Divergent Views of Race: Examining Whiteness in the U.S. History Classroom

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In this study, a teacher-researcher examined his students’ conceptions of Whiteness within U.S. history courses at an ethnically and economically diverse urban high school. Using critical race theory as the lens, this mixed method study found most students could explain the role of race in history. Students of color were more likely to express racism is common in the current day, while White students were more likely to express racism as uncommon. Whites were more likely to express racism as on a dramatic decline or the result of a few individuals. This study highlights the positive impact a race-conscious social studies classroom can have on all students. It also shows the many barriers teachers face in helping White students understand their roles in a system privileging them because of their skin color.

Key words: U.S. history, Whiteness, critical race theory, multicultural education, secondary education, teacher research, practitioner research

Introduction

Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This inequity is perpetuated by a system of White privilege allowing specific social, cultural, and economic advantages for Whites (Ladson-Billings & Tate; McIntosh, 2003). Various scholars have described this institutionalized power as “Whiteness” (Chubbuck, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, & Chennault, 2000; McIntyre, 1997; Skattebol, 2005; Sleeter, 2001, 2008; Tatum, 1994, 1997). As a school subject, social studies seems best suited to help students understand issues of race and power (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2003). Many social studies teachers, yet, do not make examining race a substantial component of their classrooms (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Howard, 2003, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Tyson, 2003).

Taking an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) in my practice, as a White social studies teacher at an ethnically and economically diverse urban high school, I wanted to better understand my students’ beliefs about race and their conceptions of Whiteness in both U.S. history and the present day. Unlike other fields, such as mathematics or English education, there has been limited related teacher research published in social studies (Manfra, 2009). It has been argued that teacher research offers an important source in understanding culturally relevant teaching rooted in the naturalistic setting of the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To better understand the role of race in my classroom, I conducted this study to answer the following research questions: What are my students’ conceptions of race or ethnicity and Whiteness within the social studies classroom? How do those conceptions of race relate to my instruction and the U.S. history curriculum?

Theoretical Framework

Social studies teachers generally have ignored the issue of race as an institutionalized and politically oppressive construction (Tyson, 2003). Instead, Cynthia Tyson argued, social studies should focus on the role race has played in past and present social inequity. Aligned with that
stance, in this study I used critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997) to analyze my teaching practices, and the reactions of my students, in the U.S. history classroom. CRT has three main assertions. First, race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States. This assertion is supported by evidence from historical and present-day statistics on social gaps (i.e. poverty rates, employment levels, health care access, educational opportunities). Because of such supportive evidence, race, I argue, should be at the center of any analysis of past or present social inequity in the U.S. history classroom.

Second, U.S. society is based on property rights, rather than human rights, which has persisted since the nation’s founding. Throughout its history, from slavery and forced relocation of the Indigenous people to reservations, to racial segregation, to redlining practices, and to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the United States has emphasized the protection and expansion of White property rights at the expense of people of color. The social studies curriculum, additionally, can be considered another form of property, which is principally produced by Whites. As a result of a White-produced curriculum, students of color are often confined to learning White perspectives of U.S. history. Conversely, Tyrone Howard (2003) has argued that the social studies curriculum must be more race-conscious and place race and racism at the center. Students should not only learn the diverse narratives that frame U.S. history, but they should also be equipped to challenge accounts that present history from only White perspectives.

Third, the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social inequity. In the U.S. history classroom, teachers should have their students use race as a lens to examine past and present events and help students see racism as a system of advantage based on race. Such consideration involves the teacher helping students see the complex causality, often involving race, of past events, and connecting past racial inequity to present day racial inequity.

In this study, I also used the critical White framework (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), which sets out to specifically examine constructions of Whiteness. This framework includes investigations of the meaning of Whiteness (Chubbuck, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe et al., 2000; McIntyre, 1997; Skattebol, 2005; Sleeter, 2001, 2008; Tatum, 1994, 1997) or the institutionalized power associated with being White and the privileges afforded those who belong to the dominant racial group in the United States. As a White social studies teacher, I employed CRT to challenge the institutionalized power that privileges Whites in an attempt to better serve the needs of my students of color, as well as my White students. I intentionally racialized the curriculum in my U.S. history courses and made the relationship between race and power a central component. While the state-mandated history curriculum framework is heavily oriented toward the experiences of White Americans, I included many missing events related to the history of Black, Latino, Asian, and Indigenous people in my curriculum (i.e., the Haitian Revolution, slave revolts, the Zoot Suit Riots, the Detroit Race Riots, the Black Panthers, the Second Battle of Wounded Knee, the Boston busing crisis, the L.A. Riots, Hurricane Katrina). I designed class work, assignments, and projects based on a more racially inclusive view of history. To have students read competing documents or interpretations of the past rooted in the experiences of people of color, I used teacher-created reading packets in place of the textbook. Students (including White students) were encouraged to incorporate their racial and ethnic histories into class discussions (cf. Martell, 2013; Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2012)
Literature Review

Over the past 15 years, only a small number of studies published have examined how race is taught in the social studies classroom (Castro, Hawkman, & Diaz, 2015; Chandler & McKnight, 2009). Several studies, however, offer important insight into how race is or is not taught in the social studies classroom. In their study of students in an eighth grade history class, Dario Almarza and Bruce Fehn (1998) found Mexican American students recognized the dominance of their teachers’ “White” approach to history, which ultimately led to resentment of both the subject of history and of their teacher. In another study of an eighth grade history class with a race-conscious focus, Howard’s (2004) findings revealed that most of the students’ previous social studies courses were race-invisible; students viewed social studies as a place to study the past, not the role of race in the past, and most students believed their social studies teachers rarely discussed race. In a study of two teachers co-teaching a high school interdisciplinary history and English language arts course, Jane Bolgatz’s (2005) results showed that, by making race an explicit component of the course, the teachers encouraged students to openly discuss race. In a case study of one White teacher in a predominately White district attempting to incorporate controversial issues into her teaching, Elizabeth Washington and Emma Humphries (2011) exhibited evidence that disclosing personal viewpoints on race-related controversial events involved a professional risk and, subsequently, teachers were more likely to do so if they had a more professional experience. Through teacher research, Christopher Martell’s (2013) showed findings of the positive impact of culturally relevant pedagogy for students of color, but Brazilian, Latino, and Asian students said their histories should be more prevalent in the curriculum. In a case study of one Latino social studies teacher who made race a major theme in his teaching, Antonio Castro et al.’s (2015) findings illuminated that teaching race involves personal disclosure and counter-storytelling, the unpacking or racial myths and inequities, and the constructions of a “counterspace where students can voice their experiences” (p. 142).

Much of the work investigating race and the history classroom comes from Epstein and her co-researchers. In a study of Black and White students engaged in an historical inquiry, Terrie Epstein (1998) found White students’ perspectives were more aligned with those they had learned in school, while Black students’ perspectives were more aligned with their own or family’s experiences, which were often marked by racial oppression or discrimination. In her study of history students in an urban school, Epstein (2000) revealed the White students believed their teacher had taught everybody’s history, while Black students believed they had learned very little about people of color. Through a long-term ethnographic study, Epstein (2009) uncovered White students had historical interpretations similar to those of their teachers, while students of all ethnic backgrounds tended to ignore the teacher or historical texts that were not aligned with their pre-instructional views of the past. In a study of one urban history teacher’s attempt to use culturally responsive practices, Terrie Epstein, Edwin Mayorga, and Joseph Nelson (2011) showed evidence that students develop a positive understanding of history and a more complex understanding of historical racism as a result of a history curriculum connected to their racial and ethnic identities. In the same study, however, students were less responsive to the teacher’s attempt to teach the diversity within the experiences of White Americans in history. While these studies examined the teaching of race in social studies courses, there is little examination of White privilege or Whiteness. Most studies examined teachers and their classrooms from an
outsider’s perspective, with an absence of the emic or insider perspective. This study attempted to fill both these gaps in the research on race in the social studies classroom.

**Method**

In this study, I employed mixed methodology through practitioner research to critically examine my practices as a high school social studies teacher and my students’ learning in my history courses. Practitioner research allows teachers to learn through a critical and systematic examination of their work. Similar to some forms of outsider or etic perspectives in qualitative research, the practitioner researcher attempts to capture the experience of participants. Yet, insider or emic perspectives often are missing from traditional forms of educational research. While an insider perspective has constraints, it can also be an asset, revealing insights often overlooked from the etic perspective. Although practitioner research is often used to inform local practice, it also can have global application informing the practices of others. In this capacity, practitioner research can be a vital bridge from local knowledge to public knowledge of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). As such, this work intended to ultimately inform the practices of other teachers and teacher educators.

I worked from a position of inquiry as stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), where a practitioner researcher adopts a critical and systematic examination of her or his practice. This was not a one-time project, but part of a larger professional commitment, where I engaged in repeating cycles of inquiry. This work did not seek to only confirm that my practices were successful, as it revealed areas of success, but it also provided exposed shortcomings and struggles. Practitioner research intentionally examines issues of equity, power, and social justice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In this work, I took on the dual role of teacher and researcher to challenge the status quo, which perpetuates power structures and continues to maintain inequity.

The participants for this study were the students in my U.S. history courses at an economically, racially, and linguistically diverse urban high school of approximately 2,200 students. The school is located in a former New England factory town, which experienced an economic decline in the 1980s. Traditionally an immigrant community, the town is home to a diverse group of immigrants and migrants from South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. Brazilians are one of the largest immigrant populations in the community, and the town has one of the highest percentages of Brazilians in the United States. This study included one honors-level and one lower-level sophomore U.S. History I class and two regular-level junior U.S. History II classes. The students’ racial makeup was 43% White, 17% Brazilian, 15% Latino/a, 7% Asian, 4% Black, and 14% multiracial. Of my students, 35% identified themselves as having a language other than English as their first language, and 41% were immigrants or children of immigrants.

The data for this study were derived through four sources: survey, interview, teacher observations, classroom artifacts, and student work. This study used what Creswell and Plano Clark (2006) labeled an embedded mixed method design, where one data set provides a supportive secondary role to the primary data set. I embedded a statistical analysis of closed-response survey data within a larger qualitative analysis of interview, teacher observations, classroom artifacts, and open-response survey data.

I generated survey questions based on the study’s research questions and CRT, with the purpose of investigating students’ perceptions of Whiteness and its relation to their race and ethnicity. The survey included 28 Likert-style response items, 8 demographic items, and 4 open-response items on their perceptions of Whiteness and history. To increase validity, I pilot tested
the survey questions with a colleague’s students. During this pilot, students were asked to take
the survey and circle the individual questions they found confusing or difficult to answer.
Students were then asked to explain why they found those questions confusing or difficult to
answer. I considered these students’ comments in my revisions of the survey into its final form.
The survey was administered to all my history students (N = 75). The Likert-style and
demographic items were anonymous, while students had the option of including their name on
the open-response items. Descriptive statistics were used to determine general patterns in
student responses to the closed-question items, and I conducted independent samples t-tests on
all questions to compare students of color to White students. (See Appendix A for the complete
survey).

Following the survey, I conducted a purposeful selection, choosing 13 students based on
two factors: their representation of the racial or ethnic diversity of my students and their
willingness to be interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. A semi-
structured interview protocol consisting of eight questions was used, with questions grouped
around two themes related to race and learning history and the students’ backgrounds. I recorded
and transcribed the interviews. (The interview protocol is in Appendix B.) The qualitative data
were coded thematically, and I generated and tested assertions from the data. Table 1 shows the
background and characteristics of the 13 interview participants.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity, Gender</th>
<th>Grade/Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuck</td>
<td>White male</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>White male</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dante</td>
<td>Brazilian male</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>White female</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-Pierre</td>
<td>Black male</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamelia</td>
<td>Black female</td>
<td>11th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keiko</td>
<td>Asian and White female</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>White male</td>
<td>11th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcelo</td>
<td>Brazilian male</td>
<td>11th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafaela</td>
<td>Brazilian female</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Throughout the year, I kept several different memo pads in my pocket and noted various observations of students related to race and Whiteness. Artifacts in the form of student work and my class handouts were also collected.

In the first stage of the qualitative analysis, I took multiple passes through the raw data. This process involved three thorough readings through all of my interviews, observations, classroom artifacts, and open-ended survey data, taking extensive notes with each reading. After a rough coding of the data using a coding scheme based on my research questions, I used the work of Frederick Erickson (1986) for guidance in the generation of assertions and then preliminary testing of those assertions. Assertions with evidentiary warrant are displayed in my qualitative findings. Finally, final coding of the data occurred in an iterative coding process, where my codes remained flexible, working through cycles of induction and deduction to power the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thirty individual codes were organized into two categories: student identity and teacher identity. There were also several “in vivo” codes, or “phrases that are used repeatedly by informants” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 61). The in vivo codes included: “Equality,” “History as Progress,” “Personal Experience with Racism,” “Racialize History,” “Racism is Individual,” “Racism Only in South,” “Racism is Stereotype,” and “White Social Power.”

At the same time, there are limitations to this study. The results of this study were specific to this particular classroom. Although the students offered key insights into their experiences, the results are not transferable to students in other school contexts. The researcher’s relationship with the students as their teacher might have influenced how students answered questions (i.e. wanting to please the teacher). To assure my students would be honest in answering interview questions (and less influenced by my status as their teacher), interviews were voluntary and collected in the last month of school (when grades were nearly complete). Before the interviews, I emphasized verbally, and through an informed consent form, that their interview would in no way impact grades and their honesty would help me improve my teaching.

**Results**

This study had several key findings. First, most students identified racial discrimination as having a major impact on history. Second, most students expressed views that society has historically been based on property rights at the expense of human rights, which is a main assertion of CRT. Third, despite similar views of race in history, White students and students of color had generally divergent conceptions of race in the present. Fourth, the race-conscious focus of my history courses appeared to help my White students see White privilege in the past, but it was less successful at helping them see their White privilege in the present, which is an important component of CRT. Fifth, many students noted that racism is an individual problem, not necessarily a problem with the system or related to power structures. As a result, many students believed racism was on the way to being ended.

**Race in the Past**

Most students identified racial discrimination as being a major factor in history. In the survey, 89% of students agreed or strongly agreed that White people discriminated against
people of color in the past, and 91% of students agreed or strongly agreed that White people had more power in the past. An independent-samples t-test was conducted on both questions to compare the responses of White students and students of color, with no significant difference found in the responses of White students and students of color (Table 2). In the interviews, students described specific events in detail that were examples of race playing a role in history. The students most commonly cited slavery, the Trail of Tears, the California Gold Rush, sharecropping, the Civil War, Japanese Internment during World War II, Jim Crow segregation laws and civil rights protests, and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots as race-related events.

Of these events, 10 of the 13 interviewed students specifically used the California Gold Rush as one of their examples of racial discrimination. The Gold Rush has been taught traditionally from a Euro-centric perspective. The typical textbook narrative of the Gold Rush depicts it as White Americans flooding into the West in search of riches. Although in recent years, more attention has been paid to the role of the Chinese in the Gold Rush, it is still predominantly framed as a part of the White conquest of the West. In my teaching, I had intentionally designed my lessons on the Gold Rush to better reflect the diversity of the groups involved and the power structure that existed in California at the time. This included having students: watch a documentary on the Gold Rush that examined numerous racial perspectives, engage in a simulation involving a gold hunt following rules that represented the power structure of the time, and participate in an activity that has students use statistics to better understand the racial demographics of California in 1850 and today. Chuck, a White student, said, “An example is the California Gold Rush, the Chinese, they were treated very badly, because they couldn’t even mine the same place as Whites. Latinos were kicked out by the Whites” (Interview, May 22, 2012). Rafaela, a Brazilian student, said,

In the Gold Rush, Mexican people were there first… [but] as soon as the Whites started to hear about it… [they] sort of just left behind their scraps for other races to collect and I think that wasn’t really fair, because the White people had all of the advantages.

(Interview, May 29, 2012)

These quotes directly aligned with the activity students did in class, which simulated the social inequity of the period. Having my students explore the advantages or disadvantages of the Gold Rush, appeared to leave a strong impression on their understanding of race and its impact on this historical event.

Property Rights Over Human Rights

In interviews, students frequently expressed views aligned with the concept that society has been based on property rights rather than human rights, which is a major assertion of CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). This was generally expressed in terms of Whites holding property or treating others as property. Rafaela, a Brazilian student said, “In history, Black people didn’t have the same advantages [as Whites], because they were treated as property. Then they were constantly in debt because they were uneducated” (Interview, May 29, 2012).

Related to their power as property owners, students also included direct references to Whites using political and social power to prevent people of color from having human rights. In the interviews and survey open-response items, almost all the students cited one or multiple historical examples. Dante, a Brazilian student, said,

Honestly, I think that the Whites have always had more racism in the past, just from past events in history. Because you know White people were the ones to kick out the Natives
from their land and exterminated a lot of Natives. And White people are the ones who brought all the slaves over [from Africa]. (Interview, May 23, 2012)

While Elizabeth, a White student, said, “There was … Manifest Destiny. When Whites were forcing Indians out of their own land, on to reservations, without their consent” (Interview, May 29, 2012). Jean-Pierre, a Black student from Haiti, said, Back in the day, they use to have a Black school and White. Usually the White school have better supplies. Like better books and better teachers. Where like the Blacks, they didn’t have that much like books. So the Whites, they would have a better education than the Blacks. (Interview, May 23, 2012)

The examples the students presented of racial discrimination and lack of human rights included the oppression of Blacks, Asians, Latinos, and American Indians by Whites. 

Several students included immigrants as a group within the category of people of color. When I probed the students on their conflation of immigrant and people of color, most students said that immigrants to the United States today come from Latin America, Asia, or Africa. Dante, a Brazilian student, echoed this when he said, “When people think of immigrants, they think of Mexicans” (Interview, May 23, 2012). The students in this study generally viewed immigration as an issue rooted in communities of color, and especially the Latino and Asian communities.

The students also supplied counter-examples from history where both Whites and people of color worked for human rights by attempting to end racial discrimination and oppression. Dante, a Brazilian male, said, “A lot of White people did [try to stop racism]. There were a lot of White people who were abolitionists, tried to end slavery” (Interview, May 23, 2012). Mark, a White student, said, Mostly the abolitionists, mostly in the north during the same time, they wanted and acted to help free slaves and help promote equality and idea that would last more than, instead of just freeing people and trying to end the whole system. (Interview, May 21, 2012)

Leilah, a Brazilian student, wrote, “I believe White people have helped reduce racism, but I don’t believe that they have been the leaders of the protests and movement to stop racism” (Survey, May 17, 2012). From the responses by all students, there is some evidence that my class was successful in helping many of my students see a race-conscious history (Howard, 2003; Tyson, 2003). Unlike the findings of Epstein (1998, 2000, 2009), which showed important differences between Black and White students’ conceptions of history, in this particular context, White students and students of color appeared to have very similar conceptions of race in the past.

**Race in the Present**

A key assertion of CRT is that race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity. As such, I examined the students’ views of race and inequity in the present. Despite the students’ similar views of race in history, White students and students of color had different conceptions of race in the present. While many students of color said racism is still very common and supplied numerous examples of racism in the current day, White students were more likely to say racism is uncommon and usually the result of a small minority of individuals.

Students of color supplied numerous personal examples, or examples from their families, experiences demonstrating discrimination or oppression. Jean-Pierre, a Black student from Haiti, said,
My grandfather used to tell me that in America, if you apply for a job, and your skin color is black or dark, and the White person applies for the same job, the White guy will go and get the job. (Interview, May 23, 2012)

Greg, a biracial student, who is Black and White, wrote, “People view [Blacks] as criminals or up to no good” (Survey, May 17, 2012). Connecting racism to his family’s experience immigrating to the United States, Dante, a Brazilian student, said,

The laws, like the Arizona immigration law, we talked about that… I think if there were more minorities in their [state house] it wouldn’t have passed because, many of those minorities might have been of Hispanic descent [and] would understand that immigrants aren’t bad people. So I think that for minorities, were more in position, more in charge, that wouldn’t happen. (Interview, May 23, 2012)

Teresa, a Latina student, who had moved from the South two years earlier, wrote,

When I lived in Alabama, the whites would get to do things toward black people or do something in school and I saw that they would get into less trouble than the black or Hispanics. (Survey, May 17, 2012)

In the light of the Trayvon Martin shooting in Florida earlier in the year, several students of color cited that specific case as an example of continued racism. Jamelia, a Black student, said,

You know, Trayvon Martin being killed, that is a great example of how racism isn’t over. He was minding his own business, walking with a soda and some Skittles, when he was attacked by that guy. It reminded me of that young kid we studied, who was murdered, Emmett Till. (Interview, May 21, 2012)

Students of color could give tangible examples of racism today from themselves or others. They could link their personal experiences facing discrimination to examples from the media.

Most of the White students in this study, however, said racism was primarily in the past, on a dramatic decline, or the result of a few individuals. These students emphasized that people can stop racism by changing their individual behaviors and that racism will end when everyone becomes colorblind. In the survey, 88% of White students responded that Whites had an advantage because of their race in the past. Of the same group, 31% responded they have an advantage today because of their race. In the survey, Sandy, a White student, wrote, “I don’t think anyone of any race has any advantage over anyone else. I think everyone has the same opportunities” (Survey, May 17, 2012). Several White students cited the election of Barack Obama as an example of how racism is now uncommon. Leonard, a White student wrote, “I don’t think whites have an advantage necessarily, because I think for one, that if we have a black president then that tells people that if you’re black or white, it doesn’t make a difference” (Survey, May 17, 2012). Many of the White students cited the equal opportunities of their peers of color at their high school or the people of color they interact with in the greater community, as well as the disadvantages they or their families had as Whites. Sinéad, a White student, wrote, “There is really no racism today. If there is, it doesn’t happen around me. Then again, I live in a white neighborhood,” adding later, “My Dad is white and he can’t get a job. No, white people don’t have an advantage” (Survey, May 17, 2012). Sinéad acknowledged that the racially segregated section of town where she lived may frame her views, but she also expressed internal frustration with the economic disadvantage of her White family. Harold, a White student, wrote, “Racists are such a minority today. There is very little people can do on a large scale. However, talking to people with ignorant views and somehow getting them to change is really all they can do” (Survey, May 17, 2012). Despite regular interactions with their peers of color, many White
students had a difficult time seeing racism as a system of disadvantage or prevalent in the community around them. In the survey and interview data, White students were more likely than students of color to view the conditions of all minority groups as improving in history (see Table 2).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students of Color M (SD)</th>
<th>White Students M (SD)</th>
<th>t-Value(^b)</th>
<th>Effect Size(^c)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In United States history, things have improved for Blacks(^a)</td>
<td>3.86 (.570)</td>
<td>4.28 (.471)</td>
<td>2.267(^*)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In United States history, things have improved for Latinos</td>
<td>3.91 (.734)</td>
<td>4.19 (.504)</td>
<td>4.601(^*)</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In United States history, things have improved for Brazilians</td>
<td>3.28 (.752)</td>
<td>3.94 (.592)</td>
<td>2.985(^*)</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In United States history, things have improved for Asians</td>
<td>3.74 (.581)</td>
<td>4.00 (.508)</td>
<td>2.027(^*)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In United States history, things have improved for American Indians</td>
<td>3.35 (.870)</td>
<td>3.72 (.772)</td>
<td>1.910</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In United States history, things have improved for Whites</td>
<td>4.00 (.742)</td>
<td>3.78 (.832)</td>
<td>1.185</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Maximum score = 5 (Strongly Agree). Multiracial students were included with the students of color.
\(^b\) Two-tailed independent t-test
\(^c\) Effect Size: Calculated using Glass's \(\Delta\); \(r^2 = t^2 / ( t^2 + df)\).

\(* p < .05\)

Minority students were less likely to state that the conditions for people of color have improved. In the interviews, students of color often said the past and present system in the United States is skewed toward Whites, when immigration, employment, or education are considered. White students were more likely than students of color to say Whites do things today to decrease racism. In the survey, 69% of White students agreed or strongly agreed that White people do things today to decrease racism, where 37% of students of color responded similarly. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare White students and students of color finding a significant difference in the scores for students of color (\(M = 3.21, SD = .773\)) compared to White students (\(M = 3.66, SD = .745\)); \(t(73) = 2.514, p = .014\).

White students were more likely to note that Whites stop racism in the present. They supplied examples such as Whites often asking people to not use racial slurs and Whites now making friends with all races. Chuck, a White student, said, “I feel like today Americans [have] found like the brighter side, and racism is less, seeing how it is really bad” (Interview, May 22, 2012). They did not exclusively hold this belief. Ana, a Latina student, said, “I think that [people of color] are treated equal now. Well, like different races … are accepted to all sorts of different schools” (Interview, June, 2012). Although most students of color expressed that racism continued to be prevalent, three students of color in the interviews or the survey said racism was essentially over.
A small group of White students, however, noted racism was common today. These students often cited examples from the media, their friends, or family members who are people of color, which appeared to influence their view that racial discrimination exists in the present. Andrew, a White student, who emphasized that many of his friends were Latino, wrote, “The whole American system was created to give whites power and leave behind any other race, even though it is improving, but still not improved enough” (Survey, May 17, 2012). Carol, a White student wrote, “In the United States, I feel whites still have an advantage due to their race. Most jobs would rather hire a white and some whites think some other ethnicities are all illegal [immigrants] and shouldn’t be hired” (Survey, May 17, 2012). Most of these students directly connected racial discrimination to economic disadvantages.

The race-conscious focus of my history courses appeared to help my White students see White privilege in the past, but it was less successful at helping them see their White privilege in the present. While students could point to many historical examples of White privilege, it was more difficult for them to point to examples of racial discrimination in the present. In an examination of my U.S. History I and II curriculum materials, there were no lessons that had students examine racial inequity today, and I spent very little time having students connect past racial inequity to the present. Although students would have a chance to explore racial inequity during my lessons on Hurricane Katrina, this was included in the last weeks of my U.S. History II course and after the survey and interviews for this study were administered. This offers evidence that my curriculum, although race-conscious in its approach to history, was missing important opportunities to examine race in the present.

Conclusions

This practitioner research highlights the positive impact that a race-conscious social studies classroom can have on all students. It also indicates the many barriers that teachers face in helping White students understand their role in a system privileging them because of their skin color. Subsequently, this study suggests several implications for the teaching of race in secondary classroom and specifically the history classroom.

First, this study revealed benefits to my students from teaching a race-conscious history curriculum and supported the arguments of Tyson (2003) and Howard (2003) that a more race-conscious social studies curriculum can have a powerful impact on students. The students in this study were able to reference various historical events directly linked to my curriculum, and explain how race was a major factor in those events. By making race a central theme of the course, including a racialized portrayal of historical events and the inclusion of diverse racial perspectives, most students were able to see the role race and power played in history. Students were comfortable discussing advantage and disadvantage in the context of history.

Second, this study highlighted the importance of rooting discussions of race not only in the past, but also in the present. Through race-related discussions of current events, students questioned the “ideological predispositions and the baggage of political socialization by parents, peers, schooling, and the media” (Washington & Humphries, 2011, p. 112). A lack of connection to current events was a shortcoming of my teaching. I had allowed concerns about history curriculum coverage to limit my use of race-related current events in my classroom. Social studies teachers must do more to help students, especially White students, better understand the institutionalized power that privileges Whites today. When history teachers include examinations of race in the present, they may be able to help students see the power structure perpetuating racism. They can help students better understand that racism is a system
of disadvantage, rather than simply individual prejudices. Social studies teachers may teach about race and inequity, but that is not the same as teaching about Whiteness. This study suggests it is important to teach not only about the groups being disadvantaged, but also the groups being advantaged.

Finally, this study illuminates the importance of teaching students that racism is a system of disadvantage, rather than simply expressions of individual prejudice. By defining racism as a form of oppression, and a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies, Beverly Tatum argued (1997) students can better understand how racism operates and then learn ways to work against that system. If students are led to believe racism is simply an individual problem, then it becomes easier for those students to discount their ability to affect change. This obscures possible solutions to the inequity in our current society. By framing racism as a systemic problem, students are more likely to be empowered, and subsequently, better positioned to dismantle that system.

References


Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. In the United States, racism has decreased over time.
   
   1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

2. In United States, people of color have had disadvantages because of their skin color.

   1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

3. In United States history, things have improved for people of color.

   1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

4. In United States history, things have improved for Blacks/African Americans.

   1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

5. In United States history, things have improved for Latinos/Hispanics.

   1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

6. In United States history, things have improved for Brazilians.

   1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

7. In United States history, things have improved for Asians.

   1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

8. In United States history, things have improved for American Indians/Native Americans.

   1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

9. In United States history, things have improved for Whites/European Americans.

   1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

10. In the United States history, White people have had advantages because of their skin color.

    1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

11. In United States history, White people have discriminated against people of color.

    1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree
12. In United States history, White people have had more power than people of color.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree

13. In United States history, White people have done things to decrease racism.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree

14. In United States history, people of color have done things to decrease racism.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree

15. In this class, I learned about the positive things White people did in history.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree

16. In this class, I learned about the positive things Black/African American people did in history.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree

17. In this class, I learned about the positive things Latinos/Hispanic people did in history.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree

18. In this class, I learned about the positive things Brazilian people did in history.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree

19. In this class, I learned about the positive things Asian people did in history.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree

20. In this class, I learned about the positive things American Indian/Native American people did in history.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree

21. In this class, I learned about how people of color overcame oppression.
1-Strongly disagree 2-Disagree 3-Neither agree nor disagree 4-Agree 5-Strongly agree
22. In this class, I learned about the history of discrimination.
1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

23. In this class, I learned about races and/or ethnicities other than my own.
1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

24. In this class, I learned about my race/ethnicity.
1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

25. In the United States, I have an advantage because of my race.
1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

26. There is very little racism in the United States today.
1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

27. Today, White people do things to decrease racism.
1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

28. Today, White people discriminate against people of color
1-Strongly disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither agree nor disagree  4-Agree  5-Strongly agree

Demographic Information

29. What is your age?
14  15  16  17  18  19

30. What is your grade level?
9  10  11  12

32. What course and level are you currently enrolled in?
1-US History I       2-US History I Honors       3-US History II       4-US History II Honors

33. What is your gender?
1-Male  2-Female

34. What is your race/ethnicity (If you are multiracial, please circle more than one)?
1-American Indian/Native American  2-Asian  3-Brazilian  4-Black/African American
5-Latino/a or Hispanic  6-White/European American  7-Other: __________________________

35. Is a language other than English your first language?
1-Yes  0-No

If you answered “Yes,” please list your first language here:_____________________________

36. Do you speak a language other than English fluently?
1-Yes  0-No

If you answered “Yes,” please list your first language here:_____________________________

37. Are you or your parents immigrants to the United States?
1-Yes (Both I and my parents)  2-Yes (My parents only)  0-No

Please answer the following questions. Try your best to be descriptive as possible. Please use margins of the page if you need more room.

38. In history, have White people had advantages because of their race? Explain why or why not.

39. In history, have White people done things to help stop or reduce racism? Explain why or why not.

40. Do White people have an advantage today because of their race? Explain why or why not.

41. Today, are there things White people can do to stop or reduce racism?
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. In the United States, have there been events in the past motivated by racism? If yes, can you think of some examples?

2. In the United States, have people of color had disadvantages because of their skin color? If yes, can you think of some examples?

3. In the past, did White people do things to stop or decrease racism? If so, can you think of any examples?

4. Did this class include the history of non-White people/people of color? If so, can you provide some examples? What is your reaction to learning this history?

5. Did this class include the history of White people? If so, can you provide some examples? What is your reaction to learning this history?

6. Did White people have an advantage (power; privileges) in the past? Can you explain why or why not? Do White people have an advantage (power; privileges) today? Why or why not?

7. Do non-White/people of color people have an advantage (power; privileges) in the past? Can you explain why or why not? Do non-White/people of color people have an advantage (power; privileges) today? Why or why not?

8. Today, is there something White people can do to stop or decrease racism? If so, can you explain? If not, why do you feel this way? Today, is there something non-White people/people of color can do to stop or decrease racism? If so, can you explain? If not, why do you feel this way?

Author Bio

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