades classrooms. Although few significant correlations were found between demographic information about teachers, the study remained revelatory, particularly in the qualitative section.

Discussion

Secondary Teachers' Attitudes toward Student Agency in Curricular Decision-Making

The researcher asked six questions at the beginning of the study, the first being the primary research question: What are secondary teachers' current attitudes towards student agency in terms of curricular decision-making in social science courses at the secondary level? Data suggest that teachers' views are mixed: some teachers believe that students have the capacity to be part of a decision-making process and others believe that students' superficial responses on course surveys indicate their apathy toward what and how they learn.

Past Battles over Stakeholder Control and Current Polemics

Student agency is not an issue in a vacuum; rather, "structural inequality in schools seldom leads to contexts where students have agency" (Vaughn, 2020, p. 109). Students of color, those with language differences, and children in poverty have much less access to situations that develop and promote their agency. The issue of agency is not strictly about who decides what is learned and how; it is also about who has access to the conversation that occurs when decisions are made. Maintaining the status quo keeps people of color and low-socioeconomic groups out of the conversation.

Stakeholder Control and the Teaching of Controversial Topics

Secondary Research Question 1 asked: How have past and current battles for adult stakeholder control over decision-making in public education influenced the current polemics regarding the teaching of potentially controversial concepts? In the review of the literature, the researcher found that polemics surrounding adult stakeholder control over public education structures, processes, and outcomes have always been part of the social narrative of the United States and will likely continue. The relationship between White privilege and education's status

quo portends a continued struggle for cultural relevance and awareness in classrooms, especially in the social sciences.

Teaching Controversial Topics Without Bias

Qualitative data indicate that teachers feel the pressure of these current political polemics surrounding the teaching of controversial topics in public schools. The study uncovered teachers' fear of angry parents, frustration with the politics of education, concern about the public's misunderstanding of culturally responsive teaching practices, and passion for academic freedom. Participants agreed that teachers are capable of teaching controversial topics without pushing their personal views onto students: The mode for level of agreement with this statement on the 7-point Likert scale, with 7 indicating strong agreement, was, in fact, 7. The mean was 6 for this response. Teachers strongly disagreed with the claim that teachers indoctrinate their students with liberal ideas, as seen in a mode of 1 and a mean of 2.

Struggle for Culturally Relevant/Responsive Education

The struggle for culturally relevant education continues in Florida. Governor Ron DeSantis has appeared frequently in the national media for his decisions regarding education. Having taught at an elite boarding school in Georgia for one year in his early 20s (Robles, 2022), DeSantis may not have adequate perspective on public education to make sweeping decisions, like the educational law that bans an Advanced Placement African American studies course for young Floridians, due to concerns the governor has about objectivity and educational "value" (Rozsa, 2023). The law supports DeSantis' very public stand against "woke indoctrination" in education. He asked why queer theory is a part of Black history, suggesting that certain agendas are being pushed in schools. Perhaps DeSantis drew inspiration from Arizona's threats to the Tucson Board of Education in 2012 to withhold more than $14 million of its public funding if it

did not shut down a voluntary Mexican American studies program begun in the 1970s (Strauss, 2017). Maybe another state inspired his actions; there are now 54 laws affecting education surrounding controversial issues, 28% of which relate to race, racism, and history, and 42% of which bar transgender students from playing on sports teams that match their gender identities" (Natanson et al., 2022).

Handling Controversial Topics in the Secondary Social Sciences Classroom

Secondary Research Question 2 asked: How do secondary teachers view the teaching of social sciences and, more specifically, the handling of controversial topics?

Duty of Teachers to Address Controversial Topics

Quantitative responses indicated that teachers were mostly willing to treat controversial topics in the classroom. Data showed strong opinions about teachers having the option not to teach controversial topics (the mode on the 7-point Likert scale was 1, indicating strong disagreement with the statement provided).

Personal Background and Controversial Topics. The data did not reveal any correlation between participants' familial histories, personal religious experiences, political beliefs, or socioeconomic upbringing with these rates of engagement or exposure. Teachers' responses reflected the following majorities in demographics:

Table 10

Identification of Demographic Majorities

Demographic Category	Majority Percentage
Ethnic Identity	88% Caucasian
Gender Identity	85% Female
Level of Education	63% Master's degree
Family History	77% Families with 3+ generations in the U.S.
Religious Upbringing	79% Mainstream Christianity
Socioeconomic Upbringing	45% Middle-class
Political Affiliation	41% Liberal

Conditions for Addressing Controversial Topics. Teachers revealed their attitudes about teaching controversial topics in the qualitative section of the survey. Although there were some nuances within their answers, teachers largely agreed that controversial topics belong in classrooms under specific conditions: teachers must strive to serve as unbiased facilitators of discussion about important topics without influencing their students' thinking one way or another.

Parents and Teachers as Facilitators for Controversial Topics. A few topics appeared to be off-limits and not all teachers agreed with what "truths" should be shared with students and at which ages; however, teachers did not agree that controversial issues should be left to parents only, regardless of a student's age or grade level. The mode for level of agreement was 1 and the mean was 2 for this response.

Although "discussion of controversial issues in an open classroom climate is correlated with increased political efficacy, interest, and tolerance, as well as civic knowledge and engagement" (Pace, 2019, p. 1), teachers still may decide which controversial issues are relevant to those cornerstones of competency in a democratic society. As Pace (2019) noted, there is a need for more scholarship in this area. In a study investigating teacher preparation for handling controversial issues in the United States, Northern Ireland, and England, teacher educators in three of four courses examined had given their teachers strategies for "teaching in the charged classroom, where tensions and possibilities for democracy education co-exist and are intensified by current conditions such as socio-political turbulence" (Pace, 2019, p. 27). This indicates that teachers are, in fact, being prepared to confront controversy in their classrooms, but within a "contained risk-taking" paradigm, in which negative consequences may affect their careers.

Gender, Race, and Class in U.S. History and Culture. The modes for frequency of exposure to or engagement with the roles of race, gender, and class in U.S. history and culture were 5, 5, and 4, respectively, on the 7-point Likert scale, with seven representing the most frequent exposure.

Gender, Race, and Class in the U.S. Legal System. Engagement with the role of these three topics in the U.S. legal system revealed a mode of 5, further indicating that these are common topics in the classroom.

Racial and Economic Oppression through the U.S. Legal System. The concept of the U.S. legal system as a force for oppression of people of color revealed a frequency mode of five; for the oppression of the lower class, this mode was 5. This indicates that there was moderate frequency of exposure to or engagement with the topic.

Sexuality and Gender. The standalone concepts of gender identity and sexuality each had a mode of 1.

Religion in U.S. History and Culture

Teachers revealed a hesitancy to cover religious aspects of U.S. history and culture, as compared to the frequency with which they covered racism.

The Church and Slavery. The frequency of engagement with or exposure to the role of the Church in Slavery was a mode of 1, with an average of 3.2, while the broader topic of religion's role in U.S. politics, laws, history, and/or culture received a mode of four and an average of 4.1.

Students' Agency and Right to Participate in Decision-Making

Secondary Research Question 3 asked: How do secondary teachers view student agency and the potential right for students to participate in curricular decision-making? Some

practitioners reported that their students sometimes shared superficial opinions about their courses and others indicated that students should be an integral part of the decision-making process when it comes to their learning.

Students' Critical Thinking Capacity

Teachers were apt to agree quite strongly with the idea that secondary-level students can think critically about their world, with a mode of 7 and a mean of 6.

Value of Exposing Students to Controversial Ideas

An exact replica of results showed that teachers also agreed that exposing students to the concept of institutional oppression through race, gender, and class is a good idea.

Involving Students in Decision-Making

However, a mode of 6 and a mean of 5 indicated a slight hesitation around including students in the curricular decision-making process.

Points of Agreement. The qualitative information gathered from the survey confirmed the sentiments unveiled in the agreement data. Teachers acknowledged that their students both yearned for historical truth and deserved access to it, regardless of the challenges teaching controversial topics may present.

Potential for Dissent. Some dissent appeared in participants' responses, but teachers were largely in agreement about the necessity of and appropriateness of addressing issues of controversy. Indeed, multiple respondents mentioned equity as a reason for including these topics in public education. Some claimed that students in poverty deserved to know about institutions of oppression in order to gain the power—through knowledge and understanding—to change the status quo.

Teaching and Reading to Children about Controversial Topics. Answers were similar

when respondents confronted the issue of agency and age. The survey asked participants for their level of agreement with the statement: "Children's books with a complex message or historical narrative are appropriate for learning about history in elementary school" (*Henry's Freedom Box*, *It's OK to be Different*, etc.). The mode for agreement was 7 and the mean was 6. A similar pattern indicated that teachers agreed with the appropriateness of teaching elementary-aged children (aged 5-12) about race, gender, and class, as seen in the mode of 7 and mean of 5.

Years of Experience and Beliefs about Student Agency. The study uncovered a relationship between teachers' years of experience and their beliefs about student agency. Participants with more years of experience responded with a lower mean than did teachers with few years of experience. Teachers with 11-15 years in education responded with an agreement level mean of 4.2 to the statement: "Secondary students should be able to participate in some way in the curricular decision-making process (what is taught and how)." This figure decreased for teachers with 16-20 years of experience, with 4.5 being the mean response. The figure steadily decreased by years of experience, with teachers reporting 0-1 years of experience and 2-5 years of experience both agreeing with the statement at a mean level of 5.7.

Years of Experience and Critical Thinking. Similar results suggested teachers' confidence in their students' capacity for critical thinking about controversial issues: Teachers with 0-1 years of experience agreed at a mean level of 7 and teachers with 16-20 years of experience agreed at a mean level of 5.9.

Approaches to Involving Students in Decision-Making. Participants provided a wide variety of responses about district-, school-, and class-level engagement in decision-making in the social sciences. Many teachers offered students the opportunity to express their opinions about what and how they learn. Some teachers immerse students in civic engagement in their

classrooms, inviting them to debate and choose topics of interest. Some teachers acknowledged the lack of student voice in schools and districts. State standards can be a barrier to presenting controversial topics; often, states and/or districts ban these topics entirely or create a framework that limits teachers' ability to address them. Meanwhile, in states like California, concerted efforts to revamp curricula to buttress culturally relevant teaching are underway.

Political Affiliation and Teaching Controversial Topics

Conservatives' Willingness to Treat Sensitive Issues in Class. While the politics of an area may influence the teaching of controversial topics, the only relationship between teachers' reported political affiliation and engagement with controversial topics was found in the levels of exposure to or engagement with the roles of race, gender, and/or class in the U.S. legal system. Libertarians were the most likely to engage their students with the roles of race, gender, and class in the U.S. legal system, with a mean frequency of 7. Participants who chose not to share their political affiliation taught these concepts at a mean frequency of 4. Teachers with no affiliation were similar in their responses, with a mean of 4.6 and liberal teachers answered at 4.9. Participants reflecting conservative or somewhat conservative political affiliations tended to present these topics more, with means frequencies of 5.2 and 5.6, respectively. This data revealed a surprising link between conservative leanings and a willingness to teach controversial topics in class. This unexpected relationship does not comport with statements disseminated by the national media about the public perception of controversial topics in public education. In fact, this relationship actually further sustains the claim that teachers are not inculcating liberal-leaning principles in their classrooms.

Self-Reporting. One may wonder about how participants self-reported in this question, since an underpinning theme of the survey was to find out whether teachers are capable of being

fair and unbiased. Answering a certain way may be a result of wanting to appear less biased and any possible overcorrection in this response could skew the data, however, that is a cynical conclusion.

Additional Research Potential. Much more research along these lines could be beneficial, especially if students could rate their own perceptions of agency and those could be compared with how their teachers rated them. This question is also a Catch-22, since it is challenging to know what students can handle if teachers are not consistently presenting those issues to them at earlier ages and teaching the skills for having critical discussions over time. Perhaps a systematic approach to teaching discussion, debate, and research skills beginning in the younger years could produce higher levels of engagement and agency among secondary students.

One consideration is the experience teachers have had with student advisors, as states, districts, and schools vary in their approaches to include voices from various stakeholders. In North Carolina, Superintendent Catherine Truitt has a student advisory committee composed of eight juniors and four seniors from around the state. These students develop proposals for changes in legislation during their service on the committee (NC DPI, 2022). A community college student writer cited lack of student representation as a problem in Illinois. Kramer (2021) indicated that only a small percentage of students in the Unit 5 District were of age to vote and would leave the district after graduation very soon; even if they voted for school board members, their vote may not mean much after their departure and leaves "over 13,000 students without any real representation, without a voice." Kramer added,

> While minors cannot legally represent themselves by voting, Illinois state law provides
>
> for a student member to serve on the Board of Education in an advisory role. To fairly

represent the group most impacted, there must be a student member on the Unit 5 School

Board. (2021)

Other areas may invite students to advise on "support," but make no mention of

curricular decision-making, as is the case with Edmonds School District (2022) in Washington

state. Of thirty-one states, local districts have the option of inviting students to serve as

representatives on the board. Maryland is the only state that allows students voting power in that

role and "just 14 percent of the country's 495 largest districts have student members" (VOA

Learning English, 2022). Thus, the variety of experiences from state to state and district to

district may affect teachers' assumptions about students' capacity for participation in decision-

making in the shaping of curricula.

Teachers' Beliefs about the Purpose of Education

Secondary Research Question 4 asked: How do secondary teachers view the purpose of

public education in the United States, specifically as it relates to the teaching or censorship of

controversial topics? Teachers answered this question consistently, stating that public education

was a tool for the preservation of a modern, functional democracy.

Teaching for a Competent Citizenry

Ideally, students learn to be good, productive citizens with a base knowledge and critical

thinking skills that prepare them for their adult lives. A base knowledge and critical thinking

skills should allow young people to understand the basics of democracy and create agency within

them to participate productively in society. For some survey respondents, controversial topics

must be included in the social sciences classroom at the secondary level in order to foster this

critical thinking and engage students with their world. For others, basic "facts" and traditional

"history" are sufficient to create good citizens.

Nuanced Responses. Teachers' responses were nuanced, even though very few participants were so conservative about their beliefs that they echoed strong statements from the national debate on controversial topics in public education. Generally, participants acknowledged in their responses that the issue was not black or white; rather, the shades of gray meant that although controversial topics should be taught, there was no one right way to do so. Beliefs about the purpose of education range from "bring[ing] forth one's true power" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, p. 21) to "achiev[ing] social justice and equity" (Brown & Brown, 2010, p. 139) and "help[ing] society evolve through evidence-based logic and collective action" (Tannebaum, 2020, p. 7). If the public agrees on this type of power emanating from public education, there is too much at stake for the debate over how education is implemented to be resolved soon.

Relationship of Participants' Demographics with Beliefs

Secondary Research Question 5 asked: How are respondents' demographics related to attitudes surrounding student agency, curricular decision-making, and the teaching of controversial topics in secondary social sciences courses? The researcher expected to see more correlations in this area. There were no relationships between socioeconomic upbringing and treatment of classism; neither was personal religious experience related to the discussion of the Church or religion in U.S. politics, history, or culture. Participants' race or gender did not impact how often they taught about oppression with race or gender. The state of teaching assignment or immigrant status did not correlate with any answers. The study only showed relationships between political affiliation and exposure to controversial topics and participants' years of experience and convictions about student agency. While results were not necessarily expected, some findings were essential to further understanding teaching and learning.

Implications for Practice

One of the goals of the study was to confirm the suggestion that students could participate in meaningful ways in the development of their curriculum in the social sciences in the secondary plan of study. This remains a goal: perhaps with more research, school leadership will increase their efforts at including the students themselves in the decision-making process. If the purpose of public education aligns with a healthy democracy, it makes sense to give students opportunities to participate in activities that allow them to think critically and contribute to decision-making in an informed, intellectual way. As districts approach these types of decisions, they should examine how they use the processes they have developed to incorporate life lessons for their students into the processes.

While the study produced mixed results regarding beliefs about student agency and policies for participation in decision-making processes, the results indicated a need for more study on the topic. As defined in Chapter 2, agency involves efficacy, or one's capacity to carefully weigh options before making a decision, along with self-regulation and self-reflection (Moses et al., 2018). Whether agency is psychologically, socially, or politically motivated, or if it is, perhaps, a communication issue, such skills can and must be visited in the classroom. If teachers offer students opportunities to make judgements—even in contrived scenarios— scaffolding, independent learning, and reflection can all lead to more agency in the nation's youth. The national debate over students' readiness for controversial issues does not contain questions about how to systematically "ready" them for exposure. When regional political control over public education interferes, students' exposure to, learning about, and practice with decision-making and critical thinking may depend strictly on their zip codes.

The study results do not necessarily confirm Solhaug's (2018) "citizenship perspective," in which, in the minds of their teachers, students are citizens with rights rather than "citizens 'in

the making" (p. 2). However, it is clear from survey responses that teachers largely believe in public education as a vehicle for producing a competent citizenry. Teachers commented on equity and saw knowledge as a means for socioeconomic transformation in some cases. Teaching about oppressive systems sows the seeds of change in the minds of young people, according to many teachers.

Recommendations for Further Research

The researcher found that there was a lack of research on student agency. Vaughn (2018) highlighted the lack of understanding surrounding student agency:

The precise definition of student agency remains elusive not just among educators, but also among scholars who study it. While it is easy to give a broad definition of agency—in general, it refers to students' ability to define and act on their own goals—it can be hard to pin down the details. (p. 63).

Some potential topics that warrant further research include:

- An examination of student agency at different ages

- How to promote and scaffold opportunities for student agency at different ages

- The effect of educators' religious experiences/upbringing on teaching decisions, beliefs, and behaviors using qualitative data

- A comparison of social sciences curricula in different states

- A comparison of state-prescribed social sciences curricula and national/international curricula like International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement and

- The efficacy of state, national, and international curricula, based on college students' preparedness.

Another fascinating area of research is marketing within education and the view of

education as both process and product (Grewal et al., 2022). When viewed as a commodity, parents and students are consumers of a product costing taxpayers $762 billion per year to fund elementary and secondary schools, while producing a revenue of more than $650 million per year for colleges and universities, nearly equaling the combined revenue for Amazon, Microsoft, Google, and Apple in 2018. Elementary and secondary school and district leaders must consider how they market this product to maintain or increase enrollment, leading to federal dollars; therefore, the attention on how and what students learn deserves the careful focus of leaders in the field.

Finally, studying student agency from the student's perspective is crucial. What do students believe about their competence? If Moses et al. (2020) were right in calling agency/efficacy "people's beliefs about their ability to control events" (p. 213), how do students' own beliefs about their agency affect their desire to participate in education? Teachers who reflect on students' apathy toward their learning may consider questioning students about their beliefs, starting with how much of their learning they think they can control. A potential next step would then be to ask them what they want to control, or at least influence. Perhaps giving a survey about their learning is putting the cart before the horse if the teacher is unaware of a student's belief about their power.

Limitations

At first, posting the survey on social media did not garner many responses. However, the researcher continued posting strategically by joining teacher groups on Facebook, asking other educators to post in their own teacher groups, and adding posts to TikTok and Reddit. The desire was for a national perspective, with an opportunity to delve into results from California and North Carolina, if possible. While these two states and Texas accounted for most of the

responses, there was no correlation between state of teaching assignment and other responses. Future studies may reveal more if one district from each state is targeted for the survey. However, even districts within the same state can have significant policy differences.

It remains unclear if teachers may also be wary—or even weary—of taking surveys, if they were not interested in the topic of controversy, if they simply did not have the spare time to take the survey, or if they feared putting their thoughts in writing, despite assurances of privacy, anonymity, and encryption of their answers. It is also not clear if the choice of Facebook groups or TikTok tags skewed participation. Teachers may have gravitated toward or stayed away from hints of critical race theory, for instance.

Some of the wording and answer choices were clumsy. Other questions offered too many choices or were difficult to work with because of the "check all that apply" instruction. Questions about what materials and methods teachers used were not helpful in this study. This question would have held more relevance had more teachers responded to the survey, since there was no way to correlate demographics with teaching decisions. This also took so much time that teachers may have been fatigued toward the end, where the more complex, open-ended questions appeared.

Delimitations

Initially, the researcher attempted to survey teachers and their students. The second survey targeted students who had graduated high school within the last four years. While a few votes were received on some TikTok video polls, the results were not plentiful or reliable enough for inclusion in the study. Therefore, the researcher only worked with teacher submissions and focused on their beliefs about student agency. While this was not the original plan for the study, it provided an opportunity to pay more attention to one facet of the teaching and learning of

controversial topics. Having the opinions and experiences of students may have been too broad for the study.

Conclusions

Although respondents to the teacher survey reported some similar demographics, there is no one version of what a social sciences teacher is. The teachers had different levels of experience, varied reasons for choosing education as a career, a wide variety of certifications, and differing thoughts about student agency, curricular decision-making, and how and what students learn. There is no one teacher profile that should promote anger, fear, disdain, or disrespect among the public. Teachers are much like their students in that their life experiences differ, as do their beliefs and abilities. The most surprising finding may shock opponents of culturally relevant teaching: the more conservative the teacher is, the more likely they are to include controversial topics in their instruction. Teachers of all political affiliations believe that students both need to examine and deserve to know about the complications and complexities of the world around them.

Common among the participants were altruism and hope for a productive, functional, fair, and equitable society. Teachers are not likely to enter the field to indoctrinate young people. In fact, teachers enter the field for altruistic, practical, and selfish reasons. The study illustrates that practicing teachers still believe in what they do and understand that theirs is a worthy career that contributes to a functioning society. Despite challenges, especially those hardships coming from outside the profession, teachers indicated that they believe in what they do and have pure motives for continuing their work.

Regarding student agency, suggestions for teachers abound. Vaughn (2018) told teachers to "be alert to students' readiness," to examine practices and materials for opportunities for

compatibility with student agency, and to start at a higher level of freedom, scaling back if necessary (pp. 65-66). Williams (2017) invited educators to be comfortable with relinquishing their control in the classroom. In order to promote agency within literacy education, the author suggested that teachers resist the urge to override students' reading selections and strive for "authentic connections with student learning" (pp. 13-14). Zacarian and Silverstone (2020) covered everything from the physical environment of the classroom to strategies for self-directed learning and supporting self-reflection. The authors include a list of words that describe the empowered student, noting that the phrase "empowered student" is itself a paradox in modern education. However, inconsistent implementation—or permission for implementation—of supports for student agency represent a barrier to creating an ideal learning environment where students take part in making decisions, learn to think critically, and explore their interests, regardless of associated controversy.

Summary

Although this study had challenges and flaws, it allowed insight into some teachers' beliefs about student agency, curricular decision-making, and the teaching and learning of controversial topics. The field of critical race theory is often misunderstood by non-academics but serves as the perfect tool to observe institutions like education and to provide recommendations for providing equitable experiences for all public-school students throughout the United States. Knowledge is indeed power and ensuring equity in this way gives power to the powerless and voice to the voiceless. In this way, society can be improved and democracy can be preserved, simply by investing in education and trusting professional educators enough to engage in open dialogue about what is best for young people to learn and experience.

The study exposes the lack of clarity about student agency, beliefs educators hold about

their students' capacity for critical examination of controversial topics, and inconsistent policies for promoting student agency within education. If educators themselves are not entirely clear on whether students can at least inform decisions about their studies, change is likely to be slow and haphazard at best.

This study shed light on a long history of political disagreement and wrangling for power over public education, continuing to the present day and into the future. Disagreements over policy will not abate until stakeholders can agree upon the purpose of public education, students' capacity for examining critical issues about history and society, and teachers' and families' roles in that examination. Beliefs about the purpose of education provide a foundation for moving forward with or without student input. If students are citizens—or at least citizens in the making, their voices matter. If education is about maintaining the status quo for a factory-based, patently inequitable society, students' opinions will go unheard. Perhaps teachers' opinions will, too.

A laudable, long-term goal for the educational leader is to "effect deep and equitable change [and] to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice" (Shields, 2018, p. vii). Leaders who "exhibit moral courage" can create safe and effective places of learning like Vital High School, a majority-minority school in the Midwest that "changed from a place of mistrust and hierarchical leadership to one of collaboration, energy, and communication" (Shields, 2018, p. 10). School leaders should be transformative— they should be prepared to "take a stand, embrace the chaos and ambiguity, focus on information sharing and relationships, and develop a strong sense of the core organizational vision" (Shields, 2018, p. 11). The missing piece here, though, is what happens to students when they enter the so-called "real world" where social justice is not necessarily a reality. Creating a utopic learning environment is a start, but it does not solve the inherent problems of a society that cannot agree

on how to educate its young people. When significant swaths of society are at odds with—or simply cannot agree on—the tenets of public education, school reform will only disrupt social injustice to an extent. The decision-making process could be the ideal starting point for effective reform of American public schools.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Survey: Social Science Teachers' Opinions on Student Agency in Curricular Decision-Making

Questions for the teacher survey include demographics such as level of education, ethnic identity, gender identity, family background (regarding immigration), socioeconomic background, and religious and political affiliations or exposure. Teaching experience and attitudes questions include:

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. What certifications do you have?

3. What led to you to the teaching profession?

4. Why did you choose to teach social sciences?

5. What is your opinion regarding the purpose of public education?

6. Which social sciences courses have you taught and at what levels (regular, IB, AP, etc.)?

7. Describe the demographics of your school to the best of your knowledge.

8. In your history, civics, social studies, or other social science course(s), how often did you engage students with the following: textbooks, trade books, websites, blogs, primary sources, service-learning projects, maps and globes, debates, timelines, social media, etc.?

9. Choose a level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

   o My students learn(ed) an adequate amount about U.S. history to understand the past and present.

   o I offer(ed) my students opportunities to think critically about controversial issues

in U.S. history and culture.

o Teaching controversial topics should be optional for teachers.

o Teachers tend to indoctrinate students with liberal-leaning ideals.

o Teachers are capable of presenting two opposing viewpoints without pushing their personal opinions.

o Secondary-level students should be exposed to ideas of institutional oppression through race, gender, and class.

o Secondary-level students have the capacity to think critically about controversial issues in their world.

o It is appropriate to expose elementary-aged children (5-12) to stories/ideas about race, gender, and class.

o Children's books with a complex message or historical narrative are appropriate for learning about history in elementary school (Henry's Freedom Box; It's OK to be Different, etc.).

o Exposure to controversial ideas about history and culture are most appropriate for high-school-aged students.

o Controversial issues are best left to parents to discuss with their children, regardless of the student's age or grade level.

o I am confident my students are competent to engage in a democratic society based on their high-school social sciences learning.

o Students must learn about controversial ideas to be good citizens.

o Secondary students should be able to participate in some way in the curricular decision-making process (what is taught and how).

10. How did your students voice their opinions, either in your class, on an advisory panel, or before the school board, regarding their preferences for what and how they were learning? *Please explain.*

11. Do you have any final thoughts to share about critical race theory in education?