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MISSING NARRATIVES:
RACIAL INEQUITIES IN SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

While autonomy and individual freedoms are often touted as a cornerstone of American identity, in actuality, policies and laws created by the government shape the very idea of freedom. Democracy, freedom, and power are among many concepts that Americans should understand as citizens, but civics and other social studies courses often fall short in deepening our understanding of these concepts and how they relate to the systems around us. Many people, mostly White people, are able to feel removed from politics and government because they are less likely to be negatively impacted by those systems. To be able to ignore the racist systems that government creates and perpetuates is a baseline example of White privilege in the United States. While many who benefit from the current systems have the luxury of being able to ignore the power structures, that is not the case for everyone. Government systems overwhelmingly favor White society, and that can be seen in everything from the opportunity gap in school to mass incarceration rates. DiAngelo opens *White Fragility* by pointing out 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” (2018, p. 1).

Because of their race, White people have unearned, systemic advantages in our society, which is often referred to as White privilege (Tatum, 2003, p. 8). This is not always easy for people to accept, especially those who are White and have not reflected on their race or realized those advantages exist. It is easy to grasp how a Black person might be disadvantaged by the system, but the advantages for Whites are often

overlooked. “In very concrete terms, it means that if a person of color is the victim of housing discrimination, the apartment that would otherwise have been rented to that person of color is still available for a White person” (Tatum, 2003, p. 9). This is just one small example of how White privilege exists but goes unnoticed in everyday life.

We are surrounded by Whiteness in society. As Singh (2019) points out, the societal value of Whiteness is continuously reflected back to us through “histories in school textbooks and positive media portrayals to having the advantages of safe neighborhoods, quality education, high-paying jobs, access to good medical care, and greater health and well-being” (p. 13). White people also see themselves in government, especially the federal government, which is disproportionately White, despite an increase of 84% in nonwhite elected officials from the 107th Congress (2001-2003) to the 116th Congress (2019-2021), according to a Pew Research Article (Bialik, 2019). In fact, despite the fact that Congresses in recent years “have continued to set new highs for racial and ethnic diversity, they have still been disproportionately white when compared with the overall U.S. population,” of which nonwhites make up about 39% (Bialik, 2019). The fact that our federal lawmakers do not reflect the diversity of the country needs to be part of the conversation in a civics course.

Acknowledging the lack of diversity, as well as tackling why our represented leaders do not reflect our population, has to be part of the larger discussion to help students engage in a topic that has largely been dominated by White men. Without those pieces, I cannot see many reasons that a racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse set of students would want to pay much attention. However, a deep understanding

of democracy, power, and government can give students the tools they need to see how they can impact, disrupt, or dismantle those systems to create policies and systems that benefit a broader section of society. As a civics teacher, this is the ultimate goal: to help students understand how they can create changes where they see fit. This is why I framed my research around this question: *As a White educator, how can I provide learning opportunities for students to explore alternative narratives and address racial inequities that government systems create and perpetuate in order to strengthen their understanding of power and democracy?*

My Story

I grew up in a series of small midwestern towns, eventually graduating high school with a class of less than 50 students. Small towns might have some advantages, like not having to lock your doors, but that comes with some major drawbacks. By the time I entered middle school, I started to notice the lack of awareness on broader social issues in a relatively homogeneous place. While I was thinking about saving the rainforest from big oil companies, other kids at school did not seem to notice. In addition, many of the adults that I interacted with did not seem to care about bigger picture things either. I did not realize at the time that not all adults consumed as much news as my parents. I see now that I was much more aware of current events from a young age, fostering my desire to learn and understand the world.

In middle school, I developed a passion for politics. Our country was in political and social turmoil post-9/11. The rise in Islamophobia and bigotry, paired with a new wave of patriotism, was startling, even to a 14-year-old. While our country geared up for

military action, my peers and I did not have an outlet for any guided discussion or research to further our understanding in school. I wanted to discuss the impending wars or the legacy of imperialism in the Middle East with my peers, but it was useless to attempt engagement in this conversation with most of them. Efforts were mostly met with ignorance and fear, rather than the evidence and empathy I sought.

When people talked about catching Osama bin Laden, they did not talk about the children killed in the bombings. When going into Iraq, they did not talk about leveling the infrastructure, destroying homes, businesses, and schools. They did not talk about the discrimination against Muslims in the United States. Most people were completely ignoring all the other parts of the narrative. They only focused on the White American version of catching the bad guys. Did they not know there were other sides to the story? Did they just not care? I felt like I was screaming about this constantly, but no one was willing to listen. This caused a lot of frustration -- with my peers, my school, and even the region as a whole. Luckily, my immediate family was there to listen, though parents are not always the best outlet for a young, anxious teenager.

By late high school, I was still frustrated, but I was also very bored with small town life. School was not very challenging, and I did not take most of my teachers seriously. I was always perceived as combative and angry when in actuality I just wanted real, passionate discussions about social justice issues. Many teachers had very limited world-views and did not give me the space to learn and explore in a way that would focus my activism and energy. At this point, I also expected all my teachers to be experts in their fields, a view held by many students. Because most of my teachers presented

themselves as holders of knowledge, rather than facilitators of learning, the students missed out on many opportunities for deeper understanding and self-discovery. This traditional approach to teaching was troublesome, not only because it took away my agency and damped my curiosity, but also because it opened the door for me to distrust them when they did not have all the answers. Admittedly, I was not shy to point out mistakes, but that was natural when my teachers had always presented an infallible facade in regards to their knowledge in the subject areas.

That was true at least until I finally had a teacher that sparked something inside me. My history teacher was both passionate and knowledgeable about the subject, which was not the case for many of my other teachers. In class, she acted more as a facilitator than a traditional teacher, giving us broad social and political issues to ponder and debate. Her social-reconstructionist-leaning classroom finally allowed us to think on our own, instead of memorizing and recalling information. I was stimulated both intellectually and emotionally, which was really what I had been seeking out all along. Until this point, I had no say in what we discussed in school, and I was told time and again not to bring up controversial topics like politics in school. There were no outlets for me to express concerns about the world around me or to explore what was happening in a rapidly changing political climate.

For the first time, I actually found history class interesting. We certainly needed to understand some events in chronological order and remember key people, but there was so much more to investigate. We were learning about events, but we were putting them into a puzzle to see how they fit together and impacted other people and places. This

teacher taught us to look at the bigger picture, to question the narrative, and to put events in a broader context.

My love of history started in this class, and it led to my eventual undergraduate degree in history. The critical thinking and inquiry skills I learned in high school really helped my transition into college and opened the door to always thinking about *why*. Why do we, as historians, care about certain people or events? What is the historical significance? Most of my college history classes focused on the idea of historical significance through exploring why we are learning certain things. Rather than memorizing dates and timelines, we discussed why and how these events made an impact. This approach, using historical significance, went deeper into why we were learning about certain people or events, and I knew that this was something I wanted to eventually bring to my classroom. While the historical significance of a time or place is an important part of understanding history on a deeper level, it still does not give us a complete picture. In order to fully understand history, we need to fill in the missing narratives to get a more complete context in which to analyze events, people, and places.

Though I did not realize it at the time, there were so many other narratives that were missing from the history I had learned. We have to think about why certain events and people are important, but it is critical that we also think about *who* wrote that narrative and why. Who decided that version of history was important? In perpetuating a single narrative, whose voices were silenced?

Turning Point — Missing Narratives

Throughout college I took dozens of social science courses covering topics from the history of the Islamic empire to issues in African American education. I was constantly thinking about alternative perspectives and the context in which we were discussing the topics. Historical significance was a focal point throughout college, across many types of courses. However, so much of my education was completely lacking an explicit discussion of missing narratives, particularly around race.

I considered myself liberal and open-minded; therefore, I fell into a particularly heinous trap of thinking that I truly understood the root of the problems, when in reality, I was misunderstanding the magnitude of the problem. I had no idea how whitewashed the history I learned was, even in college. By whitewashed, I mean narratives that at best ignore, and at worst, intentionally silence voices from those in marginalized communities. Although my classes featured a diverse range of countries, cultures, and perspectives, I did not question the homogeneity of my instruction; while learning about Chinese politics or British imperialism, all my professors were White, and most of the authors we read were White as well. By not realizing or talking about how this is problematic, we ignored a chorus of voices that could have led to a much deeper understanding of those places and the people who lived those experiences. The White perspective was at the center, and it was never questioned. It took years of learning, and unlearning, beyond college, and a shift in the conversation on a national scale, to allow me to realize my mistakes.

I did not, and could not, understand racism, because I was only seeing a small part of the story. I was learning about people and places that were different from me as a White cisgender, able-bodied woman, but most of those stories were presented through a White, Euro-centric lens. I was getting information *about* diverse sets of people, rather than getting information *from* those groups of people. The voices of those I was learning about were almost nonexistent throughout my education.

Over time, after extensive research and discussions, I realized I had missed lots of important narratives that would eventually completely change my understanding of whole time periods. This set me on a difficult journey of uncovering those missing narratives that have been hidden and removed from textbooks and popular culture. The voices of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) have been silenced.

As a teacher, I do not want to perpetuate the color-evasive approach to teaching social sciences that has been, and continues to be, prevalent in schools across the country. Instead, I want to provide learning opportunities that highlight those missing narratives to make sure students get a more accurate understanding of the world around them, especially related to race and racist systems. In doing this, I hope they find the voices that resonate with their own identities and experiences to strengthen their understanding and engagement in civics.

Teaching in a System Built on Racism

There is a color-evasive approach to education, and it has been there for a long time. Color-evasive refers to the fact that we have actively ignored race as a key factor in how our systems operate in the United States, from healthcare to courts to education. The

term “colorblind” has been used to describe how policy-makers, textbook writers, and teachers have all largely ignored race outside of lessons on slavery or the civil rights movement. However, “colorblind” in this context implies that one is *unable* to see race, which makes it both inaccurate and ableist, detracting from its intended use (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2015, sect. 9). Even if one is not discriminatory based on skin color, it does not mean they cannot see it. In fact, as Tatum (2003) points out, children as young as three years start to notice differences in physical appearance, including skin color (p. 32). Rather, I use the term “color-evasive” since it implies that there is an active avoidance of race, rather than being unable to see it. Someone is color-evasive when they choose to ignore race as a factor. According to Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison (2016):

Additionally, informed by narrow understandings of blindness by sighted people, color-blindness implies passivity. Here, blindness is imagined as something one is struck with or victim to – something that happens to them. Yet, that ignores the power of white supremacy, and whiteness situated within it, to actively evade discussions on race. (sect. 9)

In schools in the United States, race is largely ignored, unless there is a lesson on slavery or the Civil Rights Movement. Students generally get the same story over and over again about how Martin Luther King, Jr. led the fight for equality during the 1960s, and with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we fixed the problem. However, most of us realize that that is not quite right. There is a lot of story missing from this narrative.

I understood racism was still very much alive in the United States from a young age. I knew there were still White supremacist groups and discrimination. I also knew a lot of systems disadvantaged certain marginalized communities, especially African Americans. However, I did not understand the pervasiveness of racism in developing, implementing, and perpetuating those systems that govern so many aspects of our lives. For the most part, I thought of racism as events or acts of discrimination, rather than a ubiquitous set of structures. While many people see racism as simply prejudice or discrimination, Tatum (2003) argues that it does not fully encapsulate the meaning; racism is more accurately defined as “a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals” (2003, p. 7). This broader definition is key to fully understanding how racism is entrenched within our system of government.

In my schooling, I did not learn about racism as a structure or system; therefore, I did not understand that racism played a meaningful role in the creation or implementation of modern policies and institutions within government. For example, I learned about redlining a handful of times throughout my schooling. I understood redlining was a practice of denying loans and other services largely to black families to promote segregated neighborhoods. I thought banks, realtors, and local governments were largely to blame because I never learned about many of the federal policies that created and enforced those systems. Even though I had history and political science courses that covered American society in the first half of the twentieth century, it was not until I read *The Color of Law* (Rothstein, 2017) that I understood how intentional and deeply rooted

those redlining policies were in the federal government of the United States. As a teacher, I do not want to overlook the intention or the impact of those policies. While redlining has been banned for decades, it is easy to see its legacy in everything from school budgets to voting districts. And while something like racist policies around home mortgages in the 1930s might not seem initially relevant in a civics class, by bringing the roots of modern inequity to the surface, it becomes apparent how important understanding that piece of history is in order to gain a deeper understanding of electoral districts and voter participation today.

I only understood the history of redlining through the lens of White, dominant culture, which meant I was unable to see all the missing narratives that would have given me better insight and deeper understanding. Without that information, I could not properly analyze the intention behind either the actual policies or the creation of the White-centric narrative. Some stories were lifted up, and many others silenced. I want to provide students with learning opportunities that elevate those silenced voices so they are able to make deeper connections and see the underlying systems of power that are key to understanding government.

As someone who has focused on social justice in some way since childhood, it is concerning that I totally overlooked all the systemic racism around me. It is everywhere. I was looking for it, and I still missed it. I do not want to miss all those stories when I teach government or history or any social science classes. Students need to understand the root of those systems in order to understand their place in society today. Hopefully, in

understanding how we got to this point in history, students will also be able to find ways to disrupt those systems.

Racism Today

Talking about war and the Middle East in the years immediately following 9/11 was frustrating, to say the least. When I voiced my opposition to fighting in Afghanistan or Iraq, I was usually met with statements like, “You don’t support the troops!” It was not that I was anti-American or that I hated the military, but rather, I opposed violence. However, I could not have a productive discussion about this because most people I encountered put it in stark black and white terms. This false dichotomy where someone was either pro- or anti-American could be seen all over the media and in everyday conversations in the early 2000s. Even as a teenager, I understood that there were more than two sides to a story. There was a grey area, and in that grey area were the missing narratives that were needed in order to fully understand the situation. We could not grasp terrorism in 2001 without talking about the legacy of imperialism in the Middle East or the history of Islam. Of course, one reason those other narratives were overlooked was because of an underlying American fear and resentment of non-White, non-Christians, and a pervasive acceptance of White supremacy in the United States.

Today, I see the same resistance to learning and accepting narratives that come from people outside of the dominant culture. This is nothing new, but the conversation around racism has shifted, giving us opportunities to finally start unpacking the systemic impacts in a society that was very literally built on racism. In this time of social unrest,

perhaps we finally have the critical mass needed to do the work and make changes to the systems to provide equitable opportunities for everyone.

Rationale

As a social studies educator, I want to help students develop skills and knowledge that will transfer into other aspects of their lives. In teaching civics in particular, my biggest hope is that students will gain the tools necessary to create change in their communities, so they and future generations can benefit from the systems, rather than be oppressed by them. *As a White educator, how can I provide learning opportunities for students to explore alternative narratives and address racial inequities that government systems create and perpetuate in order to strengthen their understanding of power and democracy?*

I want to use specific examples from the past and present to help students make connections, using their own experiences and passions. By using information that reflects the stories, successes, and journeys of BIPOC, I hope to reinforce that there are other narratives available, and we should always be looking for additional perspectives. People of color generally hear the White perspective over and over, so I will focus on narratives that are both about and written by people of color.

Students' identities play a huge role in their individual experiences and interactions, and exploration and affirmation of those identities is a crucial piece in this type of learning environment. Talking about race can be challenging, especially for White students who likely have never questioned or thought about their own race or Whiteness in general. Looking inward is part of understanding other narratives and perspectives. We

put ourselves into our work, and I want students to be able to reflect and change as they learn.

History does not make sense in a vacuum. It is through connections among people, places and ideas that we create deeper understanding. I want to facilitate this type of learning among my students. Learning is a lifelong journey, and as a teacher, I realize that I will continue to grow and change as I learn more about the world and people around me. After all, learning is change through experience. If we are experiencing things, we should also be changing over time. I try to not resist that change, but rather, foster the growth. I take this attitude of deliberate learning into my classroom by allowing exploration, encouraging questions, and fostering discovery.

Missing narratives and other contextual pieces are important to a deeper understanding of the systems and institutions, but it is not enough to just understand current government processes. I am doing this research so I can help students to realize they can and should play an active part in government, whether that is through voting, activism, or running for office. As civics teachers, our “ultimate goal should be to create a democracy in which every civic actor can meaningfully take part in our political system” (Warren & Wilkes, 2018). We all need to push for change until our government more closely reflects our population in regards to many intersecting identities including race and gender. Government is where power lies. In order to make change in policies, laws, and institutions, there needs to be some involvement within the systems of government.

I thought I had a good understanding of government systems of power and the history of oppression, but I did not, even though I truly wanted to understand. I received a narrow view of the world through my education, and I did not do enough to question it. Now I realize that. I have worked, and will continue to work, to make positive changes in my classroom and my community, especially related to dismantling racist systems and institutions. If students have the desire to change the system, I want them to have the information that will contribute to their advancement, rather than actively work against their intentions. We need to start with the right information and the right conversations in order to disrupt the system. Dismantling and rebuilding the systems is the only way we can work toward a more equitable society. I believe teaching is an important way to continue my own anti-racism work.

Summary

I have been interested in politics and history from a young age, but was always frustrated with the lack of choice and perspective in my rural schooling. As I moved into college, I loved the interconnecting pieces needed to understand how we got to where we are as a society. Using “why?” as a framework, I learned to think about the historical significance and context when studying people and events throughout history. However, I was still missing an important part, which was the additional narratives, particularly from people in marginalized communities. I mostly learned White history from White professors using books written by White authors, even when the subjects of the courses may not have been White. I thought I was gaining perspective by learning *about* other

communities of people, but I was missing out on a deeper understanding because I was not learning *from* those communities I was studying.

Throughout my education, race was largely avoided outside of studying specific eras or events, so I did not see the pervasiveness of the racist systems. When I studied government in high school and college, we talked about the Founding Fathers, branches of government, and some important Supreme Court cases, but we never did a deep exploration of government policies or institutions, and certainly not related to race.

Even though it was unintentional, I fell into a color-evasive trap for a long time. I was not willing or able to see the entrenched systems of racism all around me. Partially, it was because I did not have those learning opportunities, but it was also because I benefit from that system, so I did not have as much incentive to dig in and discover it for myself. It was not until years out of college, with lots of reading and reflection, that I have realized how skewed my vision had been. I now see how racism has evolved time and again to lie just under the surface, so most white folks can easily ignore it. This perpetuates the cycle and ensures the systems of oppression will continue.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

All of the research for this paper is centered around the question: *As a White educator, how can I provide learning opportunities for students to explore alternative narratives and address racial inequities that government systems create and perpetuate in order to strengthen their understanding of power and democracy?* In order to attempt to answer such a daunting question, I broke up the research into three sections. The first section focuses on historical narratives that are often absent from a traditional White-centric education. This will help provide necessary sociopolitical context for understanding topics and concepts within a civics course. The second section contains research on how to acknowledge, process, and discuss race and racism, as well as what it means to be anti-racist. The final section of the literature review is an attempt to integrate the aforementioned topics (historical content and discussions on race) into a culturally responsive approach to teaching government.

While all voices are valid and important to understanding the full picture of the United States government, it is unrealistic to address all the missing narratives in one short research paper. Rather, to narrow the scope of research, I focused on silenced Black narratives, since many government policies and racist systems were built on anti-Blackness. While I focused on the Black experience, I am not diminishing the struggles and stories of many other marginalized groups of people, all with complex, intersectional identities. I acknowledge that this research is incomplete, and I will

continue to educate myself in anti-racist pedagogy to better serve my students and community.

Contextual Understanding

Missing Narratives

Traditional textbooks and instructional materials for civics classes tell the stories of White men and the laws, policies, and institutions that they created. Race, and the racist systems that built this country, are left out of the conversation. Because of this, these social studies curriculums are not serving our increasingly diverse set of students, especially those in marginalized communities who are absent, or at best misrepresented, throughout history. For example, Stewart (2019) critiqued how slavery is taught using outdated materials that promote errant viewpoints, leaving students with “a poor understanding of how slavery shaped our country, and they are unable to recognize the powerful and lasting effects it has had” (para. 4). Many marginalized communities and individuals throughout time have been intentionally overshadowed by the dominant White narrative in order to push a specific agenda that perpetuates the racist systems. In attempting to assess how textbooks have presented abolition movements in the United States—a standard topic covered in most social studies classes—Yacovone (2018) quickly discovered White supremacy was a central theme, writing:

The assumptions of white priority, white domination, and white importance underlie every chapter and every theme of the thousands of textbooks that blanketed the country. This is the vast tectonic plate that underlies American culture. And while the worst features of our textbook legacy may have ended, the

themes, facts, and attitudes of supremacist ideologies are deeply embedded in what we teach and how we teach it. (para. 4)

Educators have been teaching generations of students a mostly White-centric view of government that does not touch on the racist systems on which those policies, laws, and practices were based. We can see countless examples of this in social studies in particular, as there are no national standards, and curriculums and textbooks vary widely from state to state. For example, when Goldstein (2020) compared popular textbooks tailored for California and Texas schools, there was a distinct difference between how the two sets of books portrayed systemic racism. White flight to the suburbs in the California edition stated that people wanted to leave culturally diverse neighborhoods to seek a better life, while noting that African Americans were blocked from purchasing houses in some places (Goldstein, 2020). While that is partially true, Rothstein (2017) wrote that “until the last quarter of the twentieth century, racially explicit policies of federal, state, and local governments defined where whites and African Americans should live” (p. vii). While the California edition misses the mark on the explicit racial policies and covenants that legally segregated most cities, the Texas edition ignores housing discrimination all together, while noting that white Americans fled the congestion and crime of the inner cities (Goldstein 2020). Textbooks have played a major role in our education system, and when they gloss over, or flat out ignore, systemic racism, there is little chance students will understand it. As Wong (2015) pointed out, there are many examples of myths or distortions in how race and slavery are taught in the United States. “A consistent point of tension across all these examples is whether history classes and their accompanying texts

are misleading kids with Eurocentric interpretations of the actors and events that have shaped the human experience” (Wong 2015).

The White-centric view that can be seen in many traditional textbooks and learning materials does not address or name the systemic racism that is present in government institutions and policies. Power and democracy are two key elements of a U.S. government curriculum, according to Minnesota state standards (p. 98-104). Without explicitly identifying the systemic racism embedded within government institutions and policies, students cannot accurately understand the complexity of our current political and social climate. West (2004) argued that the democratic experiment in the United States is unique “because of our refusal to acknowledge the deeply racist and imperial roots of our democratic project” (p. 41). Denial perpetuates the system, so we must confront the problem of racism or risk “our democratic maturation” (West, 2004, p. 41).

In order to understand the specifics of the content, we need to name the larger sociopolitical context in which we live. In doing so, students will be able to describe “the series of mutually reinforcing policies and practices across social, economic, and political domains that contribute to disparities and unequal opportunities for people of color in housing, transportation, education, and health care, to name a few” (Hammond, 2015, p. 28). Citing the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2013), Hammond (2015) wrote that the sociopolitical context is made up of two key components, structural racialization and implicit racial bias, which reinforce one another, holding the systems of inequality in place without blatant racism:

As a result, inequality doesn't look like the Jim Crow laws of the pre-Civil Rights era. Instead, it takes the form of seemingly benign institutional practices or structures that reduce and limit opportunities for people of color, poor people, and immigrants. (p. 29)

While many people involved in education, including civics teachers, may not have created these narratives, they were, and are, complicit in perpetuating a White-centric, color-evasive view of the history and policies of the United States. It was intentional to create narratives that put White people, history, and events at the center, while ignoring that race is part of the story. This was done to quietly promote racist ideas while quashing the voices outside of the dominant culture. "The principal function of racist ideas in American history has been the suppression of resistance to racial discrimination and its resulting racial disparities" (Kendi, 2016, p. 10). Those voices, outside of dominant culture, of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) could give us all a better and deeper understanding of our society today, but educators (and school boards, text books writers, policymakers, etc.) need to choose to teach and serve with the intention of lifting up the voices of BIPOC who have been missing from the conversation. As educators, we have the power to help our students discover a more complete view of our country's history—one that better reflects our society as a whole. Through deeper contextual understanding of the systems that run our country, we can see who is actually benefiting from the policies and laws, and who is not. We can see how policies are perpetually not working for BIPOC across the country and in our own backyards. Writing about Minnesota, Shin (2016) noted that some societal factors have

gotten worse in recent years, “including racial diversity among K-12 teachers, poverty rates for children of color, access to fresh food and exercise and play, declining real wages, and job security for the parents and caregivers of those children” (p. 14). The opportunity gap in school, mass incarceration rates, voter suppression, and lack of access to healthcare are just a few of the ways in which the systems are failing people of color. The missing narratives help explain why and how we got to a point with so many inequities within our systems. Understanding how the systems impact people in different groups can help students see patterns to identify ways in which those systems need reimagining. When you pair that contextual information with civics content, students can develop tools to make actual changes within their communities.

Power and Democracy

Closely tied together, power and democracy are two important concepts in the study of politics and government. While these words are in the common social studies lexicon from a young age, they are difficult concepts to grasp, as they take on many different meanings, depending on the context. Because these concepts are central themes throughout much of this research, it is important to frame what they mean within this conversation about inequities in government.

The word power has many meanings, though its specific role in society and education is sometimes overlooked. There are many different types of power—social, political, economic, physical—that play out differently depending on context. Power differentials exist between students and teachers, but they also exist between citizens and elected government officials. Systemic racism plays a role in both scenarios, so

understanding power is essential to meaningful conversations on race and government. White people have social power due to their race, which, according to Tatum (2003) affords them access to economic, cultural, and social resources and the option to make decisions (p. 7). Unearned power and privilege is granted to Whites, disadvantaging all other groups. DiAngelo (2018) wrote, “The direction of power between white people and people of color is historic, traditional, and normalized in ideology” (p. 56). We must acknowledge what power is and who has it in order to understand how it can be used to dismantle systems of oppression, rather than upholding them. Delpit (1988) wrote, “to act as if power does not exist is to ensure that the power status quo remains the same” (Hilty, 2011, p. 170).

Delpit referred to a culture of power as an important connecting theme in the examination of the silenced dialogue of BIPOC educators. This culture of power translates to work both in and out of the classroom. The rules for the culture of power, Delpit (1988) stated, is dependent upon who holds power, which “means that success in institutions— schools, workplaces, and so on— is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power” (Hilty, 2011, p. 160). In other words, BIPOC must understand and work within White culture to gain power, which is especially true when we look at institutional power.

White people overwhelmingly hold the institutional power in the United States, and because systemic racism and White supremacy are self-perpetuating, it has been easy for them to stay in power. From Congress to the classroom, the people in charge of policy, laws and government organizations are mostly White. DiAngelo (2018) pointed

out that in 2016-2017 all of the ten richest Americans were White, as was 90 percent of Congress and 96 percent of US governors (p. 31). Outside of government, we also see that the vast majority of those who decide which books get published and which movies and TV shows get produced are White (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 31). White perspectives are in charge of our news, social media, and government, which further centers White culture as the default. DiAngelo (2018) wrote that these influential White people “represent power and control by a racial group that is in the position to disseminate and protect its own self-image, worldview, and interest across the entire society” (p. 31).

Democracy is defined by who has power in government, though it is an amorphous definition at best. In a standard textbook, McClenaghan (1997) defined democracy as a form of government where “supreme political authority rests with the people”, and the government needs the consent of the people in order to operate (p. 13). In contrast to this concrete definition, Janda, Berry, and Goldman (2009), in a more updated textbook, defined democracy as “a system of government in which, in theory, the people rule, either directly or indirectly” (p. 31). By using the phrase “in theory” the authors alluded to the fact that ordinary people do not always hold the power in democratic systems, though exactly who holds the power is debatable. For years, Taylor (2019) searched to define democracy through both a documentary film and a book, only to conclude that “there is no single definition I can stand behind that feels unconditionally conclusive” (p. 1).

Even for experts, democracy is difficult to define. According to a Pew Research poll conducted in 2018, fifty-eight percent of the population is dissatisfied with how

democracy is working in the United States, which rose from fifty-one percent in 2017 (Kent, 2020). Analyzing additional Pew Research surveys, Dimock (2020) wrote that “while Americans generally agree on democratic ideals and values that are important for the United States, for the most part they see the country falling well short in living up to these ideals” (para. 5). Part of the problem might lie in how we understand democracy and all the institutions and policies of government. “Perhaps Americans value democracy but do not fully understand it or agree on what it entails” (Janda, Berry, & Goldman, 2009, p. 32).

Hertzberg wrote, in the forward to Hill’s book, that the United States’ “geographically based, plurality winner-take-all method of representation serves us especially poorly”; however, if we can understand the “ways in which our political institutions distort our democracy and hobble our politics, we might gain a deeper more useful understanding of the sources of our various national discontents” (Hill, 2006, p. xi). Through democracy and the problems within the systems, we can better understand how to address those inequities.

While none of the definitions are all-encompassing, the main takeaway is that ordinary citizens *should* have some amount of power in government in a democracy. One of the main avenues to access power in a democracy is through voting. However, there are many groups of people whose voices have been silenced throughout our nation’s history with systematic disenfranchisement which can still be seen today.

Voter Suppression

Voting is one of the most essential rights in a democratic society. In chronicling the history of voting rights in the United States, Keyssar (2009) remarked that “although a nation certainly could have universal suffrage without being a democracy, a polity cannot be truly democratic without universal suffrage” (p. xx). While there are many forms of participation in a democracy, such as protesting, attending policy hearings, or running for office, voting for candidates is “the most common form of political behavior in most industrial democracies” (Janda, Berry, & Goldman, 2009, p. 205).

In the United States, the right to vote is implicit in our self-image as a free, democratic society (Keyssar, 2009, p. xix). Yet, the framers of the constitution make no mention of extending voting rights beyond wealthy, property-owning, White men. As Hill (2006) bluntly put it, “Truth be told, many of the Founding Fathers didn’t give a fig about the rights of the common citizen” (p. 35). In fact, the right to vote is not mentioned in the constitution until the 14th Amendment. Historically, one can see how voting expanded, though the story is not as linearly expansive as most might assume.

Expanding voting rights to more White men. War has been a huge factor in the expansion of voting rights. Keyssar (2009) wrote that war creates powerful pressure to expand voting rights, in part, because it is “difficult to compel men to bear arms while denying them the franchise” (p. xxiv). While the connection is often overlooked, expanding the vote to more White men is tied with the rise in slavery in the 19th century. After the Revolution, southern militias remained intact in order to protect public safety and suppress uprisings of enslaved people, but they grew discontent when they were

compelled to serve without the right to vote (Waldman, 2016, p. 44). Waldman (2016) continued, “Extending voting rights was seen as a way to build racial solidarity and deepen support for slavery in parts of the state where few men owned slaves” (p. 44). Racial motivation has been part of the voting process since the founding of our country.

Historical voter suppression. At the founding of our nation, universal suffrage was not a real consideration. It took decades to expand voting rights to poorer White men, much of which was done during or immediately after the Revolutionary War. With the passage of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments after the Civil War, voting rights were expanded to freed Black men, who were also given citizenship at that time. In the decade following the Civil War, Black political participation, including voting and holding office, increased an astounding amount, both in state and federal governments.

Between 1870 and 1887, seventeen Black men served in the United States Congress, with Senator Hiram Revels of Mississippi and Representative Joseph Rainey of South Carolina being the first to hold their respective offices (*Black Americans in Congress*, 2008, p.1). The advancements were short-lived, however. While political participation expanded greatly for Blacks during Reconstruction, it was met with pushback in the forms of violence, intimidation, and restrictive policies that stripped Black voters of their voice. Upon the end of Reconstruction in 1877, former Confederates and other Democrats regained power throughout the South, “and, through law and custom, gradually built a segregated society during the next several decades, effectively

eliminating Black Americans from public office and ending their political participation” (*Black Americans in Congress*, 2008, p.3).

Even before the end of Reconstruction, voter suppression was on the rise, though it drastically increased in the last two decades of the 19th century. Keyssar (2009) wrote that Southern Whites “engaged in both legal and extralegal efforts to limit the political influence of freedmen” (p. 84). In *One Person, No Vote*, Anderson (2018) stated that in 1890, the state government of Mississippi passed the Mississippi Plan, which was “a dizzying array of poll taxes, literacy tests, understanding clauses—all intentionally racially discriminatory but dressed up in the genteel garb of bringing “integrity” to the voting booth” (p. 26). As this plan was adopted across the South, both poor Whites and Blacks became disenfranchised.

Along with poll taxes, gerrymandering (reshaping districts for political gain), and other “legal” measures, violence and intimidation gained traction as an important component of Black oppression. Keyssar (2009) wrote: “far more dramatic was a wave of what historian Eric Foner has called “counterrevolutionary terror” that swept the South between 1868 and 1871” (p. 84). Led by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, organized White men and militias sought to hurt, intimidate, and murder registered Black voters and their allies, killing hundreds of freedmen in 1870 alone (Keyssar, 2009, p. 84). Kendi (2016) wrote that after Reconstruction, in order “to intimidate and reassert their control over rebellion Blacks and White women, White male redeemers took up lynching in the 1880s” (p. 259). Kendi went on to assert that “behind these racist ideas were powerful

White men, striving by word and deed to regain absolute political, economic, and cultural control of the South” (p. 259).

Though lots of advancements in terms of social and political power were made for Black men during Reconstruction, their rights and power were quickly taken away. The combination of violence and policy were very effective in stripping the right to vote. For example, between 1896 and 1904, registered Black voters dropped from over 130,000 to just over 1,300 in Louisiana; while in Alabama, registered Black voters dropped from 180,000 to under 3,000 over just three years (Anderson, 2018, p. 28). By 1940, Anderson (2018) continued, “only 3 percent of age-eligible blacks were registered to vote in the South” (p. 29).

While the first two Black senators were elected during Reconstruction, there was an 86-year gap between the end of Senator Blanche Bruce’s term in 1881 and the beginning of Edward Brooke’s in 1967, due to legal and illegal voter suppression (*Black Americans in Congress*, 2008, p.5). The Black wave of advancement during Reconstruction, and the White terrorism that followed, is not often part the curriculum in a public school. There are important missing narratives related to the history of political power for Blacks that have been overshadowed by a whitewashed history that is often lacking stories about positive Black successes and White racial violence.

While today we have broad enfranchisement for most adults over 18 years of age, it has taken a long time to overcome blatant voter suppression. Keyssar (2009) wrote that voter expansion as we know it today is very recent:

Until the 1960s most African Americans could not vote in the South. Women were barred from voting in a majority of jurisdictions until 1920. For many years, Asian immigrants were disfranchised because they could not become citizens, and Native Americans lacked the right to vote far more often than they possessed it. (p. xx)

Changes have been made to address explicit voter suppression due to race, such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965; however, the racist systems have evolved alongside the progress. Anderson (2016) argued that White rage, triggered by Black advancements, has “undermined democracy” and “warped the Constitution” all because “African Americans wanted to work, get an education, live in decent communities, raise their families, and vote” (p. 6). Every battle won by civil rights leaders has been met with new, more insidious, ways to oppress people of color. Anderson (2018) remarks on how embedded voter suppression was in the United States:

Denying the vote to millions of American citizens was so deeply rooted in the fabric of the nation, twisted into the mechanics of government, and embedded in the political strategy and thinking of powerful government officials that this clear affront to democracy was not going to change on its own. (p. 52)

Beyond violence or poll taxes, many other more insidious tactics have been used to suppress Black political engagement in the United States. Gerrymandering, along with housing segregation and redlining, has created easy ways for state legislatures to redistrict in ways that favor one party over the other. Due to the war on drugs, mass incarceration has taken generations of Black men out of the voter rolls in recent decades,

while stripping the right to vote forever from some people with felony convictions. In order to understand our current situation in terms of voting, it is important to examine other contextual information such as partisan redistricting, mass incarceration, and other obvious tactics such as purging voter rolls and voter ID laws, which have all led to voter suppression that disproportionately impacts BIPOC.

Housing Segregation. It is easy to see how separated we are in the United States based on race. Many people would argue that most of the continued separation is due to *de facto* segregation (separation due to individual actors rather than law); however, as Rothstein (2017) pointed out, discriminatory actions of private groups or individuals played a smaller role in segregation than the systematic and forceful policies enacted by local, state and federal governments (pp. vii-viii). Though it has been illegal for decades, *de jure* segregation (separation through law or public policy), Rothstein (2017) argued, is the main, underlying factor in urban segregation today:

Without our government's purposeful imposition of racial segregation, the other causes—private prejudice, white flight, real estate steering, bank redlining, income differences, and self-segregation—still would have existed but with far less opportunity for expression. (p. viii)

The myth that segregation happened mainly due to racist or discriminatory actions of individuals or groups buries the narrative that the federal government systematically and intentionally incentivized segregation for decades. Large-scale federal programs of mortgage financing and public housing projects are obvious examples of systemic racism, but they are rarely covered in depth in schools. Created under Franklin D. Roosevelt's

tenure in 1934, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) both insured bank mortgages and determined eligibility for those loans through its own property appraisal (Rothstein, 2017, p 64). “Because the FHA’s appraisal standards included a whites-only requirement, racial segregation now became an official requirement of the federal mortgage insurance program” (Rothstein, 2017, pp. 64-65). Beyond this blatant example, the federal government also contributed to segregation through smaller acts such as “denial of access to public utilities”; using interstate highways as racial boundaries; claiming land that belonged to African Americans was “needed for parkland”; or choosing sites for schools that would force families to move if they wanted their children to access education (Rothstein, 2017, p. 122). When all of these acts, big and small, are put together, it is easy to see how entrenched segregation is within government policies. Rothstein (2017) asserted that these policies “were part of a national system by which state and local government supplemented federal efforts to maintain the status of African Americans as a lower caste, with housing segregation preserving the badges and incidents of slavery” (p. 122).

Government at all levels reinforced systems of housing segregation through practices such as upholding restrictive covenants, destroying Black communities with interstate highways, and giving tax breaks to suburban, single-family homeowners (Rothstein, 2017, pp. 215-217). While many think these practices are a thing of our racist past, government programs and policies continue to promote racial isolation. To this day, Rothstein (2017) explained, the government reinforces segregation that already exists through “disproportionately directing low-income African Americans who receive

housing assistance into the segregated neighborhoods that the government had previously established” (p. 217).

Once some of the missing narratives are uncovered, it is up to educators to then use that contextual information to make connections to contemporary issues, such as voter suppression. Voting is based on where one lives, so the legacy of housing segregation has huge impacts on voting patterns, representation, and electoral maps. Having deeply segregated cities means that voting districts are more easily manipulated by redistricting or gerrymandering, for example. Gerrymandering, or redrawing of electoral maps, can be based on race or political party. Partisan gerrymandering is touted as being race neutral, though racial and partisan gerrymandering often go hand-in-hand today, as Black voters overwhelmingly vote Democratic. In fact, since 1968, there has not been a Republican candidate for president who has received over thirteen percent of the African American vote, and “upwards of 80% of African Americans self-identify as Democrats”, according to White and Laird (2020). Anderson (2018) reiterated the tie between partisan and racial gerrymandering:

Despite the judicial distinction between the partisan gerrymandering that Scalia asserted was beyond the pale of the Supreme Court’s authority and racial gerrymandering that requires the highest level of judicial review, known as strict scrutiny, partisan gerrymandering is also about race. (p. 222).

This assertion is also supported by Soffen (2016), who wrote that because people of color tend to vote liberal and Democratic, packing minorities or packing Democrats into voting districts has the same effect, which causes electoral maps to “favor Republicans in the

same way it favors whites” (para. 15). Majority-minority districts are, therefore, popular with Republican-led state legislatures who are in charge of redistricting (Soffen, 2016). For example, Wisconsin, “one of the most segregated states in the nation”, is front and center “over the issue of partisan gerrymandering” (Anderson, 2018, p. 225). As a result of redistricting by the state’s Republican led legislature, in the 2012 election “the Democrats received more than 50 percent of the vote”; yet, they only won 39 percent of the seats in the general assembly (Anderson, 2018, p. 227). This is one of many connections that can be made between the legacy of housing segregation and voter suppression.

Mass incarceration and felon disenfranchisement. Voting in free and fair elections is often referred to as a “cornerstone of democracy”; yet, millions of Americans, who are disproportionately men of color, “will never be able to vote because of a felony incarceration on their record” (Hill, 2006, p. 23). According to a 2016 report from The Sentencing Project, there were an estimated 6.1 million people disenfranchised due to felony convictions in 2016, which works out to 2.5 percent of the total population who are of voting age (Uggen, Larson, & Shannon, 2016). In other words, 1 in 40 adults are disenfranchised due to a felony conviction in the United States (Uggen, Larson, & Shannon, 2016). While this number might seem staggering in how many people are unable to vote, when compared with racial demographics, it is even more pointed. For African Americans of voting age, one in thirteen are disenfranchised, meaning over 7.4 percent of the total African American adult population is unable to cast a ballot, while

just 1.8 percent of the non-African American population is similarly disenfranchised (Uggen, Larson, & Shannon, 2016).

Through the power of disenfranchisement, the United States criminal justice system has been weaponized in order to prevent Black people from gaining economic or political power in the United States. “In America, mass incarceration equals mass felony disenfranchisement. With the launch of the war on drugs, millions of African Americans were swept into the criminal justice system, many never to exercise their voting rights again” (Anderson, 2018, p. 71). Though the war on drugs in the 1980s remains the most recent visible example, this practice of using criminal conviction as a tool for disenfranchisement is nothing new. “Felon disenfranchisement remains one of the oldest and most entrenched mechanisms to ensure that voters of color and African Americans in particular are barred from the ballot box” (Daniels, 2020, p. 148).

Criminal conviction was used as a tool for control after the practice of chattel slavery had been abolished in the United States. In order to ensure that this practice was aimed at Black men specifically, state legislatures worked to identify “crimes that blacks were most likely to commit”, and, starting with Mississippi in 1890, states changed disenfranchising laws from broadly focusing on “any crime” to include only particular crimes such as forgery, arson, or burglary, which they thought Black men were more likely to commit (Daniels, 2020, p. 152).

In the last 50 years, blatantly discriminating against people based on race has fallen outside of acceptable social behavior, due in large part to the civil rights movement. Alexander (2010) argued that we began to rely on the criminal justice system

to continue Jim Crow era practices by successfully equating criminality with people of color (p. 72). The discriminatory practices of the Jim Crow era such as housing or employment discrimination and denial of rights and services are all legal if someone is a felon. “As a criminal, you are afforded scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it” (Alexander, 2010, p. 72). Today, most of the broader disenfranchising laws based on criminality have changed; however, “the primary impact of felon disenfranchisement in many states remains the disqualification of people of color”, serving as a “modern-day three-fifths compromise” (Daniels, 2020, p. 153). Daniels (2020) stated the disproportionate impact of felony disenfranchisement resulted in “diminished representational capacity for African Americans” (p. 170).

As Hill (2006) stated, “In typically chaotic American fashion, different states treat felons differently,” though all the “laws restricting prisoner voting rights are rooted in racism, dating to the Reconstruction era and the legacy of discriminatory Jim Crow laws (pp. 43-44). Currently, there are only two states that allow people to vote while incarcerated: Maine and Vermont (Uggen, Larson, & Shannon, 2016). Conversely, in ten states, a felony “conviction can result in a lifetime disenfranchisement” (Daniels, 2020, p. 154). Each state is different in when and how voting rights may be restored, if ever, and states also differ in which type of crimes result in felony charges. This means that even in federal elections, the right to vote varies vastly from state to state.

While this patchwork of laws on felony disenfranchisement may seem unorganized or inevitable, there has been a clear, documented intention behind these

laws, which is to strip Black people of social, political, and economic power. Alexander (2010) wrote, “After the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the public debate shifted focus from segregation to crime” (p. 151). When politicians could no longer be openly segregationist or blatantly racist, they pivoted to an anti-crime platform. Conservatives were very successful “in using law and order rhetoric in their effort to mobilize the resentment of white working-class voters, many of whom felt threatened by the sudden progress of African Americans” (Alexander, 2010, p. 156). This fact is further evidenced by the disconnect between crime rates and increasingly punitive policies. Murakawa (2014) wrote that laws on crime were “largely divorced from crime rates, from calls for small government, and from conventional wisdom of racial progress” (p. 4). While crime rates did rise in the 1960s and early 1970s, “federal lawmakers enacted notoriously punitive drug penalties and three-strikes provisions two decades later, during the stable and declining crime rates of the late 1980s and 1990s” (Murakawa, 2014, p. 4).

While Nixon was successful in gaining the vote for president using law and order rhetoric, it was not until Reagan and his war on drugs, that mass incarceration became a focal point. Increasing incarceration rates for Black people, paired with a history of felon disenfranchisement, led to a very effective strategy of denying Black people the right to vote. The Reagan administration began the war on drugs in 1982, even though at that time, “less than 2 percent of the American public viewed drugs as the most important issue facing the nation” (Alexander, 2010, p. 163). The drug crisis that Reagan vowed to fight simply did not exist in 1982. “Marijuana use was down; heroin and hallucinogens use had leveled off, even first-time cocaine use was bottoming out” (Anderson, 2016, p.

124). The Reagan administration moved forward with the war on drugs despite the lack of necessity.

The Reagan administration shuffled federal employees from white-collar crime to the anti-drug effort focused on Black communities, while also providing huge increases in federal funding for local police departments to “aggressively expand their personnel and equipment” (Feagin, 2012, p. 105). The budget for the anti-drug allocations for the federal Department of Defense skyrocketed from \$33 million to \$1.042 billion over the decade from 1981 to 1991, while the budget for the National Institute on Drug Abuse was cut from \$274 million in 1981 to \$57 million in 1984 (Alexander, 2010, p. 164). Over and over the budgets for antidrug law enforcement agencies increased, while the budgets for education, prevention, and treatment were slashed. This created a situation where federal resources were used “to make incarceration, rather than education, normative” when it came to dealing with drugs (Anderson, 2016, p. 130).

As budgets increased for law enforcement, minimum sentences also increased. While people usually associate the sensationalized news stories about crack cocaine with the war on drugs, it was not until 1985, almost three years after Reagan’s declaration, that crack appeared on city streets. Once crack appeared in the United States, “the Reagan administration leaped at the opportunity to publicize crack cocaine in an effort to build support for its drug war” (Alexander, 2010, p. 168). In 1986, Reagan signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which Kendi (2016) referred to as “the most racist bill of the decade” (p. 435). This bill, and other reauthorizations of it, were “extraordinarily punitive,” with increased minimum sentences, “expanded use of the death penalty for

serious drug-related offences”, and loss of federal benefits such as housing or student loans, for those convicted of drug crimes (Alexander, 2010, p. 170). Kendi (2016) stated:

While the Anti-Drug Abuse Act prescribed a minimum five-year sentence for a dealer or user caught with five grams of crack, the amount typically handled by Blacks and poor people, the mostly white and rich users and dealers of powder cocaine—who operated in neighborhoods with fewer police—had to be caught with five hundred grams to receive the same five-year minimum sentence.” (p. 435)

The unequal sentencing laws led to the war on drugs impacting communities of color at disproportionate rates to that of even poor White neighborhoods. Alexander (2010) explained that while in some states, ninety percent of those in prison on drug offenses were Black or Latino, “mass incarceration of communities of color was explained in race-neutral terms, an adaptation to the needs and demands of the current political climate” (p. 180).

In two decades between 1980 and 2000, the incarcerated population quadrupled, “due entirely to stiffer sentencing policies, not more crime” (Kendi, 2016, p. 435). “In less than thirty years, the U.S. penal population exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase” (Alexander, 2010, p. 80) Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Whites and Blacks used illegal drugs at relatively the same rates, yet by the turn of the twenty-first century, “Blacks comprised 62.7 percent and Whites 36.7 percent of all drug offenders in state prisons” (Kendi, 2016, pp. 435-436). A number of factors play into the disproportionate

arrest rates, but much of it can be boiled down to the fact that Black neighborhoods are simply more heavily policed. Kendi (2016) stated there is a general rule: “wherever there are more police, there are more arrests, and wherever there are more arrests, people perceive there is more crime, which then justifies more police, and more arrests, and supposedly more crime” (p. 436). Tying in housing segregation makes it even clearer how easy it is to police Black and White neighborhoods differently since they are largely separate.

Reagan, and other politicians from all parties, profited off this tough-on-crime rhetoric. Since the war on drugs began, “millions of non-white, nonviolent drug users and dealers” have been sent to prison “where they could not vote” and later paroled, still without voting rights (Kendi, 2016, p. 437). This resulting disenfranchisement was always part of the design. “Here, as with other disenfranchising tools, the fear of black voting power serves as the rationale to maintain criminal convictions as a means of impacting the ballot box” (Daniels, 2020, p. 167). The war on drugs created a perfect storm of increased incarceration rates and longer sentences which resulted in massive disenfranchisement, particularly of Black men. “Felon disenfranchisement laws have been more effective in eliminating black voters in the age of mass incarceration than they were during Jim Crow” (Alexander, 2010, p. 434).

It can be hard to determine how our current sociopolitical climate might look without blatant voter suppression every step of the way. However, researchers are able to point to several instances where outcomes were likely directly impacted by felony disenfranchisement. Kendi (2016) wrote, “A significant number of close elections would

have come out differently if felons had not been disenfranchised, including at least seven senatorial races between 1980 and 2000, as well as the presidential election of 2000” (p. 437). For much of its statehood, Florida practiced permanent disenfranchisement for people convicted of a felony, which meant “one in four African American men were denied the right to vote due to a former felony conviction” (Daniels, 2020, p. 161). According to The Sentencing Project, before 2018, Florida accounted “for more than a quarter (27 percent) of the disenfranchised population nationally, and its nearly 1.5 million individuals disenfranchised post-sentence account for nearly half (48 percent) of the national total” (Uggen, Larson, & Shannon, 2016). Beyond this blatant, legal disenfranchisement, there have been other issues too. According to Hill (2006), leading up to the contentious presidential election of 2000, “felony voting lists were misused to disenfranchise thousands of African American voters” who simply had names similar to someone who had a felony conviction. (p. 44). Kendi (2019) wrote that fifty-eight thousand alleged felons were purged from the voter rolls ahead of the 2000 election, but about twelve thousand had never been convicted of a felony (p. 124). This all happened in an election that came down to a margin of 537 votes in Florida (Hill, 2006, p. 94).

Florida’s felony disenfranchisement laws were some of the harshest, but, in 2018, Florida voters used a ballot referendum to update the state constitution to include automatic restoration of voting rights for those convicted of a felony, resulting in more than 1.5 million people regaining the right to vote (Daniels, 2020, pp. 162-163). Felon disenfranchisement still keeps millions of citizens from voting each year, but, like in Florida, “we are seeing that its impact and import is diminishing” (Daniels, 2020, p. 170).

This is a good example of a problem rooted in systemic racism, along with the grassroots efforts needed to make change. Both parts are important for students to understand.

These facts, that the war on drugs led to mass incarceration and that incarcerated people are stripped of the right to vote, are not disputed. It is also not disputed that Black men are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system. However, despite lots of evidence, the *intentionality* of mass incarceration as a tool to strip Black people of power is still heavily debated because the racist systems are hidden and deeply entrenched in American society. Through researching missing narratives, the continuation of racist systems is clear, especially with felon disenfranchisement, which “dates back to post-Reconstruction, when the stated intended purpose of the law was to stop newly enfranchised former slaves from voting” (Daniels, 2020, p. 148). The continuation of felon disenfranchisement is “an ingeniously cruel way to quietly snatch away the voting power” (Kendi, 2016, p. 437). Equating Black men with crime, which was perfected under Reagan’s war on drugs, intentionally shifted public focus away from racism and civil rights to crime and safety, all while working to the advantage of politicians looking for votes. Crime was used to shift our attention, but the problem of systemic racism still persists. Murakawa (2014) wrote, “the United states did not face a crime problem that was racialized; it faced a race problem that was criminalized” (p. 3).

Twenty-first century voter suppression. Voter suppression is very much alive today, though methods for disenfranchisement have changed. Beyond felon disenfranchisement, other tools for denying the vote, such as purging voter rolls, voter ID laws, and restricted access to mail-in or absentee ballots, are common in many states

today. Each of these practices, though touted as methods to fight voter fraud, are tools used to disenfranchise eligible voters, particularly people of color (Daniels, 2020, p. 70). “Racist voting policy has evolved from disenfranchising by Jim Crow voting laws to disenfranchising by mass incarceration and voter-ID laws” (Kendi, 2019, p. 22).

After the election of the first Black president, where voter turnout of Blacks and Whites was nearly equal, there was pushback. “After the election of the nation’s first African American president and a record turnout among minority and young voters, voter ID catapulted to the top as an antifraud and certainly an antiparticipation device” (Daniels, 2020, p. 206). Disenfranchisement has been an effective tool throughout our nation’s history, and this time was no exception. This time, the method would be voter ID laws, which, Anderson (2017) stated, “hid the anger and determination behind a legitimate-sounding, noteworthy concern: protecting the integrity of the ballot box from voter fraud” (p. 140).

At its simplest, “voter ID laws require voters to provide some form of identification prior to casting a ballot” (Daniels, 2020, p. 64). According to Daniels (2020), voter ID laws are often compared to poll taxes because there is some financial burden on the voter, whether that is paying for the ID or underlying costs for required documents like birth certificates (Daniels, 2020, p. 70). While voter ID laws are sold as tools to fight voter fraud, Daniels (2020) pointed out that “it is well established that voter ID does not prevent in-person voter fraud and that actual voter fraud in many jurisdictions is statistically nonexistent” (Daniels, 2020, p. 71). Voter ID laws “require, among other things, particular types of identification that—properly and mercilessly

applied—make it difficult for African Americans and others to vote” (Anderson, 2017, p. 141).

The 2016 Presidential election is one that will be talked about for decades. It ushered in what is likely to be one of the most polarizing administrations in United States history. Voter turnout, or lack thereof, especially among African Americans and other people of color, has been pinpointed as a significant reason the Democratic candidate lost in 2016; however, it was not simply distrust of a candidate or lack of motivation to vote that caused Black voter turnout to drop by seven percent (Anderson, 2018, p. 3). According to Anderson (2018), “Minority voters did not just refuse to show up; Republican legislatures and governors systematically blocked African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans from the polls.” (p. 13). Wisconsin is one state that adopted strict voter ID laws under a conservative state legislature, despite there being “zero cases of in-person voter-impersonation fraud” according to an expert who studied elections in 2004, 2008, 2010, and 2012 (Daniels, 2020, p. 80). Kendi (2019) stated that, “Wisconsin’s strict voter-ID law suppressed approximately two hundred thousand votes—again primarily targeting voters of color—in the 2016 election. Donald Trump won that critical swing state by 22,748 votes” (p. 22). Voting rates for Black people in Wisconsin went from “a high of 78 percent in 2012 to less than 50 percent in 2016” (Anderson, 2018, p. 39). This is just one of many examples where voter ID laws likely played a role in election outcomes by preventing people from voting.

“Despite the overwhelming evidence of how restrictive voter ID laws discriminate against voters, states continue to pass these laws because they are effective, not at

eliminating voter fraud but at eliminating eligible voters who tend to vote Democratic” (Daniels, 2020, p. 80). Like Wisconsin, most states have little or no proof of voter fraud; yet, that has been used as justification for extensive voter ID laws. In the United States, about twenty-one million people (eleven percent) lack some form of government-issued identification such as a driver’s license or passport; this includes twenty-five percent of Black voters but only eight percent of White voters (Daniels, 2020, p. 88). This simple statistic can clue anyone in to how voter ID laws would impact White and Black voters differently. According to Anderson (2017), the overall goal of voter ID laws is to “diminish the ability of blacks, Latinos, and Asians, as well as the poor and students to choose government representatives and the types of policies they support. Unfortunately, it’s working.” (p. 56)

Though advancements have been made in terms of civil rights, systemic racism is still present, even in voting systems, a foundational mechanism to democratic rule. Through 2020, there have only been ten Black senators to serve in the United States Senate (African Americans in Senate, 2020). This is just one statistic that emphasizes the lack of proportional representation within government due to the inequitable voting systems in the United States.

Context Matters

These contextual pieces fit together like a puzzle. Many different pieces of information are necessary to make sense of the bigger picture, which in this case is systemic racism. In order to understand how systemic racism continues to shape and impact our voting systems, for example, it is necessary to examine many other historical

narratives that may not seem relevant when taken at surface value. However, after researching housing segregation, mass incarceration, and many other narratives that are typically absent from a civics course, it is clearer how White supremacist ideology has evolved to continue to shape systems of government today. These systems oppress BIPOC in many ways, and every time there is positive change, the systems evolve and push back harder. “Since the nation’s founding, African Americans repeatedly have been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die but then are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time” (Alexander, 2010, p. 108).

In order to be antiracist, one must work toward the goal of disrupting and dismantling systems of oppression wherever they are found, but we cannot work on those systems when they are misunderstood or hidden. Daniels (2020) stated, “It starts with recognizing the quagmire that we are in and the impact our decisions have on the democratic system” (p. 210). Thoroughly examining these systems is the only way to begin to unpack the deeply rooted oppression that undercuts our democracy. Civics teachers in particular need to use a diverse set of narratives to help students uncover the hidden nature of government systems because government at all levels plays a huge role in everyone’s life through healthcare, transportation, education, and a myriad of other ways. Through antiracist education, teachers can give students the tools they need to impact society. “This generation has more opportunities to right the ship of democracy in our lifetime” (Daniels, 2020, p. 211). Civics teachers have the unique position to help students navigate systems that can have very real world results. As educators, we must

find ways to help students explore and discover so they can make informed decisions about the world. Through civics education that provides missing narratives that better reflect our countries diversity, hopefully students will see they can impact change in the systems.

While context is important to give deeper meaning to the content of a civics course, educators need more than historical knowledge to create inclusive environments where students are willing to have challenging, productive conversations. Educators must do internal work first, to unpack their own biases and assumptions. They also need to research methods and techniques that better reflect the needs and interests of their students to be an effective teacher.

Constructive Conversations on Race

Content in a variety of areas is important to create an accurate view of the sociopolitical, as well as historical, context in which we view something like voting systems in the United States. However, it is important to keep in mind that this content is centered on race and racism, which is a lived, and often traumatic, experience for BIPOC students. In addition, cross racial discussions among peers or between a White teacher and Black, Indigenous, or students of color creates additional barriers.

Though discussions on systemic racism may be challenging or intimidating, it is increasingly imperative to have this discourse in the classroom. These constructive conversations on race “are not only important, but more and more they have become a moral mandate” (Kim & Del Prado, 2019, p. 66). In order to have constructive conversations with race at the center, I had to research several key areas including: racism

as a system or structure; Whiteness and my own inherent biases; and how to create trust in relationships needed to have productive discussions.

Racism as a Structure

Racism is all around us, “deeply embedded in the fabric of our society”; yet, its pervasiveness often goes unnoticed by White people both because it does not directly impact them and because their definition of racism is too narrow (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 22). Racism is commonly viewed as a series of individual actions and conscious beliefs based on dislike or discomfort of people of a certain race (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 13). In this narrow view of racism, which Tatum (2003) referred to as “active racism”, only people who perform overtly racist acts such as using racial slurs or joining a White-supremacist organization would deserve the label of racist (p. 11). This definition overlooks all the “passive racism” that exists around us, such as not speaking up when a racist joke is told or avoiding discussions on race-related topics when it is convenient (Tatum, 2003, p. 11). It also overlooks systemic or institutional racism.

A narrowly defined concept of racism is not only inaccurate, it is also harmful. This simplistic definition of racism helps to cement the status quo by hiding damaging, systemic racism that is all around us. After large strides forward in terms of equality during the civil rights era, being outwardly racist fell outside of acceptable social norms. In school and in the media, “we have been taught that racists are mean people who intentionally dislike others because of their race; racists are immoral” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 13). Equating racists with immorality actually helped to hide systemic racism because rather than racism going away, people started to use coded language and other

mechanisms for discrimination, in order to not be perceived as a racist. The violent Ku Klux Klan and “jackbooted sheriffs” became the “sole definition of racism” (Anderson, 2018, p. 100). According to Anderson (2018), by defining racism by “only its most virulent and visible form” government officials were able to create policies that appeared to meet “the standard of America’s new civil rights norms while at the same time crafting the implementation of policies to undermine and destabilize these norms” (pp. 100-101).

The actual structure of society did not change upon the collapse of Jim Crow; rather, we changed the language around how we continue to use race to justify exclusion and discrimination (Alexander, 2010, p. 71). Anderson (2018) called this a “simple but wickedly brilliant conceptual and linguistic shift” (p. 100). Today, it remains socially unacceptable to be overtly racist, so we do not see a lot of active racism. Instead, racism is more covert, leading people to the conclusion that “racism is a thing of the past”; however, “if you are paying attention, the legacy of racism is not hard to see, and we are all affected by it” (Tatum, 2003, p. 3)

To fully grasp the concept of racism, it is important to distinguish racism from “mere prejudice and discrimination”, especially since all three terms are often used interchangeably (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 19). DiAngelo (2018) defined prejudice as a “pre-judgment about another person based on the social groups to which that person belongs” (p. 19). While prejudice is a thought, idea, or attitude, discrimination is an “*action* based on prejudice” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 20). No one can avoid prejudice because it “is an integral part of our socialization”, but we can examine those preconceived notions to fight against the systems that created them (Tatum, 2003, pp. 6-7).

While prejudice and discrimination are part of the equation, racism is better defined as a system of oppression that provides advantages to White people and disadvantages to people of color (Tatum, 2003, p. 7). *Power* is what separates mere prejudice from racism. Whether realized or not, there is a stark power differential between a White person and a Black person in the United States, and that has been true throughout our short history. DiAngelo (2018) stated, “The direction of power between white people and people of color is historic, traditional, and normalized in ideology” (p. 22). It is assumed that White people have more power, and that is reflected everywhere from history textbooks to the floor of Congress. Tatum (2003) stated, “Racial prejudice when combined with social power—access to social, cultural, and economic resources and decision-making—leads to institutionalization of racist policies and practices” (pp. 7-8). When racism becomes part of the basic institutions, it is hard to combat because it continues without racist actors—it is inherently part of the system. DiAngelo (2018) stated, “When a racial group’s collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors” (p. 20). Racism is ingrained in American society to the point of being self-perpetuating; “All that is required to maintain it is business as usual” (Tatum, 2003, p. 11).

Racism is a structure of power. Kendi (2019) stated that “race and racism are power constructs of the modern world” (p. 238). Racism is not just about violence, burning crosses, or the Klan. As Anderson (2017) stated, “Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively” (p. 3). When racism is

not talked about or acknowledged, it cannot be dismantled. Tatum (2003) wrote, “It is important to understand that the system of advantage is perpetuated when we do not acknowledge its existence” (p. 9). Racism is baked into our institutions, laws, and policies, and we must acknowledge how our government creates and perpetuates a system that advantages Whites as a group. To do that properly, we need to delve into what it means to be White in this society as well. After all, a key part of the research question is that I am a *White* educator: *As a white educator, how can I provide learning opportunities for students to explore alternative narratives and address racial inequities that government systems create and perpetuate in order to strengthen their understanding of power and democracy?*

White Supremacy. The advantages of being White in America are based on White dominance in all aspects of society. Singh (2020) wrote that White supremacy is “the historic and modern legislating, societal conditioning, and systemic institutionalizing of the construction of whiteness as inherently superior to people of other races” (p. 33). White supremacy is the basis for the racial hierarchy that built this country, and much of the world. Quoting Mills, DiAngelo (2018) wrote that White supremacy is “the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today” (p. 29). Like systemic racism, White supremacy has been rendered invisible, despite it being ubiquitous, because much of its “power is drawn from its invisibility” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 29). It is largely self-sustaining, which helps the system remain intact. “White supremacy is not just an attitude or way of thinking. It also extends to how systems and institutions are structured to uphold this white dominance.” (Saad, 2020, p. 33).

White supremacy is everywhere, even when it goes unacknowledged. The term White supremacy is often associated with hate groups, but it is more accurate to say White supremacy describes the White-centric culture that sets Whites as the norm and all other races as outside of that standard (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 33). Naming White supremacy is an important part of dismantling the system because it “makes the system visible and shifts the locus of change onto white people, where it belongs” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 33).

White educators must be aware of how we all fit into a system of White supremacy so we can equip ourselves and our students to combat the inequities. “If you are willing to dare to look white supremacy right in the eye and see yourself reflected back, you are going to become better equipped to dismantle it within yourself and within your communities” (Saad, 2020, p. 34). To fully understand racism as a structure based on White supremacy, Whiteness must be carefully examined.

Whiteness

Most White people have not considered themselves in racial terms, even though most Americans realize that race and racism exist. DiAngelo began the book *White Fragility* (2018) by remarking how from a young age, White people are taught to be color-evasive because race matters, but only for people who are *not* white. DiAngelo (2018) wrote:

My experience is not a universal human experience. It is a particularly white experience in a society in which race matters profoundly; a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race. However, like most white people raised in the US, I

was not taught to see myself in racial terms and certainly not to bring attention to my race or to behave as if it mattered in any way. (p. 7)

This is a common sentiment among Whites because Whiteness is portrayed as a baseline. When Whiteness is seen as the norm, there is not a lot of incentive to acknowledge Whiteness as a race with a distinct white culture. “Whiteness is not acknowledged by white people, and the white reference point is assumed to be universal and is imposed on everyone”(DiAngelo, 2018, p. 25). Because society reflects White culture back to us constantly, in mass media, school, and government, it is easy to assume that White culture is the norm. In reality, White culture is distinct, even though many Whites have not grappled with it because they do not see themselves in racial terms. Most Whites who grew up in predominantly White spaces “think of themselves as being part of the racial norm and take this for granted without conscious consideration of their White privilege, the systematically conferred advantages they receive simply because they are White” (Tatum, 2003, p. 95). Acknowledging and naming their racial identity is an important first step in being able to discuss racism for White people (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 7).

Naming Whiteness can be difficult for a number of reasons, including that, in naming it, one must also acknowledge all the advantages and prejudices that accompany being White. “Being perceived as white carries more than a mere racial classification; it is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 24). This examination is also difficult because it reframes their worldview. DiAngelo (2018) wrote,

“Instead of the typical focus on how racism hurts people of color, to examine whiteness is to focus on how racism elevates white people” (p. 25). Tatum (2003) wrote, “For many Whites, this new awareness of a racist system elicits considerable pain, often accompanied by feelings of anger and guilt”, and those feelings can derail productive discussions (p. 9).

While this process of examining our own racial identities can be difficult, or even painful, it is important work because it provides a deeper “understanding of racism and an appreciation and respect for the identity struggles of people of color” (Tatum, 2003, p. 113). Integral in this work is also the creation of positive racial identities. Singh (2019) stated that “a positive racial identity means you have spent time learning about who you are as a racial being— both the privileges and the disadvantages it affords you— and how your racial identity affects your experience of others and the world” (p. 23). Citing Helms’ model for creating a healthy White identity, Tatum (2003) wrote that “there are two major developmental tasks in this process, the abandonment of individual racism and the recognition of and opposition to institutional and cultural racism” (pp. 94-95).

This process of acknowledging Whiteness as the dominant culture, separate from a color-evasive melting-pot view of *American* culture, is important in the classroom for both educators and students. “Whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 25). It is just as important to point out how Whiteness is elevated in American society, as it is to point out the inequities that disadvantage so many other marginalized groups.

Hammond (2015) asserted that “the hardest culture to examine is often our own, because it shapes our actions in ways that seem invisible and normal” (p. 55). Self reflection, inquiry, and vulnerability are all very important for a White educator when examining Whiteness and other cultural reference points, especially when facing painful and uncomfortable truths like how Whites benefit from systemic racism in the United States.

White privilege. In some contexts, the word privilege refers to a life of wealth and luxury, which is why the term White privilege is easily disregarded by many poor and working-class Whites. Economic disadvantage is a strong motivator in how people operate in society, and because of it, people often overlook what benefits they might have in our current system. Though many Whites may not feel powerful due to their socioeconomic status, there are still many advantages that accompany being White in the United States, even though not all Whites benefit equally (Tatum, 2003, p. 8). White privilege can be defined as “the systematic advantages of being White” (Tatum, 2003, p. 8). While there are major advantages, such as access to better education, and minor advantages, such as being able to find bandages that match their skin tone, Whites are typically “viewed as an individual, rather than a member of a racial group” (Tatum, 2003, p. 8). This basic benefit protects Whites from being labeled and stereotyped. Whites are seen as individual human beings, without preconceived notions of their intellect or behavior, for the most part. Whites view themselves through the lens of meritocracy and individualism, which explains their position over people in other racial groups (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 27).

Acknowledging this privilege, both on an interpersonal and institutional levels, is an important step in creating space for courageous conversations. Kim and Del Prado (2019) wrote:

While you can't get rid of your privilege, especially unearned privilege such as race and gender identity, you can move it from the blind window to the known window. By acknowledging your privilege to yourself, you can even own it when embarking on constructive conversations. p. 110

Barriers to conversation

There are many barriers, internal and external, that can stop people from having constructive conversations about race. Fear is a common barrier. For those in marginalized communities, fear may involve real threats like violence or lack of housing. It is important to remember that in spite of these real and persistent threats to their personal safety, people in marginalized communities continue to “speak up and courageously work toward liberation from injustice and toward our collective healing” (Kim & Del Prado, 2019, p. 93). However, for many others, especially Whites, that fear is usually not life-threatening, though fear that arises from uncomfortableness can be just as big a hindrance to a conversation on race.

White fragility. Hammond (2015) stated that when we feel threatened, including threats to our culture or belief system, “we are vulnerable to an amygdala hijack”, which puts our brains into fight or flight mode (p. 64). This amygdala hijacking causes people to become “culturally reactive” or defensive, which can be a barrier to any sort of

productive conversation. DiAngelo (2018) wrote that when ideologies are challenged, people often have strong emotional reactions (p. 100).

When addressing White privilege and racism, “common white responses include anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 101). This common response to racial stress is White fragility. DiAngelo (2018) asserted that White people are used to racial comfort and advantages that come from White supremacy. When there is a disruption “to that which is familiar and taken for granted—white fragility restores equilibrium and returns the capital “lost” via the challenge” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 106). The pushback caused by White fragility prevents “us from attaining the racial knowledge we need to engage more productively,” all while upholding the racial hierarchy (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 8).

White people in the United States have been socialized “into a white supremacist worldview because it is the bedrock of our society and its institutions” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 129). White fragility rises out of uncomfortable feelings around our role in the racist systems, but “stopping our racist patterns must be more important than working to convince others that we don’t have them” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 129). Talking openly and honestly about race can be challenging and uncomfortable, but it is necessary in order to confront and dismantle racism. Educators must be willing to be vulnerable with students and to help them explore their own identities and biases along the way. Recognizing topics that might trigger a defensive reaction and preparing for discussions are important steps for anyone communicating cross-culturally, especially in a classroom (Hammond, 2015, p. 64-65). In order to get to a place to discuss race, however, teachers and students

need to forge relationships and build trust to create safe and brave spaces to have constructive conversations.

Relationships

According to Hammond (2015), educators are often primarily focused on curriculum, with little attention paid to their interactions with students, but “relationships are as important as the curriculum” for a culturally responsive teacher (p. 72).

Intentionally building relationships with students should be a priority to all teachers, especially those with a racially and culturally diverse set of students.

Trust. Trust is a central tenet to culturally responsive teaching. “At the core of positive relationships is trust” (Hammond, 2015, p. 73). Brake (2019) stated that research shows that “teachers who actively work to build trusting relationships with students are more likely to positively impact students’ social and emotional development, especially for those most at risk for being disconnected from high school” (p. 278).

Trust is key in a biological sense, because our brains require it to make connections, and those connections are needed to create authentic personal relationships. Oxytocin, also known as “the bonding hormone,” is released when we feel a sense of connection (Hammond, 2015, p. 74). In conjunction, humans also have mirror neurons, which prompt us to “match our body language and facial expressions to the other person’s to signal trust and rapport” (Hammond, 2015, p. 74). According to Hammond, trust also neutralizes the amygdala’s fight or flight response to fear, which “frees up the brain for other activities such as creativity, learning, and higher order thinking” (p. 76). Therefore, students’ brains are better equipped for learning when they feel safe. With this

biological response in mind, teachers can use small gestures of respect and affirmation to build authentic relationships with students to help them become stronger learners (Hammond, 2015, p. 74).

Building relationships takes time and effort, but there are many seemingly small gestures and interactions that can have major impacts on creating connections with students, such as a smile or nod in the hallway (Hammond, 2015, p. 77). According to Hammond (2015), authentic listening, acts of caring, and selective vulnerability can all help build trust between teachers and students (p. 79). Using a longitudinal study of ninth-graders, Brake (2019) found there are three critical steps for educators to build trust in a classroom: First, teachers must be flexible, understanding, and patient in regards to inconsistent student behavior in the classroom (pp. 286-287). Second, teachers should use activities that aim to strengthen relationships, as well as activities that help develop and reinforce classroom expectations and norms (p. 287). Third, teachers should use one-on-one conferencing because it signals to students that their teacher wants to know and understand each individual's strengths, challenges, learning styles, and interests (pp. 288-289). These three steps can help teachers build trust, which is crucial for authentic relationships. Brake (2019) wrote that "this study underscores the close connection between teacher–student trust and culturally responsive classroom practice, particularly in supporting immigrant youth and youth of color, students who most often experience oppression, marginalization, and unequal access to resources and supports in schools" (p. 298).

Learning partnership. Hammond (2015) stated that a learning partnership is a new kind of relationship focused on “building a culture of care that helps dependent learners move toward independence” (p. 75). A learning partnership has three key components: rapport and affirmation; alliance and teamwork; and cognitive insight (Hammond, 2015, p. 75). This learning partnership is essential in getting students to open up, especially when having potentially difficult discussions on race and racism. According to Kim and Del Prado (2019), constructive conversations should start with stating why you are having the conversation because it affirms the importance of the relationship (p. 92). Whether within a family or a classroom, relationships are key to having authentic conversations. Building trust through a learning partnership is an important step in how educators can “lead students to their zone of proximal development” (Hammond, 2015, p. 86).

Cross-cultural conversations. A lot can get lost or misinterpreted when having conversations across cultural or racial boundaries. Delpit (1988) asserted that members within a cultural group “transmit information implicitly to comembers”; “however, when implicit codes are attempted across cultures, communication frequently breaks down” (Hilty, 2011, p. 160). When students and teachers are not from the same cultural groups, there can be a disconnect in communication. According to Hammond (2015), teachers must broaden their “explanations and interpretations of student actions” in order to better understand students (p. 59). Citing Gudykunst and Kim (2003), Hammond wrote that there is a three-part process for educators to expand their understanding of cross-cultural communication: description, interpretation, and evaluation (p. 59). Educators must

evaluate their own cultural lens, and then commit to multicultural learning to broaden their interpretations of student behavior and needs.

Creating cross-cultural relationships built on trust is an essential part of effective teaching. In order to build authentic relationships, educators must reflect on their own cultural experience and familiarize themselves with a broad range of cultural references. Preparing for triggers and barriers to conversations will help prepare educators to have important conversations on race within the classroom.

Combining Missing Narratives and Student-centered Teaching

Traditional social studies content in the United States is very White-centric, lacking many important stories from Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Those missing narratives help to describe a set of racist structures that have been intentionally hidden to perpetuate White supremacy. In order to talk about those systems and policies created and perpetuated by all levels of government in the United States, students and teachers need to be able to talk about race and racism. Using a culturally responsive approach with a conceptual framework, teachers will be able to provide opportunities for deep learning related to power, democracy, and race in the United States.

The Importance of Civics

Traditionally, civics courses have been focused on the history and processes of government, with little relevance toward students' experiences with democracy or power. Civics education is crucial, however, and educators who wish to focus on racial equity, "must explicitly address the political and social marginalization of communities that have traditionally been excluded from the formal democratic process. In doing so, we can

begin to dismantle the barriers to civic identity and participation faced by so many young people in this country, particularly by young people of color” (Warren & Wilkes, 2018, para. 4). Using narratives that have been absent, “we look back to move forward”, and in doing so, we can study things like voter suppression to create ways to make voting more accessible and democratic (Daniels, 2020, p. 11).

Addressing societal inequities in civics class, unlike many other subjects, provides students a unique opportunity to figure out ways they can impact the systems with actionable items. Reading about voter suppression in English class is important, but with a rigorous civics education, educators can empower students to take action in their own communities. Though it is a good starting point, conversation is not enough. For systemic change to happen, educators must include “intentional civic engagement alongside constructive conversations” (Kim & Del Prado, 2019, p. 324). A high school civics classroom is a perfect place for the marriage of constructive conversations on race and civic engagement. “We cannot expect the system to change without our continued efforts to change it from a system that excludes people of color from obtaining and maintaining power to one of inclusion and recognition” (Daniels, 2020, p. 210). In civics, educators can help students sharpen the tools needed to make change in their community.

There is evidence that certain opportunities in school foster a sense of civic duty and possibility when adolescents are “forming their own civic and political identity” (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, as cited in Parker, 2015, p. 183). However, there is also evidence that these types of activities, including simulations and service-learning

projects, are not distributed to all students equally. Citing a study in California, Kahne and Middaugh (2008, as cited in Parker, 2015), stated:

Specifically, even with other controls in place, students who identified as African Americans were less likely than others to report having civically oriented government courses, less likely to report having discussions of current events that were personally relevant, less likely to report having voice in the school or classroom, and were less likely to report opportunities for role-plays or simulations. (p. 184)

Civics education is particularly important in a high school setting because in the United States it is the last level of free public education, and it is also a time when many young people are developing their worldview and making potentially life-altering decisions about their futures (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, as cited in Parker, 2015, p. 185). Educators must address the inequities within society, but they also must work to address why and how civics education impacts different groups within their classroom. If the goal is to enable all people to fully participate in our democracy, then we must work to understand how to provide equal access to learning opportunities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, as cited in Parker, 2015, p. 186).

Conceptual Learning

In order to provide a robust and rigorous civics education, educators must help students understand abstract concepts like power and democracy so they are able to create deeper understanding with regards to government policies and systems.

Conceptual learning is an approach that focuses on big-picture, abstract learning. In

contrasting traditional and conceptual learning, Stern, Ferraro, and Mohnkern (2017) wrote that students play a passive role in traditional learning, collecting facts and ideas that educators deem important (p. 35). Students are responsible for retaining those ideas, and later they will be asked to recall them. In contrast, conceptual learning anticipates that students begin “with their own preexisting ideas,” which they will work to refine through disciplined study (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, pp. 35-36).

Conceptual learning is dependent upon setting up a classroom culture of deep learning, which includes three important parts: a student-centered classroom; conceptual learning framework; opportunities for iterative learning with multiple chances to refine ideas (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, pp. 29-40). Students will need opportunities to uncover their own preconceptions about power, democracy, and any other civics concepts. This includes uncovering underlying bias and associations, since they are often unconscious. Then there must be an expectation set on growth rather than the traditional binary of knowing or not knowing a specific set of information. Lastly, students need to feel safe to take intellectual risks. Students and teachers must work together to create a supportive and inclusive community (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 30).

Conceptual learning opportunities focus on students uncovering abstract ideas, rather than the traditional model of teachers telling students facts. Because the goals are different in conceptual learning, the design and instructional methods are also different. According to Stern, Ferraro, and Mohnkern (2017), there are four instructional principles that will help educators design conceptual learning opportunities for students: (1) examine students’ preexisting understanding of the concepts; (2) introduce and fully

explore new concepts; (3) allow students to uncover relationships between concepts; and (4) help students transfer ideas and understandings to new concepts (pp. 47-64).

Ultimately, the goal in conceptual learning is for students to be able to “use their new knowledge to analyze problems, make decisions, and influence others in ways that matter to them” (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 57).

Conceptual language. A crucial part of learning is through language. However, educators must teach students the language they need to access the content and concepts within the course. Specific concept-based language is not something humans are born with; thus, educators need to give students the words to articulate the abstract ideas they are asked to grapple with, both related to specific content and generally to conceptual learning so they can describe differences in concepts, facts, and knowledge (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, pp. 37-38). This is crucial when implementing the second principle from Stern, Ferraro, and Mohnkern (2017) because students need proper language to explore concepts and articulate what they are learning. Stern, Ferrero, & Mohnkern (2017) stated:

Students do not come prewired with the ability to distinguish facts from concepts or with the understanding of how facts, concepts, and generalizations are related to each other. Therefore, it is worthwhile to spend a class period explaining the structure of knowledge and providing examples of the building blocks of conceptual learning. (p. 37)

Language related to content is also important. For civics classes in particular, educators need to help students name the larger sociopolitical context in which we live in

order to understand the specifics of the content. In doing so, students will be able to describe “the series of mutually reinforcing policies and practices across social, economic, and political domains that contribute to disparities and unequal opportunities for people of color in housing, transportation, education, and health care, to name a few” (Hammond, 2015, p. 28).

Conceptual learning aligns well with culturally responsive teaching because educators acknowledge that students come into the classroom with specific knowledge, ideas, and skills, while also understanding that those preexisting ideas are dependent upon their culture. A culturally responsive approach will be helpful in better analyzing students’ preexisting ideas and knowledge through looking at how they organize concepts and approach problems due to their culture and background. Culturally responsive teaching uses cultural knowledge as a scaffold (Hammond, 2015, p. 15). Similarly, conceptual learning uses students’ preexisting knowledge and ideas to build understanding of abstract concepts and their relationships to each other (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 19). Educators should help students use their existing framework to analyze concepts, rather than forcing all students to view a concept through the same lens, which has been the traditional approach.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Educators need to focus on cultural relevance to help students optimize their learning potential. Hammond (2015) framed culture in three levels: Surface, shallow, and deep culture (pp. 22-23). Cultural relevance does not simply mean nodding to a hero or recognizing music within a student’s cultural framework. Educators must focus on the

“deep culture” of their students in order to better understand how they process and organize ideas and facts in their brains (Hammond, 2015, p. 23). According to Hammond (2015), while surface level cultural elements can be helpful in making some connections to students, understanding their deep culture, such as cultural archetypes and notions of equality, will allow you to design lessons that tap into how students view and make sense of the world (p. 25).

Once educators have a decent understanding of their students' cultural framework, they can use that as scaffolding “to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing” (Hammond, 2015, p. 15). In the Ready for Rigor framework, Hammond (2015) laid out four interdependent practices to help educators create positive social, cognitive, and emotional environments in order to give students the tools and opportunities to play an active role in learning and engagement (p. 18). The four core areas in the Ready for Rigor framework are: awareness, learning partnerships, information processing, and community building (Hammond, 2015, pp. 17-20). This framework is how culturally responsive teaching becomes operationalized (Hammond, 2015, p. 20).

Identity. All students come into the classroom with their own intersectional identities which are closely tied to culture. Tatum (2003) wrote that identity is a complex concept, “shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (p. 18). It is important to have space for students to explore and express those identities, as well as the opportunity to grapple with identity as a concept. Using a conceptual framework, educators can

explore identity more deeply, which will allow for better understanding among students and teachers. If teachers understand student identities, they have better insight into their cultural framework.

Need for safe spaces. Creating a classroom that feels welcoming and safe to all students is a necessary part of culturally responsive teaching. Hammond (2015) described a biological need for safety, stating that our brains have two main functions, which is to avoid threats and steer us toward well-being (p. 47). Culture, experiences, and the sociopolitical context all play a role in programming how our brains interpret what is helpful or what is a threat. “Our challenge as culturally responsive teachers is knowing how to create an environment that the brain perceives as safe and nurturing so it can relax, let go of any stress, and turn its attention to learning” (Hammond, 2015, p. 50).

All students, especially those in marginalized communities, need to “feel affirmed and included as valued members of a learning community” in order to maximize their potential (Hammond, 2015, p. 47). This safety is necessary in order to get students to open up and fully participate. However, it is important to note that there are many different definitions of safety, and educators must understand and act according to their students’ definitions of what feels threatening or welcoming (Hammond, 2015, p. 47). Understanding their identities, experiences, and interests, as well as having open discussions about the students’ needs, will help to create an environment where students feel safe and understood.

Conclusion

The first section of the research was focused on content. Systemic oppression is

often overlooked in the traditional white-centric view of history and government. Missing narratives, especially the successes and struggles from a Black perspective, can help deepen our understanding of the racial inequities within systems that the government creates and perpetuates in the United States.

Systemic racism is a major focal point in the first section of research; thus, the second section of research was centered on how to reflect on and talk about race. Sifting through personal identities and biases is a good place for educators to start. They also must give opportunities for students to explore and express their identities and cultures in the classroom, which leads to the last part of the research.

The third section of research was focused on putting all the pieces together into a teaching approach. Using conceptual learning and a culturally responsive framework, educators should be able to create learning opportunities for a racially and culturally diverse set of learners. Understanding cultural frameworks and preexisting ideas around central concepts is important for both conceptual learning and culturally responsive teaching.

It is important to understand the history of the systems that the United States government creates and perpetuates because it impacts all aspects of our lives from healthcare to school funding. While understanding that history provides better insight to understanding today's sociopolitical context, it is also important to know how to take action. Educators, especially in civics, can start by engaging in constructive conversations so students can collaborate and cooperate to come up with solutions to problems in their communities. Everyone must contribute to the work to make positive change, but maybe

more importantly, we have to *believe* it is possible to change. “Recognizing the present cycle and fighting to push the pendulum toward justice and progress is within our reach. The struggle indeed continues” (Daniels, 2020, p. 211). Ultimately, the hope is that through a rigorous, student-centered civics education, students will develop the tools they need to fight the systems of oppression that are so entrenched in the United States today.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

My research was guided by a question: *As a White educator, how can I provide learning opportunities for students to explore alternative narratives and address racial inequities that government systems create and perpetuate in order to strengthen their understanding of power and democracy?* With that question in mind, I created a project that helped me put my research into action through a set of lessons about voting systems in the United States.

The overarching goal for the course was: Students will be able to identify systemic patterns, in government and society, using a diverse set of narratives, in order to inform their civic debate, discussion, and decisions. Kahne and Middaugh (2008) wrote, “democratic self-governance requires an informed and educated citizenry and that access to education is an important support for the development of such citizens” (Parker, 2015, p. 179). I hope that students will see the racist, oppressive systems in ways that will spark a desire to seek social justice and make change in their communities through civic engagement.

Theoretical Framework

Before these lessons would begin, there is a lot of work to do to set up a classroom environment that is conducive to conceptual learning, along with a safe community to provide a culturally responsive classroom experience. The beginning of the school term will be focused on both community-building activities and

conceptual-learning exercises. Both are important to build trust, community, and interest in the course.

Conceptual learning. Students need to be taught how to learn conceptually because a traditional classroom does not employ this style of learning. As Stern, Ferraro, and Mohnkern (2017) pointed out, “we need to be explicit about how this type of learning might be different from what they are accustomed to doing, especially for older students who are used to a more topic-based, coverage-centered classroom” (p. 34). We will spend time on the structure of knowledge, so students can begin to understand how facts, generalizations, and concepts fit together (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 38). Often educators teach concepts in the same manner they would teach vocabulary words, with definitions and quizzes. However, this method does not help students distinguish between facts and concepts (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 38). Students will likely memorize definitions that they do not fully understand. “Then they—and their teachers—will be disappointed when they can’t apply or analyze or evaluate based on the concepts” (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 53). This is why it is important to distinguish between facts and concepts, as well as fully invest in teaching concepts in a way that students can find deep meaning that will transfer to other situations.

For the entirety of the course, we will be looking at the concepts of power and democracy. Both of these will likely be fairly familiar to students who have had other government or civics courses, but they are abstract concepts with many meanings, so it will be a long learning process throughout the course. We will look at how power and democracy fit into government in all the units we cover, including voting, but more

importantly, we will explore how those concepts work in relationship to each other. It is important for students to uncover the relationship between concepts in order to use their understanding to solve complex problems involving patterns or change (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 13).

Culturally responsive teaching. In addition to getting students ready to learn conceptually, I will also be preparing them to learn independently using culturally responsive teaching. My goal is to help dependent students develop new habits and cognitive skills that will accelerate their learning. Eventually, they will “know how to learn new content and improve their weak skills on their own” (Hammond, 2015, p. 15). Students need to be independent learners, especially at the high school level, in order to find deep meaning through their own experiences, culture, and values.

I used the Ready for Rigor framework both for my instruction methods and for engaging, culturally responsive lesson plans (Hammond, 2015). The framework has four parts: awareness, learning partnerships, information processing, and community building (Hammond, pp. 17-19). These allowed me to better understand how and why I needed to establish connections, trust, and partnerships with students. A lot of this framework applies to things like relationships that are set up long before my lessons, but it is important because I could not have an in-depth discussion on how voting systems reflect power in the United States if students did not have both a good understanding of the concept and a safe space to discuss the tough issues that are part of the sociopolitical context.

Backward design. I created the unit curriculum design by using Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) Backward Design to help me focus on student learning and understanding. This pairs well with a conceptual framework, since conceptual learning implies that I have the intention of focusing on students' understanding of specific concepts within the context of various topics. Once I determined my goals and learning objectives, I worked backward to create assessments and finally instructional tasks. This worked counter to how most educators intuitively want to start with instructional tasks. With this method, however, I put students' learning needs first. With student learning always at the center, I found ways to meet those objectives and goals through assessments and instruction. In other words, this method focuses on *learning*, where traditional methods centered on specific texts and activities focus on *teaching* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 15). If this curriculum design process was thought of as travel planning, the "frameworks should provide a set of itineraries deliberately designed to meet cultural goals rather than a purposeless tour of all the major sites in a foreign country" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 14).

Further, backward design pairs well with the strategy of uncover and transfer within conceptual learning (Stern, Ferraro, and Mohnkern, 2017). Uncovering refers to providing learning opportunities for students to establish meaning and connections through inquiry. This is in opposition to traditional teaching where students receive information on what concepts mean and how they are related. Covering concepts like that denies students the opportunity to use their own experiences, cultures, and identities to

assign meaning and depth to a concept. This is a common pitfall for teachers (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 57).

Once big picture ideas and relationships between concepts have been uncovered by students, they must learn to transfer. Transfer, in this context, refers to the students' ability to use their conceptual knowledge "to unlock new situations" (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 57). Transferring is the ultimate goal of conceptual learning, because it allows students to "use their new knowledge to analyze problems, make decisions, and influence others in ways that matter to them" (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 57). We will focus on the concepts power and democracy throughout the course. This will mean that students will need to uncover the meaning and relationship between the concepts throughout the year, with the hope that they can transfer and deepen their understanding as we put those concepts into different contexts.

Timeline and Description

The unit curriculum design spans approximately three weeks, or about 15 days. Each week is devoted to one of three main contexts for learning, with separate learning objectives, assessments, and instructional materials and tasks, and the last few days will be focused on the final assessment and reflecting on the concepts of power and democracy. The overarching goal for the course is: Students will be able to identify systemic patterns in government and society, using a diverse set of narratives, in order to inform their civic debate, discussion, and decisions. The goal of this unit on voting systems is: Students will be able identify ways in which voting systems within the United

States reflect power and democracy. This goal will be in focus for the three weeks of the unit, leading up to summative assessment.

The voting unit is broken down into three sections. The first week focuses on voting mechanics, looking into how and why people vote; voter participation; and barriers to voting today and historically. Students will be able to use diverse historical narratives to identify systematic disenfranchisement and discuss ways to improve voter turnout.

The second week, our learning objective will focus on electoral districts. We will look at how and why electoral districts are created. Students will use census data, recent supreme court cases, and demographic trends to analyze how current and past electoral districts impact election results at different levels. Each student will create their own voting districts within a given map. Then in pairs, they will compare and contrast their maps to learn how to analyze maps and predict election results.

The final week is centered on different types of voting systems. We will use local and national examples, along with game theory simulations, to see if voter preference is accurately represented in a country dominated by a two-party system. Through studying historical examples and running simulations, students will be able to compare and contrast first-past-the-post and ranked choice voting.

In the last few days, we will try to make connections among the themes of the unit, while relating how these systems reflect power and democracy at different levels of government. We will end with students working on ways that we can improve these systems in ways that are important to them through a structured discussion.

Assessment

Informal formative assessments will be used throughout the unit in order to check on how students are transferring knowledge to this new context and to make sure they are understanding any new facts or contextual background information. For the first week, students will be able to use diverse historical narratives to identify systematic disenfranchisement and discuss ways to improve voter turnout. In order to assess their learning with this objective, student groups will brainstorm barriers to voting throughout time and create a timeline to demonstrate this understanding. Using a broad set of texts and the timelines they created, students will have to come up with five ideas to improve voter turnout, using a socratic circle, or fishbowl method.

For the next set of lessons, students will use census data, recent supreme court cases, and demographic trends to analyze how current and past electoral districts impact election results at different levels. We will analyze maps, demographic information, and census data to predict election results in specific places and years. Students will write a short opinion essay on how changes in electoral maps can have positive or negative impacts.

Through studying historical examples and running simulations, students will be able to compare and contrast first-past-the-post and ranked choice voting. Assessments for this final section of the voting unit will be based on debate participation, along with a short persuasive essay.

To wrap up this unit, we will have small group and class discussions on the connections students made among the three sections of the unit, focusing on how power

and democracy were reflected in different ways. For the summative assessment of the voting unit, students will work in groups to make presentations on three ways we can improve democracy by making power more equitable.

Setting

I planned this unit curriculum design for a high school United States government course. United States government or civics is required in Minnesota, typically for a semester. I planned this specifically for an urban public school in Minnesota. Based on classrooms I have taught in, I am anticipating a diverse set of students. They will be diverse in socioeconomic status, race, gender identity, home languages, and religion. I would anticipate somewhere between 30 and 50 percent of my students will be white. This likely means that the majority of my students will be BIPOC. With a focus on equity and systemic racism, I have to find ways that will engage all of my students.

For my students of color, I will need to focus on ways to affirm their identities by including missing narratives that resonate with them in some way. For my White students, I will also need to find ways to engage them, but I want to focus on students recognizing their own racial identity, which will likely be challenging. In addition, I will need to create a space where students of color and White students can openly discuss issues of race, inequity, and oppression. Students will need to build trust and relationships with each other to make those conversations productive.

In an urban school, I would expect class sizes to be on the larger end, with 25 to 35 students in each class. I will keep in mind ways to alter lessons for larger or smaller classes. Due to the size, this is another reason that it is imperative that students are able to

learn independently. While I would love to have a class of 20, that is not a reality for most public schools in urban areas.

Conclusion

The unit design was guided by my research question: *As a White educator, how can I provide learning opportunities for students to explore alternative narratives and address racial inequities that government systems create and perpetuate in order to strengthen their understanding of power and democracy?* With a framework of culturally relevant teaching and conceptual learning, I created a unit on voting using backward design. This helped to keep student learning and engagement as the central focus throughout the design process. While this student-centered curriculum design aims to be culturally relevant, it will only work if students feel safe, welcomed, and heard within the classroom. The setup of a classroom community and environment that is conducive to constructive conversations on race, identity, and culture is key to implementing the curriculum design.

This unit will allow me to provide learning opportunities that let students explore missing narratives and uncover racial inequities within government systems. The work they do will focus on how power and democracy interact with each other, as well as how both concepts transfer within different contexts. Differentiating learning, allowing student choice, and designing flexibility within the curriculum are all important aspects to creating a unit that is engaging and focused on deep learning learning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

Our education system in the United States, like the government, is built on inequitable systems, where those in charge of the narratives, policies, and institutions are overwhelmingly White. The 116th Congress, which convened in January 2019, is the most diverse Congress in terms of race and ethnicity; yet it is still disproportionately White, with only about 22 percent of its members identifying as non-White (Bialik, 2019, paras. 1-3). Similarly, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, “about 79 percent of public school teachers were White”, while only about seven percent of teachers were Black, in the 2017-2018 school year (*Characteristics of Public School Teachers*, 2020, para. 3).

Because the majority of those in power are White, it is not surprising that traditional textbooks and instructional materials are also White-centric, telling the histories of White men and the systems they created. However, this White-centric education does not support the increasingly diverse set of students in schools today. With this in mind, my goal for the project was to create learning opportunities that used narratives that are often absent from a civics course to allow students to explore the racial inequities in government. My guiding research question was: *As a White educator, how can I provide learning opportunities for students to explore alternative narratives and address racial inequities that government systems create and perpetuate in order to strengthen their understanding of power and democracy?*

In this chapter, I will reflect on the literature review, pointing out key works that helped me create my project. I will also write about major learnings, implications, and limitations of the project and writing process. Then, I will discuss future research related to the project, and I will conclude with what benefits my project might provide to the field of education.

Revisiting the Literature Review

My research was broken up into three areas. First, I focused on historical narratives that are often missing from a traditional social studies curriculum. Once I decided to focus on voter suppression, I looked for ways to make connections from historical to modern voter suppression, to explore how the systems have adapted over time. While I have a degree in history, I still had a lot to learn. I also had a lot to unlearn. I knew a great deal of history was centered on wealthy White men, but what I had not reflected on was how White-centric my education was, even when I intended to learn about other people, places, and cultures. I realized I learned history *about* other people and cultures, but almost none of that learning came *from* the people and cultures I was learning about. Most of my education was presented from White professors, using books and articles written by other White academics. Because of that, I tried to get most of my information about the Black historical context from Black authors. This is something that I will continue to do while I teach because we should try to learn from those who have lived experiences to share. This is also a good way to model culturally responsive teaching because it is another small way to represent and affirm students' identities.

I researched many different histories to fill in the gaps in my own understanding of the sociopolitical context from Reconstruction to today. I was able to use much of the material to make connections to the topic of disenfranchisement, even though some of it was seemingly unrelated. For example, I used Rothstein's *The Color of Law* (2017), to help me understand housing segregation. While on the surface, it might not seem relevant to a unit on voting, it is important information to understand why we are so segregated today. That separation along racial lines, especially in urban areas, has huge impacts on voting districts, polling places, and voter rolls. While I did not cite a lot of information from that book, it gave me a solid background on how the court system plays a huge role in enforcing (or not enforcing) laws and policies. Housing discrimination was rampant throughout Jim Crow. People often look to the Fair Housing Act of 1968 as the end to discriminatory housing laws; however, the 1866 Civil Rights Act "had already determined that housing discrimination was unconstitutional", though it did not provide power to enforce it (Rothstein, 2017, p. IX). This is just one example of many narratives that are missing from our collective understanding of history and racism.

The two books that I used the most to broaden my understanding of modern voter suppression were *Uncounted* by Daniels and *The New Jim Crow* by Alexander. Both of these books were crucial to my understanding of voter suppression today, especially through felon disenfranchisement and voter ID laws. These books were helpful in that they provide history and background that explains the cyclical nature of voter suppression. There is an ebb and flow of oppression because every time there is work done to dismantle systemic racism, there is pushback, and the way racism is presented

changes. I knew that racism has changed over time, but these two books were key to helping me see some of the step-by-step processes that have gotten us from Jim Crow to an age of mass incarceration.

In conjunction with learning more history about voting in the United States, I was also researching race and identity. It was necessary to understand Whiteness to understand White supremacy and systemic racism. I had to think about my own racial identity, and in the future, I will also have to think about how I talk about race and racism with my students. Saad's *Me and White Supremacy* and Singh's *The Racial Healing Handbook* both provided a lot of practical steps to having constructive conversations on race and processing internal biases. In setting up my classroom, both of these books would be helpful in facilitating open conversations on racism and our own biases in classrooms where we have many races and cultures.

This leads to the final part of my research where I tried to figure out how I can talk about systemic racism and civics content that is focused on narratives that have long been absent from traditional education. Conceptual learning and culturally responsive teaching go well together in developing deep learning practices for a student-centered classroom. Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* was invaluable in creating my project. However, I would not have material to implement a culturally responsive classroom if I had not researched all the history and how to discuss and process race and racism.

The research from the literature review gave me a base to create a project that is practical and flexible in its approach to create learning opportunities for students to grasp

historical and modern voter suppression. In that process, there were many major learnings about how this type of work can be implemented in today's tumultuous political climate and how imperative this work is at this moment in our history.

Major Learnings and Implications

I started researching in January 2020, but I could not have anticipated how timely this work would become. While naming and addressing systemic racism has always been important, it has been brought to the forefront of our nation's attention in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd by police in May 2020. Having lived and taught so close to the epicenter of this social uprising, I feel how imperative this work is at this moment in time. I continue to feel the weight of this responsibility, as educators in particular need to work together to help dismantle the system of racism. Social studies is uniquely positioned to help students explore these larger societal issues, and, as a new teacher, I am excited that I have gotten a start on how to incorporate anti-racist teachings into my curriculum.

When I first envisioned a unit on voting, I thought I would create three mini units within the curriculum design, in order to cover multiple aspects of voting. Within those units, I planned to use the content I researched to provide a fuller context for understanding voting systems, electoral districts, and disenfranchisement. However, I decided to change my plan to focus more in-depth on voter suppression throughout the unit. While there were some drawbacks and added anxiety for changing my plan for the curriculum design, I ultimately decided it was the best course of action for two main reasons.

First, depth of learning is what I wanted to focus on all along, but I had missed the mark in my original plan. Coverage-centered classrooms tend to touch only on facts and topics in a shallow way, but that information does now allow for deep, conceptual learning where the goal is to be able to transfer knowledge (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 15). I realized once I started digging into the design that I did not have enough time to allow students to explore and learn deeply about any of the three topics. Spending a week on each would not allow for student discovery or collaboration because it is still too focused on coverage. Because conceptual learning was a guiding approach in the design, the goals must align with “*depth of learning and quality of thought that organizes and transfers to new situations*” (Stern, Ferraro, & Mohnkern, 2017, p. 30).

The second reason I chose to focus on voter suppression was because of the current sociopolitical climate. In 2020, there has been an awakening for many people about the systemic racism all around us. We all have to have a responsibility to focus on how to be anti-racist, especially in a social studies classroom. Voting is fundamental in a democracy, but not everyone has equal access to the vote, even today. Voter suppression disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, and people of color in many ways. Voter suppression has been, and continues to be, a common strategy to maintain the status quo. By making voter suppression a focal point of the unit, it is my hope that students will better understand the cycles of oppression and disenfranchisement to better equip them to fight against these unjust systems. “We cannot expect the system to change without our continued efforts to change it from a system that excludes people of color from obtaining and maintaining power to one of inclusion and recognition” (Daniels, 2020, p. 210).

Modern practices of purging voter rolls, voter ID laws, and felon disenfranchisement are a few of many ways that power is stripped disproportionately from BIPOC citizens.

This project is a good start to how an entire course could be designed to incorporate anti-racism into all of the learning. A civics course should be focused on ways to explore systemic racism because the system of government was built on racism from the start, and it was designed to uphold the status quo, which it has done successfully. While all social studies courses could explore these racial inequities within systems and institutions, civics also gives students tools to make change in their communities. Civics can prepare students to participate in government in many ways, and that can be its own form of power. This is especially important today, when there is public discourse on how BIPOC communities are impacted by these systems and how organizing can create real change.

With the Black Lives Matter movement in full swing in the summer of 2020, I have learned a lot more about systemic racism and how it impacts individuals and communities in recent months. This time has been eye-opening for many people, myself included, but understanding and learning is very different from taking action. Through this process, I want to take action in my classroom. Imagining how individual teachers can incorporate anti-racist work within the classroom has given me a lot of ideas, but it also has its limitations because schools are built on racist systems too.

Limitations

Anti-racist work is key to dismantling the oppressive systems around us. In order to be truly anti-racist in a classroom, we have to acknowledge all the inequities within the

school and our public education system in general. The opportunity gap between White and Black students is nothing new, but it must be examined through an anti-racist lens in order to fully understand it. The project is intended as a small piece of the puzzle, but one unit within a course, or even one entire course, will not change the culture of the school or the education system, so it could be hard to implement this project if it is radically different from other classes within the school. Support from colleagues, administrators, and families is crucial to successful implementation of anti-racist work. While there has been a shift in 2020 to a larger societal conversation on systemic racism, it is still not commonplace to be at the center of a civics course in a public high school, so this could be very difficult to implement depending on how the larger community feels about these issues.

Time is another major limitation in this project because it is a lot of deep learning in a short amount of time. This project is just one three-week unit within a civics course. Because it is a set of lesson plans, there is a lot of important information and work that is not included. Conceptual learning and culturally responsive teaching are both long-term practices, rather than a specific set of instructional tasks or approaches.

Creating inclusive learning environments and a culture of deep learning are both complicated but very important in a successful classroom. In order to do the work within the lesson plans, a teacher would need to teach students about conceptual learning, including the difference between facts and knowledge. They would also need to explicitly teach them about why deep learning is important and how it is different from traditional models of teaching that they are likely more used to. The learning environment includes

the classroom set up and expectations. Building expectations that are culturally appropriate and agreed upon by all members of the learning community mean that students are more likely to understand and adhere to the community expectations, which will in turn make a more productive learning environment. This ground work is key to setting up a learning community that can implement these lesson plans. In addition to this more abstract community-building, students would also need to explicitly learn the expectations around having discussions, writing in their journals, and collaborating on group projects. This project relies on this instruction being done ahead of time. Time spent learning how to learn or how to interact with peers means less time on content. When there is pressure to know lots of facts and topics, it can be difficult to stay centered on deep learning.

Future Research and Communicating Results

The research done for this project will be useful for many other future lesson plans. It is my intention to use this project to model other curriculum designs using conceptual learning and culturally responsive teaching practices. Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) Backward Design was a really useful way to work backward from a goal that was based on the key concepts.

Sociopolitical context is important for any social studies course, so the content research will prove invaluable as I create lessons and units for other courses as well. It will be important to continue to stay up-to-date on content research, especially work related to how to be anti-racist. As we move through a larger societal discussion on race,

it is important to listen to leaders from marginalized communities to understand and create best practices for the classroom in regards to race and racism.

Collaboration is important for this project, with group work and discussions at the center. I want to model and reflect collaboration through this and future projects by making my work available to colleagues that are interested in similar work. While collaboration is not always welcomed in competitive work environments, it is a great way to lift up colleagues and peers while creating practices with the best possible outcomes. Ultimately, the goal of teaching should be to help the students, and collaboration among educators is a good way to share successes so we can keep the focus on students.

Final Conclusion

While this project was just a piece of the puzzle, it benefits the field because it will serve as a framework for building curriculums and lessons that are focused on highlighting narratives that have been missing from traditional education. This is particularly important when exploring racial inequities within larger systems because the fact that those narratives have been absent is indicative of systemic racism in itself. The stories of Black, Indigenous, and people of color need to be taught because their histories are American history, and by highlighting those, we can attempt to counteract the White-centered narratives that are all too common in schools.

Through writing this chapter, I have reflected on the literature review; major learnings and implications in creating a curriculum design; limitations of the project; and future research projects. It is my hope that this project will be a starting point for collaboration on anti-racist work within lesson and curriculum planning. This project was

done in a time of major political and social unrest, and I plan to continue to learn and grow in my understanding of racism in order to actively work to answer my research question in new ways: *As a White educator, how can I provide learning opportunities for students to explore alternative narratives and address racial inequities that government systems create and perpetuate in order to strengthen their understanding of power and democracy?*

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