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## **Culturally Sustaining Social Studies: Practical Applications to a High School Elective Course**

Emily Thomas

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Culturally Sustaining Social Studies: Practical Applications to a High School Elective  
Course

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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## DEDICATION

To my dear friend and inspiring fellow educator, Emma Nicosia, for your support, guidance, and camaraderie in teaching and beyond. To my parents, Ellen and Ian Thomas, and grandmother, Axie Hindman, for always believing in me. To my partner, Nate Fowler, for supporting my goals and helping me actualize them. Finally, to my content advisor, former teacher, and friend Matt Dingler, for helping me realize my passion and find my place.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Like many contemporary social studies teachers, I came to this career with the goal of working in opposition to the type of social studies education I largely experienced in my K-12 education. Growing up in a mid-sized city in Missouri in the early 2000s, I was a highly motivated and successful student. I had a particular love for my social studies classes that was solidified in my 9th grade Honors American Government class, where I learned about the United States' exceptional system of governance. At the age of fourteen, I was awed by the narrative I received: I learned and deeply believed that the United States Constitution was a perfect document, one that embodied the values of equality and justice for all, and most importantly, contained the flexibility and foresight to allow for the country to steadily progress to our current state of colorblind equality and tolerance. This narrative was confirmed by my World and United States History courses in 10th and 11th grade, which shaped a story of Western exceptionalism that, though it may have had a few blips of intolerance and injustice in the past, had moved past such ugliness and arrived at its current state of post-racial perfection.

Then, in 2014, Michael Brown was shot by police two hours from my hometown. I watched Ferguson burn and heard the phrase "Black Lives Matter" for the first time, and in shock, I realized that this needed to be said. I quickly began to understand that my education combined with my sheltered experience as a middle-class, neurotypical white girl had not in any way prepared me to know or grapple with the realities of injustice in the world. This project is guided by the research question: *How can culturally sustaining*

*pedagogy inform curriculum design for a social studies elective course?* As a teacher of social studies, my aim with this project is to learn to teach history differently.

Social studies teachers must recognize their position and power as gatekeepers for the content that their students learn, and that curricular gatekeeping is often based on the teacher's own unexamined assumptions and values (Nicosia, 2020; Thornton, 1989). As a discipline focused on the study of people and society, social studies is uniquely positioned to allow students to question and critique systems of power that determine our lives. Thus, it is vitally important that teachers invite such opportunities for critical questioning into the classroom. In 1995, Delpit wrote,

...I have come to understand that power plays a critical role in our society and in our educational system. The worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality, while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential. Indeed, in the educational institutions of this country, the possibilities for poor people and for people of color to define themselves, to determine the self each should be, involve a power that lies outside of the self. It is others who determine how they should act, how they are to be judged. (p. 15)

That same year, Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy charged teachers with understanding their students' home cultures as a means to provide opportunities for academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings' concept has inspired the reiterations of culturally responsive teaching and, most recently, culturally sustaining pedagogy, henceforth CSP (Gay, 2000; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). CSP provides teachers



with the opportunity to understand the languages, literacies, and brilliance of working-class students of color in their own right rather than as compared to a white standard. In addition to the cultures students are part of due to their race, ethnicity, and social class, CSP reminds teachers that students are a part of youth culture. CSP dually challenges teachers to celebrate youth culture in the classroom and also make space to critique the ways that youth culture perpetuates systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2017). Culturally sustaining pedagogy was a new concept to me, introduced via my studies at Hamline, and has engaged me for its clear potential to improve the teaching of social studies.

However, though many contemporary social studies teachers desire to teach in alignment with principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, many also feel unprepared to deviate from traditional approaches in social studies classrooms. In one study of teachers who self-identified as “race-conscious,” thirteen experienced social studies educators from varying backgrounds and teaching contexts unanimously stated that they felt they needed more opportunities and support to center race and racism in their curriculum (Martell & Stevens, 2017). This confirms my own professional experience. Young social studies teachers with a desire to shift the discipline have difficulty locating the bridge between academic scholarship on CSP and race-conscious theory to practical applications in the classroom. This study will attempt to find and illuminate that important bridge.

My study addresses the research question: *How can culturally sustaining pedagogy inform curriculum design for a social studies elective course?* Guided by this research question, I explore the scholarship on culturally sustaining pedagogy in social studies, examine reasons why social studies teachers struggle to implement CSP in their

classroom, and describe my plan for using CSP to inform curriculum design for a social studies elective course. In the remainder of Chapter One, I provide a professional context and rationale for my research question by describing my own professional journey. I close by providing a summary of my study and a preview of Chapters Two through Four.

### **Background of the Researcher**

I decided that I wanted to be a social studies teacher during the fall of my sophomore year of college. That year, I was very affected by a number of academic and personal discoveries. In the academic realm, I had the opportunity to take a history class that completely revolutionized my understanding of the discipline. The topic of this class was the history of India from the 1947 partition to present, but my learning in those ten weeks was so much more. In addition to all of the facts, dates, and names I learned and have since forgotten, this class introduced me to the practice of learning history from multiple perspectives and questioning singular narratives of historical events. These learnings have had a much more lasting impact on me. Around this time, I had a close friend experience a severe personal tragedy, and discovered in myself a talent for supporting her. I remembered back to a time of tragedy in my own life, which occurred during high school, and how supportive teachers had made an enormous difference in my ability to get through that year. All of this came together to give me certainty that being a social studies teacher was the perfect intersection of my talents, my interests, and the world's needs. I was determined to apply my newfound discovery that learning history differently can be transformative. In particular, I was driven by the desire to prepare students in a way I felt that I was not prepared by my own Eurocentric, American-exceptionalism, progress-narrative social studies courses.

However, once I got to the classroom, I realized that teaching social studies in a way that differs from the “traditional,” while being a laudable goal that many other teachers share, is actually quite difficult. The vast majority of resources for social studies teachers still teach in a predominantly white-centered, male-dominated, and leader-focused way. I found that it is difficult to know what I don’t know: in other words, even when I feel that the resources I have been given are inadequate, I find myself unsure of what questions to ask to find a better alternative. Moreover, as a young teacher new to the profession, I have experienced the instability that comes with being the newest in a department, including losing my position to budget cuts and bouncing around the social studies department as needed. In three years, I have taught a grand total of six different courses, all four high school grades, and in two different schools. This lack of stability has made it difficult for me to do much more than try to stay afloat, often edging out my earlier goals of creating groundbreaking curricula that shifted students’ perspectives. Now, as a slightly more seasoned teacher, I recognize that dreams of permanently impacting students were frankly unrealistic and contained overtones of white saviorism. However, a more sustainable and practical approach is, I believe, entirely plausible.

My main motivation and sense of purpose as a teacher comes from engaging students in learning activities that challenge them to adopt new perspectives, explore their own assumptions, and enable them to see the world through a more justice-oriented lens. I have sporadically witnessed these moments across disciplinary subject areas and age groups in my own classroom, so I believe that it can occur in any number of classroom contexts. For that reason, I am excited to research practical applications of culturally sustaining pedagogy for the social studies classroom. I believe that this framework has

power beyond shaping the teacher's theoretical concept of teaching, but to actually change a teacher's curricular decisions and approach in the classroom.

### **Rationale**

For my project, I created one curricular unit for an elective social studies course that is informed by and grounded in culturally sustaining pedagogy. The unit will be taught in a high school elective course on American Environmental History in the 2021-22 school year. However, my goals extend beyond the creation of a single unit. I hope to fundamentally influence my own curriculum planning process by centering culturally sustaining pedagogy, and shift my approach to curriculum development to naturally include CSP principles for the rest of my career.

As a practicing teacher who entered the profession with every intention of teaching social studies in ways that challenged the white hegemonic norm, I have found it difficult to actualize these goals. This is due to a wide range of factors that I explore in Chapter Two, including lack of prior knowledge, inadequate and white-washed resources such as textbooks, state standards that codify white hegemony, and lack of lived experience with racism as a middle-class white woman. With this project, I created a practical example for teachers interested in teaching in alignment with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy to center it in their curriculum planning. I hope that others who read my work will be able to use it to inform their own practice as well.

### **Positionality Statement**

As a middle-class white woman researcher, I must recognize the fact that I am a member of the privileged racial group and that this may impact my work. I grew up in a public school system in a mid-sized midwestern town. While there was significant racial

and socioeconomic diversity in my district and schools, I was personally sequestered into almost entirely honors and AP courses where the majority of my classmates were white and upper/middle-class like myself. My social studies courses exposed me to the pervasive white-centered narrative of social studies. I learned that racism was bad but believed that it was more or less a thing of the past. I did not understand the ways that white supremacy shapes all institutions of society, historically and presently. I do not blame my teachers, parents, or any individual for this. I am currently in the process of learning to recognize the ways that whiteness - as both a force in society and in myself - influences all aspects of my life and work.

### **Summary**

In Chapter One, I explained the personal and professional significance of my research by describing my journey as a social studies educator with a consistent desire but sporadic ability to teach in alignment with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). I provided a brief summary of the literature that supports the relevance and imperative of CSP in the social studies classroom. I located the gap that I hope to address in this project: The gap between young social studies teachers' academic interest in CSP and their ability to implement its principles in the social studies classroom.

In Chapter Two, I explore the literature that exists on critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and their place in social studies classrooms. In Chapter Three, I describe my project design process, including the research that supports my choice of project design and my timeline for implementation. In Chapter Four, I reflect on my capstone project and curriculum development experience.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

My project is grounded by a large body of theory on culturally sustaining pedagogy and its predecessors, critical race theory and culturally relevant pedagogy. I address the research question: *How can culturally sustaining pedagogy inform curriculum design for a social studies elective course?* For my project, I created one curricular unit for a social studies course that is informed by the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy and reflected on the process of intentionally centering CSP in curriculum development for social studies. In Chapter Two, I examine the history and literature that exists on critical race theory, culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy, and their applications to the social studies discipline.

#### Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) holds that race is a social construction embedded in American institutions to maintain the political and economic interests of white people at the expense of people of color (Curry, n.d.; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT challenges mainstream American liberalism that perpetuates the notion of meritocracy, instead seeking to illuminate the ways that social issues are experienced differently based on race and other intersecting aspects of identity. Although CRT was initially conceptualized in relation to the American legal system (Bell, 1980), scholars have applied its tenets to schools at large and social studies curriculum in particular (Chandler, 2009, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2003). CRT is foundational to educational research that examines race and racism (Ladson-Billings, 1995). A CRT lens

reveals that white cultural dominance in the United States is upheld through schools and curricula.

Bell (1980) proposed the term “interest convergence” to describe the phenomenon that advances in racial equality for people of color have only been allowed when they converge with the interests of white elites. Bell used the landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* to illustrate this point, arguing that the case passed only to manage the United States’ image abroad, to stave off negative press about oppression of Black people and racial tensions if the case did not pass, particularly since Black people had just recently served in the armed forces in World War II and the Korean War. At that specific moment in 1954, the interests of white elites seeking to project an image of equality abroad, and the interests of Black people seeking equal treatment converged, so social progress was made. From Bell’s watershed theory came the school of racial realism, which asserts that racism is a permanent and pervasive part of American institutions as well as individual belief systems (Chandler, 2015).

A stance of racial realism when examining schools at large and social studies curriculum in particular allows one to see the need for new approaches to “doing race” in social studies (Chandler, 2015). The literature on critical race theory informs my project as it establishes the fact that schools default to replicating white cultural and social dominance through supposedly color-blind curriculum. Social studies has traditionally been an agent of that status quo (Ross, 2014). I foreground CRT because it serves as a critical framework for culturally relevant/culturally sustaining pedagogy and their relationship to the discipline of social studies. With this background established, I next discuss the outcomes of CRT applications to pedagogy.

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**

Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy is the parent of culturally sustaining pedagogy, the topic of this study. Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) promotes an assets-based view of students, most especially African-American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Other scholars expanded CRP to include an assets-based approach to working with students of color, students whose home language is not English, and students living in poverty (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Writing in 2014, Ladson-Billings reflected on that 1995 work, saying "Instead of asking what was wrong with African American learners, I dared to ask what was right with these students and what happened in the classrooms of teachers who seemed to experience pedagogical success with them" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 74). Culturally relevant pedagogy argues that students' home cultures and identities must be centered in the classroom, as a means of "bridging the gap between home and school" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 467). Gay (2000) expanded on culturally relevant pedagogy by introducing culturally responsive teaching, which paired the theoretical framework of CRP - namely, that students' culture matters at school - with a 'how-to' approach, stating that "intention without action is insufficient" (p. 13).

Delpit's (1995) theory of a culture of power also promotes an assets-based approach to working with students of color. Delpit posited that issues of power are central to the classroom, that there are unspoken rules for participating in power, and that this "culture of power" reflects the norms of the culture that has power (Delpit, 1995, pp. 24-25). The culture of power is naturally transmitted from parent to child in the home if the family belongs to the group with power. This dynamic is constantly overlooked,



unnoticed, and misunderstood by those who have power, who are mystified by the inability of those who do not belong to the culture of power to play by its rules. Thus, Delpit argued, the rules of the culture of power should be explicitly taught to those who do not already belong to that culture. Delpit was clear that centering the culture of power in the classroom was not at the expense of students' home cultures, but rather:

...I suggest that schools must provide these children the content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home...And I do not advocate that it is the school's job to attempt to change the homes of poor and nonwhite children to match the homes of those in the culture of power... What the school personnel fail to understand is that if the parents were members of the culture of power and lived by its rules and codes, then they would transmit those codes to their children. (p. 44)

Delpit acknowledged in *Other People's Children* that she ran a risk, in writing this theory, of it being misconstrued by teachers to validate the suppression of nonwhite children's cultural identities at school (Delpit, 1995, p. 32). It is essential to understand that Delpit's culture of power theory, similarly to Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy, upholds the validity of non-dominant home cultures.

Paris (2012) questioned whether the terms "relevant" and "responsive" were sufficiently affirming of the languages, literacies, and cultural practices of marginalized communities, and offered the term "culturally sustaining" as a critique and challenge to educators to more thoroughly embrace a truly pluralistic society and approach to schooling. Culturally sustaining pedagogy rejects the traditional use of state-sponsored education as a project of monolingualistic, monocultural assimilation, instead asserting that

school may and must be a place where students' home cultures are affirmed and strengthened (Alim & Paris, 2017). Paris' critique stemmed from widespread misuse of Ladson-Billings' (1995) and Delpit's (1995) theories around assets-based pedagogies and culture of power. Nicosia's (2020) interpretive case study of secondary social studies teachers' decision-making around centering race and racism in their courses found that several teachers misconstrued these ideas to justify teaching a whitewashed curriculum "not because they think it's representative of their students' identities, but because they think it will help students 'play the game' of navigating power structures" (Nicosia, 2020, pp. 17-18). This finding was consistent with those of Sleeter (2012) who found that culturally responsive pedagogical approaches were being increasingly sidelined by neoliberal school reform efforts, due to oversimplification and misapplication of CRP and lack of research connecting CRP to student achievement.

Paris and Alim (2014) specifically problematized previous assets pedagogies' (e.g. Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995) centralization of "dominant culture," arguing that students should be liberated from seeking to achieve only according to white middle-class ways of knowing and being. They asked, "What if, indeed, the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White middle-class norms but to explore, honor, extend, and, at times, problematize their heritage and community practices?" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 86). To this end, culturally sustaining pedagogy recognizes that cultures are not static, and encourages teachers to focus not solely on ways that racial and ethnic differences were practiced in the past, but to also attend to shifting enactments of race, ethnicity, language, and culture in the present and future. Additionally, scholars of CSP pointed out that all

students are part of youth culture, a term Ladson-Billings (2017) used to describe the particularly dynamic ways that young people enact their own cultures while blending and borrowing from the cultures of their peers. Ladson-Billings pointed out that youth culture can at times perpetuate greater societal inequities, such as using racist or homophobic epithets as slang. As such, CSP charges teachers with both honoring youth culture and helping students recognize ways that youth culture replicates greater societal prejudices such as homophobia or racial stereotypes (Ladson-Billings, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is not a one-size-fits-all pedagogy. Rather, CSP calls on teachers to “build their classrooms around their students’ cultures, identities, and communities” (Martell & Stevens, 2019, p. 1). Misunderstanding and oversimplifying CSP can lead to problematic cultural celebration approaches which ignore the systemic inequities pervasive to American society (Martell & Stevens, 2019; Sleeter, 2012). In addition to honoring the cultural pluralism of American society, the community, and the classroom, CSP calls on teachers to prepare students to recognize injustice and critically examine the structures that create inequity.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is built upon the foundational truths revealed by critical race theory: that schools have historically upheld white ways of knowing, being, and living as the norm, working relentlessly to assimilate children of color to whiteness. CSP addresses this problem by providing a pedagogical framework for teachers and schools to embrace cultural pluralism, which is why I selected it to guide my research and frame my curricular decisions for my project. First and foremost, the literature on culturally sustaining pedagogy shows that it is an assets-based pedagogical approach to working with diverse student communities. Culturally sustaining pedagogy calls on

teachers and school systems to center students' cultures in teaching and learning, but importantly, it is a pedagogical framework, not a curriculum or program. For my project, this framework informed curriculum development for a social studies elective. Before discussing how CSP can be applied to curriculum, I first establish the research on the historical and present state of social studies curriculum in the United States.

### **Social Studies Curriculum**

As a discipline, social studies is commonly charged with preparing students to be effective members of democratic society. In 2016, the National Council for the Social Studies released a position statement on teaching and learning in the discipline, asserting that “an excellent education in social studies is essential to civic competence and the maintenance and enhancement of a free and democratic society” (p. 180). However, visions of precisely what civic competence means or how to achieve it vary widely. Social studies interprets and conveys the national story to upcoming generations, giving it great power over how American democracy is perceived by young people and how it will be enacted in the future (Chandler & McKnight, 2009). For this reason, debates over how social studies “should” be taught leads to great tension between stakeholders ranging from students to scholars to politicians.

Journell (2011) argued that even as American society becomes increasingly more pluralistic, students in U.S. social studies classes currently receive a “unifying narrative” of what it means to be an American, due to curriculum standardization efforts and ideological disagreements. Specifically, social studies curriculum has failed to directly engage with the present or historical issue of race in the United States, instead opting for a whitewashed version of history (Chandler & McKnight, 2009). Abowitz and Harnish

(2006) labeled this monocultural approach “civic republicanism,” wherein values such as patriotism, commonality, unity, loyalty, and respect are promoted in order to ensure the common good of the community. Emphasis on unity, however, can lead to an absence of curriculum on topics for which multiple perspectives or narratives exist, in favor of a singular narrative. Abowitz and Harnish wrote, “As a result of these particular values and their emphasis on communal unity, this discourse infrequently addresses the civic tensions and conflicts that spring from racial, ethnic, class, or gender divisions and hierarchies” (p. 660). However, this supposedly unifying approach leads to what Ladson-Billings (2003) called a “discourse of invisibility” for non-European members of American society. The absence of people of color from the standard curriculum implies their unimportance and irrelevance to American society (Ladson-Billings, 2003).

Cuenca and Hawkman (2019) found that debates over social studies standards in Missouri, Texas, and at the national level led to the adoption of standards that reflected white, middle-class, and heteronormative language. Attempts to write standards that deviated from such norms were branded as subversive and replaced with language that reflected themes of American and/or Western-exceptionalism (Cuenca & Hawkman, 2019, p. 59). Similar objections are being raised currently about proposed revisions to Minnesota’s social studies standards (Eischens, 2021; Kersten, 2021). Opponents of the proposed 2021 social studies standards specifically criticize a perceived overemphasis of America’s shortcomings and over-indulgence of “demographic special interest groups,” code for nonwhite members of the standards review committee (Kersten, 2021, para. 17).

Curriculum written with an ideology of civic republicanism uses examples of injustice and oppression in order to emphasize the self-correcting nature of American

democracy (Journell, 2011). For example, by Grade 6, Minnesota State Social Studies Standards (2011) require that students “Describe the establishment and expansion of rights over time, including the impact of key court cases, state legislation and constitutional amendments” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011, Standard 6.1.3.4.1, p. 55). This standard suggests using the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1963), which ended race-based segregation of schools but does not mention *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) which codified the segregation undone in *Brown v. Board*. The language of this standard focuses on the expansion and protection of rights without exploring the previous denial of rights in such key court cases. However, regardless of the state standards that guide social studies courses, social studies teachers are the ultimate gate-keepers of the knowledge and instruction students receive in their classes (Dover, Henning, & Agarwal-Rangnath, 2016; Nicosia, 2020; Thornton, 1979). Teachers must recognize their position and power in this regard.

Social studies textbooks have been critiqued for decades for their shallow examination of history and inadequate representation of non-white, non-male, and non-powerful people (Apple, 1993; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Loewen, 1995; Sanchez, 2007). However, many social studies teachers continue to over-rely on the textbook as the primary source of content knowledge for their courses (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Sanchez, 2007). In recent years, though studies show that textbooks have increased the quantity of racial and ethnic representations in textbooks, other studies show that those racial and ethnic histories are distorted, requiring the teacher to challenge myth, stereotype, or inaccuracy (Sanchez, 1997; Sanchez, 2007). However, this creates a significant challenge as “educators may be generally unaware of

inappropriate and inaccurate depictions of cultural groups” (Sanchez, 2007, p. 311). Further complicating the matter, Nicosia (2020) found that social studies teachers in her study recalled that their preservice education programs warned of textbook insufficiency but did not provide alternative tools or knowledge for creating race-conscious curriculum. This caveat is mentioned not to excuse teachers for teaching inaccurate representations of cultures they do not share, but to highlight the complexities of teaching in a way that affirms and sustains many identities in a pluralistic society, and the imperative that teachers strive to have a complex and accurate understanding of the content they present to students. Scholars have argued that applications of culturally relevant/culturally sustaining pedagogy may be a way to achieve this (Alim & Paris, 2017; Chandler, 2015; King & Chandler, 2016).

The literature on social studies curriculum, as seen through state standards, textbooks, and teachers’ beliefs, reveals that social studies curriculum has traditionally promoted a color-blind narrative that glosses over historical and current injustice. In my project, I used culturally sustaining pedagogy as a framework to develop a curriculum that addresses the reality of social injustice. Other scholars have discussed ways that culturally sustaining pedagogy may be used to improve social studies curriculum. In the next section, I explore the literature and dig into specific pedagogical moves that social studies teachers can use to teach in alignment with CSP in social studies.

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Social Studies**

The absence of issues of race, as well as class, sexuality, and gender, from social studies curriculum has been widely confirmed by scholars (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Journell, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Sanchez, 1997, 2007). In 2003, Ladson-Billings

published *Critical Race Theory Perspectives on the Social Studies: The Profession, Policies and Curriculum*, a critique of the discipline for its silence on issues of race, racism, and racial oppression, and an attempt to motivate social studies educators to apply critical race theory and culturally relevant pedagogy to the profession, policies, and curriculum of social studies. She stated the danger and irresponsibility of this silence bluntly:

The official curriculum only serves to reinforce what the societal curriculum suggests, i.e., people of color are relatively insignificant to the growth and development of our democracy and our nation and they represent a drain on the resources and values. (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 4)

The stakes are high and the conclusion is clear: Social studies classrooms must be a place for students to learn about, examine, relate to, and critique the realities of inequality and oppression in our society (Chandler, 2009, 2015; Hawkman, 2019, 2020; King & Chandler, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Martell, 2013, 2018; Martell & Stevens, 2019).

In recent years, scholars have applied critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy to social studies in a number of ways. Aronson and Laughter (2016) surveyed six recent (2006-2013) studies that linked culturally relevant education in social studies classes to student achievement, finding that using tenets of culturally relevant/culturally sustaining pedagogy produced positive student outcomes. Such outcomes included student awareness of institutional racism, ability to critique official knowledge, and greater interest in studying history as a subject area after learning it through a culturally relevant lens (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).



It is important to remember that culturally sustaining pedagogy is not a prescriptive program, but rather a conceptual framework that repositions students' cultural pluralism at the center of teaching and learning (Paris, 2012). As such, application of its principles can present in many different ways. Borrowing my criteria from Aronson and Laughter's (2016) synthesis of 42 studies rooted in culturally responsive education (CRE; this is a term the authors coined to encompass culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and culturally sustaining pedagogy), I highlight here studies that connect social studies teaching to one or more of the following tenets of culturally responsive/culturally sustaining education: academic skills and concepts, cultural competence, critical reflection, and/or critiquing discourses of power (Aronson & Laughter, 2016, p. 178).

### *Academic Skills and Concepts*

First and foremost, culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy emphasizes academic skills that students from marginalized backgrounds must be able to acquire at school. Delpit (1995) argued that schools should enable students to gain access to the culture of power. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1995) said that "all students need literacy, numeracy, technological, social and political skills in order to be active participants in a democracy" (p. 160). Aronson and Laughter (2016) synthesized six studies that featured CRE in social studies classrooms and found that students across the board achieved positive academic outcomes from culturally relevant pedagogical practices. Additionally, Martell (2013) found that culturally relevant pedagogy in his own United States History classroom yielded positive outcomes for white students as well as students of color.

Paris' (2012) theory of culturally *sustaining* pedagogy urged educators to remember that multiculturalism and multilingualism should be the explicit goal of schooling (p. 95). Only offering access to the languages and literacies of the dominant culture is not enough. Indeed, as the United States shifts ever more towards cultural and racial pluralism, the ability to communicate across languages and cultures is and to an ever-greater extent will be an academic and cultural asset to students (Paris & Alim, 2014). Thus, "academic skills and concepts" should be broadened from Delpit's (1995) and Ladson-Billings' (1995) focus on acquiring access to the dominant culture's definition of academic skills and concepts to emphasizing the inherent value of multiple cultures' ways of knowing and being.

### ***Cultural Competence***

Social studies teachers who teach in alignment with principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy foreground cultural competence in their classes, which Ladson-Billings (1995) defined as "students maintain[ing] some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). She further elaborated that "Culturally relevant teachers utilize their students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). For example, a Black social studies teacher in a Brooklyn school serving predominantly African-American and Latinx students used the terms "us" and "we" when discussing enslaved and other historically oppressed people in class (Borck, 2020). The author explained this approach:

Typically when slavery is taught in school, slaves are framed as unfortunate others subjugated by an inhumane process ended long ago. However, Cian's [the social studies teacher's] pedagogy shows how students' racial, cultural, ethnic,

and/or immigration histories can be tethered to the present in meaningful and empowering ways that facilitate learning. (Borck, 2020, p. 386)

While this specific approach would be inappropriate for a white social studies teacher like myself to use, it highlights the ways that social studies teachers can bring their students' identities to the forefront to facilitate meaningful learning and connections to students' own lives.

Hawkman's (2019) case study of one teacher's racial pedagogical decision-making in an elective social studies class revealed that the teacher, Mr. de la Vega, employed racial realism in his class, focusing on racism "as a living component of life in the United States and [working] with students to challenge its existence" (Hawkman, 2019, Discussion and Implications section, para. 2). Mr. de la Vega acknowledged the lived reality of racism in his own and students' lives, while maintaining a commitment to challenging it in his classroom. He explicitly prioritized helping students to develop an understanding of their own racial and intersecting identities in class. Cultural competence includes both using students' cultures as a vehicle for studying social studies content and subject of inquiry in its own right.

### ***Critical Reflection and Critiquing Discourses of Power***

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant/culturally sustaining pedagogy is not simply about the individual student's ability to succeed academically through utilization of home culture in the classroom. Rather, "students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). Borck (2020) described that a core belief of teachers at a

school driven by CSP was that “individual students can benefit from being explicitly taught that a central tendency of economic inequality is stratification via cultural difference” (Borck, 2020, p. 383). By explicitly acknowledging this unfair reality, teachers can equip students with the tools to navigate it.

Critical reflection can occur in the planned curriculum as well as through current events. Martell (2018) profiled a white social studies teacher who “believed it was important to challenge her students’ views in an attempt to help them recognize injustice, which may ultimately encourage her students to become agents of change” (p. 71). This teacher regularly centered race in her U.S. History curriculum, assigning students to examine and imagine different racial groups’ perspectives on events such as Columbus’ arrival in the Americas or the “closing of the frontier.” Such exercises required students to develop historical empathy and practice critically examining historical events for all participants’ perspectives. Additionally, critical reflection can occur through discussion of current events. Mr. de la Vega stopped his planned curriculum in order to allow students to process the racial dynamics of the shooting of Trayvon Martin and subsequent acquittal of his white killer, George Zimmermann (Hawkman, 2019). This discussion allowed students to apply their skills in analyzing the racial reality of the world to events affecting their own lives.

Finally, the literature reveals that social studies is a discipline in which the CSP principle of critiquing discourses of power can be meaningfully realized. I distinguish this aspect of CSP from critical reflection in terms of its application to discourse or rationalization of the existence of inequitable power dynamics, rather than the institutions of power themselves. Social studies teachers who engage their students in critiquing

discourses of power explicitly point out the ways that social studies courses can be used to obscure the racial and socioeconomic reality of society and promote a colorblind view instead. For example, Martell (2013) included what he called “missing events related to the history of people of color” in his United States History class, and discussed with students the meaning and impact of their absence from “traditional” social studies curriculum (p. 72). In a 2018 study of three other teachers of U.S. History, Martell highlighted one teacher’s emphasis on questioning dominant portrayals of the past and present by applying their own lived experiences, which often provided examples that ran counter to the “official” narrative. These examples demonstrate the plethora of ways that social studies teachers can help students engage in critical reflection and critique discourses of power.

### ***Models of Culturally Sustaining Social Studies Pedagogy in Practice***

However, despite the important contribution these studies have made to the field, gaps still exist. Martell and Stevens (2019) noted that “there is still little research documenting models of CSP, especially in social studies, which can help us understand what it can look like in practice” (p. 2). Martell’s (2018) study within a single urban high school analyzed methods that social studies teachers used to enact CRP/CSP, resulting in three different models, which he called *exchanging*, *discovering*, and *challenging*. These three models persisted in Martell and Stevens’ (2019) interpretive case study across nine different secondary schools with varying racial and socioeconomic demographics, as well as teachers who varied in age, experience, and racial identity. The exchanging model of CSP uses discussion, storytelling, and the sharing of personal experience so that students can understand cultural differences and social inequity. The teachers who used the

exchanging model saw their role as facilitators, but were intentional about guiding discussions such that students unpacked their own and others' cultures, as well as critiqued the power dynamics of the current social order. Teachers who employed the discovering model of CSP focused on exposing students to many different past and present racial and cultural perspectives, allowing them to make connections between historical events and the present day. In this model, teachers also facilitated student explorations of their own racial identities and cultures, and emphasized the multidimensional nature of the content of social studies classes, pointing out competing narratives and perspectives. In the final model, the challenging model of CSP, teachers focused on helping students recognize injustice that existed in their communities and galvanized them to be agents of change. All three models enact certain shared tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy. All models of CSP-based social studies teaching center culture in the core content, regularly interrogating issues pertaining to race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and immigration status as the central study of their courses, particularly focusing on past and present social structures that created inequities. Additionally, teachers using all models regularly engaged students in exploring their own identities, drawing connections between social studies content and the cultures and contexts of students' lived experiences (Martell, 2018; Martell & Stevens, 2019).

Social studies teachers working to teach in alignment with the principles of CSP can benefit from practical models such as Martell and Stevens' work, but must remember that CSP is a pedagogical framework, not a prescriptive program. Reflecting and responding to the unique aspects of one's own students and classroom is the core work of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

In this section, I summarized the literature that argues that culturally sustaining pedagogy can and should be used to improve the teaching and learning of social studies. I outlined specific tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy that my project will incorporate. However, it is important to recognize that culturally sustaining pedagogy is not a switch that can be flipped from off to on. Significant barriers to its implementation must be acknowledged and addressed.

### **Barriers to Implementing Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**

Sleeter (2012) rang the alarm bell about the increasing marginalization of culturally relevant pedagogy in the face of neoliberal school reform efforts that apply the capitalist logic of competition in an attempt to “motivate” schools to improve. Examples of such neoliberal reform efforts include curriculum standardization, standardized testing, and providing punishments such as decreased funding or school closure if schools do not achieve test results (Sleeter, 2012, p. 563). In response, Aronson and Laughter’s (2016) synthesis of 42 studies, theses, and dissertations linking culturally relevant education to student outcomes found that culturally relevant education across all disciplines resulted in positive student outcomes regardless of the specific outcome measured. Nonetheless, significant barriers to implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy in classrooms, both external and internal in nature, exist.

### ***External Barriers to Implementing Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy***

External barriers to implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy in social studies include barriers created by parents, administrators, school culture, and state and district social studies standards that limit teachers’ ability to implement CSP-based changes to their practice. As previously discussed, regulation of the content of social studies courses

remains a significant source of tension and debate (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Chander, 2009; Journell, 2011). This can particularly be seen in debates over social studies standards, where some stakeholders oppose the supposed over-emphasis on race and racism (e.g. Cuenca & Hawkman, 2019; Eischens, 2021; Kersten, 2021). Applying culturally sustaining pedagogy to social studies fundamentally rests upon a refusal to view the past or present in a color-blind way (Chandler, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2003). Nicosia's (2020) interpretive case study found that social studies teachers frequently justified their choice not to center race and racism in their courses by referring to their absence from state standards. Without that external encouragement, teachers who are reluctant to implement CSP on their own are not challenged to rethink their pedagogical approach.

### ***Internal Barriers to Implementing Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy***

I classify barriers related to teacher preparation, disposition, and knowledge required to teach social studies in a culturally sustaining way as “internal barriers to implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy.” In a survey of 15 recent-at-the-time (1991-2004) social studies textbooks' depictions of Native Americans, Sanchez (2007) found that though the quantity of representation had substantially increased with time, textbooks still frequently perpetuated inaccurate myths and stereotypes of Native peoples. The author placed the onus of recognizing and combating such stereotypes upon social studies teachers using the textbooks, calling upon teachers to deepen their own knowledge of Native cultures. He wrote, “The question of how educators can validate cultural accuracy in textbooks begins with a serious attempt to learn about and understand selected cultures” (Sanchez, 2007, p. 312). This example illustrates one



challenge of teaching social studies in a culturally sustaining way: many educators simply do not know that they hold inaccurate, incomplete, and/or harmful beliefs about identities they do not share.

Much focus has been placed on the preparation of preservice teachers to teach in a context of increasing cultural pluralism and racial accountability. Scholars interested in race and racism agree that it is important for trainee and preservice teachers to have a thorough understanding of both systemic issues of race and racism as well as its application to pedagogy, curriculum, and schooling (see Crowe & Cuenca, 2016; Hawkman, 2020; King & Chandler, 2016). Importantly, Hawkman's (2020) study of white preservice social studies teachers' preparation in antiracism found that "white preservice teachers struggle to enact antiracism despite holding antiracist beliefs or awareness" (p. 423). Preservice teachers' belief in the importance of antiracism in social studies did not necessarily equate to enacting fundamentally different pedagogy or curriculum because of the pressure of other structures, such as school culture, standards, resources, and whiteness itself that made change difficult and slow. This is the exact gap that I have identified for myself and creates the impetus for this study and project.

The continued development of practicing social studies teachers is of extreme importance as well. If current teachers are to drastically change their practice, significant support and professional development must be provided in order to implement changes in practice in a way that does not harm students of color. Chikkatur (2013) observed a white social studies teacher's attempt to teach African American History in a multiracial classroom over the course of a full school year. The course was taught following a change in district policy mandating all 10th grade students to take African American History. At

the beginning of the year, the teacher indicated that she felt uncomfortable discussing issues of race and gender, and throughout the year she was unsupported, pedagogically and emotionally, to navigate challenging conversations about identity. Chikkatur concluded, “The teacher’s lack of preparation and her own hesitations talking about race limited discussions of race, and she was not given support to navigate the emotional impact on both teachers and students of learning about the history of racial injustice” (Chikkatur, 2013, p. 530). Good intentions without significant identity work and continuous content knowledge development can ultimately lead to teaching in a way that, while it may aim to be culturally sustaining, is actually meaningless or harmful (Chikkatur, 2013).

Teachers’ personal backgrounds and habits of gaining knowledge influence their effectiveness in the classroom. Though not directly related to CSP, Journell (2013) found that less than 50% of preservice secondary and middle-grade social studies teachers were able to correctly answer half of the questions relating to domestic current events on a survey. In post-survey interviews, the preservice teachers were troubled by their poor performance because many recognized that social studies content is more meaningful if connected to current events and students’ lives. Among other rationalizations, the preservice teachers discussed being too busy with their personal lives and schoolwork to pay attention to current events (Journell, 2013, pp. 337-338). The author concluded that teacher education cannot be solely reliant upon the pedagogical content knowledge learned in university coursework, particularly as related to ever-evolving political and social issues. Fostering a habit of staying up-to-date on current issues is essential for effective social studies teaching: “Simply having a vision is not enough” (Journell, 2013,

p. 343). I believe that a parallel may be drawn to wider social and cultural issues, including knowledge of cultures present in a teacher's classroom and complex understanding of the content a teacher presents (see Sanchez, 2007). This issue becomes even more pertinent in the case of white social studies teachers. Branch (2003) argued that since white teachers lack personal experience with racism, they are unable to understand and therefore unable to authentically teach about the insidious and destructive impacts of racism in their social studies classes. Martell (2013) concluded that all white teachers must examine their whiteness and maintain a continual commitment to knowing their communities and adjusting their curriculum accordingly. Development cannot be seen as a one-time event, and preparation cannot be seen as a destination. Rather, effectively teaching in alignment with culturally sustaining pedagogy requires constant learning and revision (Martell, 2013).

On the other hand, simply passing off teachers' lack of preparedness as a matter of individual failure to try hard enough is neither productive nor sufficiently compassionate to the realities of a demanding teaching workload. It is important not to mischaracterize teachers' lack of preparation to teach in alignment with culturally sustaining pedagogical principles as simply a matter of personal (ir)responsibility. Boone (2016) recommended that school districts offer "embedded professional development [in culturally relevant pedagogy] so that educators are able to enhance their skills within their normal routine work" (Boone, 2016, p. 137). In studies of practicing social studies teachers' efforts to implement race-conscious and/or CSP-based changes to teaching practices or curriculum, teachers regularly report feeling that they need more time, emotional and/or pedagogical support in order to implement such changes effectively

(Boone, 2016; Chikkatur, 2013; Martell & Stevens, 2017, 2019; Nicosia, 2020). Personal commitment to continuous growth is an essential aspect of being a culturally sustaining social studies teacher, but structures that will support continuous growth are equally important.

### **Summary**

In Chapter Two, I established the breadth of literature that supports the need to further develop practical applications of culturally sustaining pedagogy in social studies. I discussed the foundation of critical race theory and its application to social studies, and defined culturally relevant/culturally sustaining pedagogy and their application to social studies. Additionally, I dug into the tenets and factors that make social studies culturally sustaining: academic skills and concepts, cultural competency, critical reflection and critiquing systems of power. Finally, I discussed barriers to implementing curricula that are informed by culturally sustaining pedagogy. Although a significant amount of theoretical literature has been published in recent years making the argument that culturally sustaining pedagogy can and should be applied to social studies, relatively little literature exists detailing practical ways to implement CSP in the social studies classroom. My work attempts to fill this gap by answering the research question: *How can culturally sustaining pedagogy inform curriculum design for a social studies elective course?* In Chapter Three, I describe my project design and the literature that supports my design decisions.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

In Chapter Three, I describe how I created an introductory unit for an 11th and 12th grade elective social studies class. This project is guided by the research question: *How can culturally sustaining pedagogy inform curriculum design for a social studies elective course?* In this chapter, I explain how Tomlinson and McTighe's (2006) model of differentiated instruction (DI) and Understanding by Design (UbD) will help me create a culturally sustaining curriculum for a social studies elective course, and reiterate the research around core tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy and models for using culturally sustaining pedagogy in social studies courses. Additionally, in Chapter Three, I describe the setting in which this curriculum will be used and my timeline for project design and implementation.

My capstone project takes the form of a unit of curriculum to support a new 11th & 12th grade social studies elective class that I will be teaching in Fall 2021. Based on my research, I used culturally sustaining pedagogy as an informative framework to write one unit of my course. I employed Tomlinson and McTighe's (2006) Differentiated Instruction + Understanding by Design (DI + UbD) model, which allowed me to use backwards planning to write engaging curriculum with the core learning and assessment in mind from the beginning.

The elective social studies course in which this unit will be taught is American Environmental History. The course will run for approximately ten weeks in the fall trimester of 2021. It will be taught in a small private high school in New York City, where I will be a first-year member of the history department. I will have sixteen students

in 11th and 12th grade in my class, which will meet for 65 minutes three times per week. For my project, I will create an introductory unit that will be taught over approximately 3 weeks, or 9 face-to-face lessons with some out-of-class assignments. I will center culturally sustaining pedagogy in my unit design and lesson creation throughout the process (see Appendix A).

Although the great majority of my work is original and all of it was carefully considered and presented with my teaching context and research paradigms in mind, I also chose to incorporate portions of lessons that were adapted from or inspired by secondary sources. These include Wakild and Berry (2018), Learning for Justice, Waziyatawin (2021), and Zinn Education Project. Use of these sources of inspiration authentically reflects my curriculum design process. As a teacher, my work is often inspired by the work of others, but adapted to fit my teaching style and context. With this project, I hope to create a curriculum that is likewise inspiring, adaptable, and helpful for other educators in their own settings.

### **Rationale**

I selected curriculum design as my project format to address an important gap in the literature on culturally sustaining pedagogy. From my perspective as a practicing teacher, a graduate student, and an ongoing learner, I have struggled to apply the theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy to the daily realities of the classroom. I recognize that CSP is a pedagogical framework, not a prescriptive curricular program. Given this, it is important for teachers who wish to teach in alignment with CSP's principles to devote significant effort into authentically allowing their courses to be informed by CSP. I chose to write a curriculum because it challenged me to put significant time and thought into

authentically using CSP to inform my curricular decisions. I believe that the work I put into this project extends beyond this single unit of curriculum by giving me practice with centering cultural sustainability in my courses, a skill that I can then apply to other future teaching.

### **Setting**

This project will be implemented at a small private high school in New York City's lower east side. The school serves approximately 260 high school students. The school charges a tuition of over \$50,000 per year. The student body is 63% white students and 37% students of color. More than 90% of students speak English as their first language. Approximately 30% of students receive financial aid or full scholarships in order to attend this school. The school is associated with an elementary and middle school, and about half of the student body attended the feeder lower school, while another half enroll for high school only starting in 9th grade. There is strong retention of students through all four years of high school, and because of the school's small size, students know one another and are well known by the entire staff. This school was founded upon an ideology of progressive education. A core mission as well as an academic principle of the school is commitment to social justice and preparing students to be active agents of change. In my preliminary conversations with fellow members of the social studies department, I have gathered that culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy is a normalized part of the culture and approach to curriculum design in this school.

My course, American Environmental History, will be one of several elective options available to 11th and 12th grade students. At this school, students take 9th grade World History, 10th grade American History, and then are able to choose from a range of

electives for their 11th and 12th grade years. Social studies department teachers are able to propose and implement elective courses based on their own interests and in conversation with the other offerings being made by fellow teachers. My class will be composed of sixteen juniors and seniors who have a strong background in learning history from a social justice-oriented perspective.

Another important aspect of the setting to note is that I will be implementing this project as a first-year teacher in this school. I need to acknowledge upfront that there are many aspects of the school context that I do not currently understand, and will therefore have to monitor and adjust as I implement my project.

### **Research Paradigms**

Research around culturally sustaining pedagogy and social studies first and foremost informs and supports my project (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2003, 2017; Martell & Stevens, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017). In order to be culturally sustaining, my curriculum must embody the core tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy described in Chapter Two: academic skills and concepts, cultural competency, critical reflection, and critiquing discourses of power (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2003). As I create my curricular unit, I will continuously evaluate it throughout the planning stages for these elements of culturally sustaining pedagogy (see Appendix A).

An additional area of research that supports my project is considering the three models of culturally sustaining pedagogy in social studies (Martell, 2018; Martell & Stevens, 2019). Upon careful consideration, I chose for my curricular unit to draw its methods from the discovering model of culturally sustaining pedagogy. In my course, I used sources that provide a variety of perspectives and facilitate students' recognition of



ways that historical events impact the present social order. Additionally, I continuously emphasized the importance of examining multiple, competing perspectives and facilitated students' understanding of the ways that history is "created" by historians. Describing three social studies teachers' use of the discovering model, Martell and Stevens (2019) said "The teachers purposely used the analysis of texts and sources to drive conversations about racial and cultural differences (rather than relying on the knowledge and experiences of students alone) and helped their students foster a critical consciousness" (pp. 6-7). I believe this model suits the school context best. While I cannot speak to the individual lived experiences of my future students, demographic data of this school indicates that 70% of students are able to pay full tuition greater than \$50,000 per year and 63% of students are white. Therefore, it will be important not to solely rely on students' lived experiences to unpack issues around race, class, ethnicity, or other areas of inequality, but to also engage with these concepts from an academic and source-based perspective.

The final research paradigm supporting my project is my choice of curriculum development model. I used Tomlinson and McTighe's (2006) combined Understanding by Design and Differentiated Instruction approach to write my three-week unit. The authors explained that UbD helps educators focus on what is taught in a classroom, while DI focuses on whom, where, and how we teach. Attention to all of these elements are necessary for effective teaching and learning because "...quality classrooms evolve around powerful knowledge that works for each student" (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 3). Understanding by Design is a model of curriculum design that embeds backwards planning. When developing a unit of study, I began by identifying the desired results of

the unit of study (standards, understandings, essential questions). A sense of clarity about the purpose of the unit is essential in the first stage. In the second stage, I determined what evidence I will use to know whether students have achieved the desired results. In stage two, the criteria I use to evaluate students may be differentiated based on students' needs. In the third planning stage, I planned learning experiences and instruction. In this stage, differentiated instruction is essential (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Finally, I diverged from Tomlinson and McTighe with my addition of a "Stage Four: CSP Core Criteria" (see Appendix A). In this final stage, I reflected on the ways that my lesson or unit plan enabled or engaged the four criteria of culturally sustaining pedagogy in curriculum development: academic skills and concepts, cultural competency, critical reflection, and critiquing discourses of power.

This curriculum design model effectively supported my goal of creating a culturally sustaining curriculum. The UbD framework gives me clarity in identifying my students' essential learnings. In the past, my on-the-fly curriculum planning has strayed towards what Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) call "activity-oriented" instruction, prioritizing making my lessons fun and engaging but without clarity as to why I am doing them in my class (p. 28). Because I wish to infuse my curriculum with the tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy, UbD allows me to maintain clarity and work towards that goal throughout my design process. Meanwhile, differentiated instruction supports another essential element of CSP: knowing my students and bringing their lived experiences and home cultures into the classroom. In designing my unit plan template (Appendix A), I incorporated an intentional step where I will assess myself for evidence

of each of the core tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which will allow me to make adjustments if I find any of these criteria are missing from my plan.

### **Timeline**

This project was conducted from January through August, 2021 and will be implemented in September 2021. Background research on culturally sustaining pedagogy was conducted from January through May of 2021. In this time period, I developed my guiding framework and project description. Throughout the summer of 2021, I used Tomlinson and McTighe's (2006) DI + UbD model to create an in-depth curricular unit for my course that is informed by the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy. I will implement this project in the fall trimester of 2021 when I use it as a unit of study with my new students.

As previously discussed, my hope for this project is not only to write an excellent, CSP-informed unit of study for my American Environmental History course, but to improve the way that I approach writing curriculum overall. As a result of this project, my goal is that I will be better equipped to engage with the tenets of culturally sustaining pedagogy as a reflexive part of my curriculum design process.

### **Assessment**

The research question guiding my project is: *How can culturally sustaining pedagogy inform curriculum design for a social studies elective course?* In order to assess my own success at reaching my project goals and addressing this research question, I closely followed the unit plan template (see Appendix A) which reminded me to evaluate my curriculum for elements of culturally sustaining pedagogy throughout the design process. Additionally, I created a unit assessment, through that same curriculum

design process, that is informed by culturally sustaining pedagogy. This means that the project consistently embodies the CSP tenets of academic skills and concepts, cultural competency, critical reflection, and critiquing discourses of power. I will know my project was successful if students are able to succeed on an assessment that integrates these elements of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

### **Summary**

In Chapter Three, I outlined my project goals, discussed the research supporting my design decisions, and described the setting and timeline in which my project will take place. For my capstone project, I wrote a curriculum for an 11th and 12th grade elective social studies course that is authentically informed by and enacts the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy. I used a unit planning template adapted from Tomlinson and McTighe's UbD + DI model of curriculum design (see Appendix A). This backwards planning model allowed me to remain focused on my goal of creating culturally sustaining curriculum while attending to the individualities and home cultures of the students in my classroom. In Chapter Four, I reflect on the curriculum design process and how I intend to implement it in my new school setting.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

The process of developing a unit of curriculum for my capstone project has allowed me great insight into how I think about my course, my students' learning, and embedding culturally sustaining pedagogical principles into course content. Throughout this project, my work has been guided by the research question: *How can culturally sustaining pedagogy inform curriculum design for a social studies elective course?* In Chapter Four, I discuss my answers to this question. In this chapter, I begin by revisiting the literature that had the greatest impact on my work. I then discuss significant learnings from the process of engaging with CSP-based curriculum design, implications for the future, limitations of my work, and next steps that I plan to take with my capstone project.

### Revisiting the Literature

Culturally sustaining pedagogy both inspired and grounded my project. Studying the work of theorists like Ladson-Billings, Delpit, Paris, Alim, Martell, and Stevens among many others, my review of the literature revealed the imperative that teachers be committed to radically pluralizing the cultural perspectives and values that students learn in schools. Several years ago, I was profoundly impacted by Paris and Alim's (2017) answer to the question I had not, until then, truly asked myself: What is the purpose of schooling? They said,

In the context of the United States and other nation-states living out the legacies of genocide, land theft, enslavement, and various forms of colonialism, the answer is rather clear: The purpose of state-sanctioned schooling has been to

forward the largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools. (p. 1)

Since reading their answer, I have come only to more and more strongly agree that schools exist in order to perpetuate the systems of power and oppression by which this country operates. This realization has caused me to reckon with the fact that by entering this profession, I am an agent of that replication. At times, this makes me question my role in the entire system, as I find myself asking: Do I really want to be part of this? Though I do not have a final answer and will continually revisit this question throughout the rest of my career, through my capstone project, I have come to believe that, for now, my work as a teacher allows me access to ways that I may mitigate the harm of and, perhaps, change these systems.

I chose curriculum design for my capstone project because I perceived a gap between social studies teachers' desire to teach in opposition to systems that replicate and perpetuate inequities, and their actual ability to do so. The works of Martell and Stevens (2017) and Aronson and Laughter (2016) were incredibly important for helping me develop strategies for bridging that gap. Guided by their work, I developed a framework for self-reflection built into the curriculum design process that centered four principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy: academic skills and concepts, cultural competency, critical reflection, and critiquing discourses of power.

The most important takeaway from my literature review process, and my capstone work overall, is simple: Anyone can use culturally sustaining pedagogy to improve their teaching and to better reflect their students' cultures, languages, literacies, and

brilliances. When I started this project, I did not know which social studies course I would choose for which to write a curriculum, and though I ended up writing it for American Environmental History, I could easily have conducted this project improving the Government curriculum I taught last year, or the World History curriculum I will teach next year. Culturally sustaining pedagogy offers a flexible, challenging framework that inspires educators to think deeply about the ways they reflect their students' identities, expand their cultural competency, and enable them to examine oppressive systems.

### **Self-Reflection**

The process of designing a curriculum well ahead of teaching it was, to put it plainly, completely new to me. I have never before been able to design curriculum without the imminent pressure of needing something to do with students. Thus, I found curriculum-writing to be the most challenging part of the entire capstone process for me. I have long suspected myself of falling into the trap of “activity-oriented teaching” described by Tomlinson and McTighe (2006). Through this process, I learned that while I am most inspired and enthused by designing the actual activities students will do, I am also completely capable of grounding my curricular decisions in thought-through student outcomes. I based my curriculum design model in Tomlinson and McTighe’s (2006) *Understanding by Design and Differentiated Instruction* partnership. This required me to engage with backward planning, the process of first articulating student outcomes of understanding, knowledge, skills, and questions, then describing performance tasks, all before creating the learning plan. Considering desired outcomes first helped me remain focused on what I wanted my students to get out of each lesson, activity, or project.

When I started writing the curriculum, I tried to dive straight into creating slides and activities, but found myself confused and directionless, just as Tomlinson and McTighe warn. A major turning point in my design process came when I was able to pause, collect my thoughts, and identify the outcome and assessment I wanted this unit to scaffold. Ultimately, though I had not originally intended to do so in my capstone work, I ended up creating a summative assessment for the entire course: the Environmental Justice Summit Project. With this summative in mind, I was able to narrow the focus of my unit, laying the foundations of environmental history and environmental justice through an exploration of primary and secondary sources, a lesson challenging human supremacy and its associated human-created myths, and a role-play inspired by the Indigenous Peoples' Climate Summit. By engaging authentically with the backwards-planning process, I grew as an educator and, I believe, created more powerful learning opportunities for my future students.

This project allowed me to marry my social studies teachings with my passion for environmental justice. As an undergraduate, I majored in Environmental History, but found that my interest in the past was entirely motivated by trying to find answers for my questions and concerns about the present. I have been deeply concerned by the impending climate crisis for my entire life. Fatefully, while I was in the middle of my curriculum design process, I attended the Minnesota Educational Equity Edcamp, where I heard a keynote address by Waziyatawin, an Indigenous educational leader and activist. Her address inspired me to think deeply about the patterns of thinking that schools instill in their students. She specifically spoke about the ways that schools teach students the worldviews of human supremacy, social evolution, and “progress,” presenting these



culturally-created belief systems to be fact (Wazyatawin, 2021). This keynote turned into Lesson 5 in my project, but more significantly, it made me think about ways that I have replicated these belief systems in my curriculum of the past, such as in American History or World History. In the future, I intend to be much more conscious of these narratives, and to incorporate Indigenous worldviews into all the curricula I teach to challenge and complicate the colonial worldviews that dominate the standard curriculum.

### **Implications**

My project shows that culturally sustaining pedagogy can serve not only as a helpful concept exclusive to academia, but as a framework to improve teaching and learning with practicing teachers. Too often, teachers grapple with big ideas in professional development or graduate programs, but return to their classrooms to repeat the same lessons that they have always done. I hope that my research and project will serve as an inspiration to teachers who wish to engage with culturally sustaining pedagogy and/or environmental history at a deeper level.

Another implication of this work is specific to the field of Environmental History. When I majored in Environmental History for my Bachelor's degree, almost all of the work I read by environmental historians was written by white men. While issues such as race, class, and gender were discussed, they remained secondary to the study of the environment, and I continued to believe that environmental issues were somehow slightly separate from the social ills of human societies. However, I have come to realize that social justice is inextricably linked with environmental justice. Violent social hierarchies like white supremacy, patriarchy, and ableism are reliant on a foremost acceptance of human supremacy, the belief that human beings are the central or most important entities

in the universe (Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2015; Waziyatawin, 2021).

Thus, the field of Environmental History desperately needs a critical examination through a culturally sustaining lens. While my work has only scratched the surface of possibility for this examination, I hope that it will be taken up by others interested in Environmental History as inspiration and a call to action.

### **Limitations**

My project was designed with my specific setting in mind, which means it may not be entirely transferable to many teachers' contexts. This project is a curriculum to support an 11th and 12th grade elective that I am designing entirely from scratch. Many social studies teachers never get the opportunity to propose elective courses, and this flexibility in course content is unique due to the fact that I am teaching in a small, private, progressive school in 2021-22. Additionally, Environmental History is not a topic that is commonly taught in many social studies curricula. While I hope that other educators may be inspired by my work, a potential limitation is that three weeks of curriculum may not fit well into a course like a survey World History, Economics, or Government. In this case, I advise educators wishing to use my work to take individual lessons or activities and modify them to fit within their own classrooms.

Through my literature review process as well as my professional experiences up to this point, I have come to believe that teachers may be less constrained by the need to "cover" certain topics than they believe themselves to be. Supporting this view, Thornton (1989) theorized that social studies teachers are gatekeepers of the knowledge their students learn, and Nicosia (2020) found that social studies teachers reference standards as a way to justify teaching in a way that does not grapple with race, racism, and

oppression. Speaking anecdotally from my experience so far in two public high schools, and preparing to teach in a private school starting in September 2021, I have not experienced pressure to stick to a prescribed curriculum or ever been asked to justify my curricular choices with standards. Nonetheless, the literature also revealed that a lack of resources, when combined with pressure from colleagues, admin, or parents, can cause teachers to feel as though they do not have power over their curricular decisions. I recognize that my contexts may allow me to have flexibility in my curriculum that other teachers do not enjoy in their settings.

### **Next Steps**

My goal with my project was not only to create a high-quality unit of curriculum for my Environmental History course, but to fundamentally shift my approach to curriculum design into the future. I believe I achieved that goal. By continuously assessing my work for elements of culturally sustaining pedagogy, I came to reflexively edit myself as I added ideas, perspectives, and activities. Thus, I believe this project has improved my practice in ways that will stick with me for the rest of my career. I will share this curriculum with anyone who wants to use it, and I certainly hope that others will find it helpful in the future. Though many of my fellow social studies teachers may not be able to explicitly teach an Environmental History course as I am, I believe this unit would be an asset to an American History, global- or region-specific studies, or Human Geography curriculum.

Now that I have created the curriculum, I will need to teach it for the first time in the fall of 2021. As I teach these lessons and engage with these learning activities with my students, I will need to pay careful attention, take notes, and be highly reflective on

the effectiveness of the material. Making adjustments along the way and revising my work as I repeat these lessons in the future will improve this curriculum to make it more useful and applicable to other teaching contexts. Moreover, the act of continuously revisiting and improving my curriculum based on the needs, interests, and cultural assets of my students is the heart of teaching in alignment with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy. As I carry on working with students over the years, I believe I will become better at including the voices and perspectives of people whose histories I do not share. This is my hope and intention.

### **Summary**

I was inspired to engage with this capstone work because I perceived a gap between teachers' desire to teach in alignment with culturally sustaining pedagogy, and their actual ability to do so. Barriers such as teachers' knowledge, curricular resources, pressure from outside sources, and state-mandated standards make it difficult for teachers to radically alter their curricular decisions from the way things have "always been done." In this chapter, I revisited the literature that inspired and grounded my capstone work. I then reflected on my personal growth from this capstone project, discussing ways that I have grown as a curriculum-designer and the ways that I have been able to more reflexively embody a culturally sustaining approach in my teaching practice. I closed by discussing implications, limitations, and next steps I plan to take with my capstone work.

The epigraph of Paris and Alim's (2017) *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* is a quote from Gloria Ladson-Billings which reads, "We teach what we value." I value justice, compassion, and the inherent worth and dignity of all living and nonliving beings. Through my work in

this project, as a social studies teacher, and as a member of my communities, I intend to live and teach these values.

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## APPENDIX A

## Unit Plan Design Template

Stage One: Desired Results	
<b>Understandings</b> <i>Students will understand that...</i>	<b>Essential Questions</b>
<b>Knowledge</b> <i>Students will know...</i>	<b>Skills</b> <i>Students will be able to...</i>
Stage Two: Assessment Evidence	
<b>Performance Task(s)</b>	<b>Other Evidence</b>
Stage Three: Learning Plan	
<i>Describe learning activities and label instances of the CSP core criteria, e.g., (CC, CR)</i>	
Stage Four: CSP Core Criteria	
<i>Reflect on the ways that the desired results, assessment evidence, and learning activities in this lesson or unit plan enable/engage:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Academic skills and concepts (ASC):</li> <li>● Cultural competency (CC):</li> <li>● Critical reflection (CR):</li> <li>● Critiquing discourses of power (CDP):</li> </ul>	