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## History as a Catalyst for Effective Activism: A Project Based Curriculum

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History as a Catalyst for Effective Activism: A Project Based Curriculum

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Background

When it comes to the core subjects in school, there is frequently a tangible purpose justifying *why* we teach it. In math, we assert that numeric literacy is a necessary skill for daily calculations such as balancing a budget. In science, we assert that developing methods of inquiry and prediction will enhance problem solving skills while explaining the natural laws of the world. English sustains reading and writing skills necessary for communication. Even gym promotes the notion that body and brain health are linked.

Social studies has always felt like an exception to this rule. Although it is considered by most districts to be a core subject there seems to be an ubiquitous lack of consensus defining its tangible benefits to students. This is evident by the varying degree of class content covered between districts across the country which fall under the umbrella of social studies, as well as the absence of a social studies section in standardized tests to outline “what essentials you *must* know” before leaving secondary schools such as the Minnesota Comprehensive Exam (MCA). Though there are many schools of thought that define what the tangible benefits actually are; I choose to focus on one skill which I believe is intrinsically linked to the subjects of social studies classes: the ability to fix contemporary societal problems through activist social change. Integrating this topic into a civics class is relatively intuitive but when venturing into the other social studies, this tangible objective frequently gets lost, and with it, student engagement.

History, for example, can frequently devolve into a never ending list of names and dates. While good teachers display how history relates to the present, I noticed there is still a common misunderstanding of how to *use* that knowledge for a tangible purpose. In an attempt to better justify social studies as a core subject with links to useable skills, I ask the question: How can history be used to teach students effective activism? In this chapter I will first describe my personal history and reflections on this question. I will then explain why this question is important to ask and how one can answer it. Finally I will outline the positive benefits answering this question will have for the educational community and society at large.

### **Personal History and Reflections**

My decision to become a social studies teacher originated from my desire to work in an interactive setting, engage as a lifelong learner and find a career where there would always be a market. I was drawn to history because there was an element of storytelling that fed into my theatrical background. My goal was solely to make history come to life in an engaging way for students but this would slowly start to shift as my educational career continued.

As I took more civics and political science classes in 2015, I gained a clearer vision about the state of the world and its problems. Though my goal was still to teach history, I could feel my intentions as an educator begin to evolve. It was during this period that I felt inspired to incorporate activism as a core component of what I teach, though this motivation was still in a preliminary form. When I got my first job in 2020, I was happy to be working full time at a middle school, teaching 6th through 8th grade

history to a 90% Somali and 10% Ethiopian population, who could greatly benefit from an education focussed on activism.

Not only was I at the right school to ignite my interest in teaching activism, but the timing was also perfect. The conditions of Trump's presidency, George Floyd protests, Covid-19 chaos and discussions of misinformation campaigns seemed to create a perfect storm of social studies topics that brought activism into the spotlight, making it nearly impossible to solely focus on the past. Between the period of 2015 to 2020 I had slowly watched our country devolve in ways that kept setting new and troubling precedents.

There have always been societal problems, but I was taught that throughout American history there was a healthy flow of progress, or at least a back and forth battle in power dynamics. The growth of unions, the battle for women's suffrage and the civil rights movements of the sixties all serve as examples of impactful activism where marginalized groups used systematic methods to significantly and tangibly change the practices and norms of the country for the better. In contrast, 2020 seemed to be a culmination of societal problems that, over the last 40 years have only worsened, such as wealth stratification, political tolerance, racial injustice, environmental health and government corruption/manipulation (Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Hale, 2010; Research Group on Socialism and Democracy, 2021). As a scholar of history, I couldn't help but ask myself what the causes of this change in trajectory were. Why does the net trend of these social issues seem to be downward when compared to the rest of American history that displayed a seemingly more efficient resistance? The more I thought about this the more passionately I wanted to reverse this trend.

I then looked at my own history and realized that wealth inequality had been plaguing my life since I had grown up in a low income family. I did not have the resources necessary to build wealth, and societal structures made this type of accumulation nearly impossible. The need for societal correction became much more salient when I reflected on the fact that I was struggling as a straight white male. As hard as it is for me to succeed, that difficulty becomes exponentially compounded for citizens of minority status, whether that be racial, ethnic, disability, gender or sexual orientation. Reflections on my own personal hardships paired with the circumstances of working with a minority population fuelled my scrutiny on the flaws of American society, driving me to look for ways to make a difference.

As a social studies teacher, I found myself lucky because I was in a perfect position to make that difference. Education is certainly one of the most powerful tools to help mobilize people to make change, so I started teaching my history classes using a cause and effect lens that tied the past to the present. Many of my lectures and activities centered around how events, people and systems of the past contributed to systemic issues we face today. For many months I believed I was achieving my goal of inspiring activism by educating my students about the injustices of the modern world, until one day I had a student raise their hand and ask the dreaded question every history teacher tries to avoid: “What’s even the point of learning this?” I was stunned. How could a student not see the point of history when I was clearly connecting it to the present, let alone issues that significantly affect their own community? That’s when I reached an epiphany. Although I was informing students about the social problems they were inheriting, I was



doing nothing to teach solutions. My students were left oblivious to ways they could *use* that information, empowering them to make a difference of their own. Because I am passionate about making social change and have unsuccessfully attempted to mobilize my own students of minority status, I have elected to answer the question: “How can history be used to teach students effective activism?”

### **Importance of the Question and How to Answer it**

Educators across the country have faced the same dilemma of linking historical content to activism and the solution seems to be informing students about inspiring activism from the past (Hengen, 2012; Picower, 2015). The problem is, this practice brings educators back to the same question “what can my students *do* with this information?” The well-intentioned rebuttal seems to be, “by learning about the past, students will be inspired to recreate this activism in the present,” but this is only partly true. There are undoubtedly lessons about activism that can be applied to the present, but they don’t exist in a vacuum. If we simply retell what happened before, there is no way for students to apply that activism today. This train of reasoning begs the question: if the way we teach activism right now is not working, how *can* history be used to teach students to effectively make social change?

The answer is to create an activist curriculum that prioritizes student action in two ways. The first of which is structuring historical information and texts through a lens of *how* change from the past happened as opposed to *when* and by *who*. By making the *process* of societal change a priority in texts, learning objectives derived from them will directly correlate with actions students themselves can perform (Beason-Manes, 2018).

Taking a “how to” approach to topics like the Labor Movement would directly display for students the ways in which they can apply the events of the past to their own world.

Under this approach historical texts and information would be accompanied by efficacy evaluation objectives. More specifically they would be taught to identify individual factors that impact activist efficacy from the historical information presented, then apply those factors as gauges to explain why a movement was more or less successful at achieving the societal changes they were targeting. The second way this curriculum would prioritize student action would be the inclusion of a project based portion requiring students to research, plan and implement their own activism. Here learners will be provided opportunities to transfer their knowledge of how to be effective activists from the page to the real world by practicing it and developing their skills in a performative assessment.

### **Positionality**

I am a social studies teacher who works with an under-privileged demographic of first generation Somali Americans. My work on activism directly relates to my personal experience as an educator who serves demographics consistent of racial minority status and multilingual (ML) learners. Every day I am reminded of the systemic inequalities of American society as some of my students eat school lunch as their only meal of the day and others have brothers, sisters or parents who are already in a racially biased prison system. I have a deep desire to use my position as an educator to better society for my students. I am also a product of my generation. I grew up on a classic historical education that emphasized "progress" in America. I was shown depictions of Americans stopping

Nazis, stamping out racism, and empowering women to vote. Being raised on this ideology, I find it personally troubling to still see racism, sexism, and wealth inequality as major issues troubling our nation today. Being raised on one idea and living through another has created a frustration that has led me to believe something is, or always has been, wrong. With the exception of the passage of same sex marriage rights, I have not yet lived through a major systemic shift brought upon by activism. Black Lives Matter campaigns have not produced national legislation changes, the Occupy Wall Street movement died out and the #Metoo Movement has only metaphorically "canceled" some abusers who still regularly sell out theaters (Louis C.K) or are already out of prison (Bill Cosby). As a product of my generation, I feel disappointed in the state of activism and it has inspired me to look for a solution to this problem by first addressing the question of what went wrong. With a clearly left-leaning political status, it is important to create a curriculum that does not exclude the views of others and be conscious and accepting towards a wide socio-political range of learners.

### **Benefits to the Educational Community and Society**

Using history to teach how to effectively make social change serves as both a benefit to the educational community and a necessity for future societal success. When discussing the educational community, the positive implications are evident at every level. Considering student learning, it is a well-reported fact that classroom engagement increases when content is personally connected to the lives of students (Hengen, 2012). As mentioned above, when drawing a direct connection from the past to the present, students can better see how to use historical information in meaningful ways. Creating a

curriculum with a project based assessment would also contribute to engagement (Beason-Manes, 2018). Student retention is higher when they learn by doing or using manipulatives, therefore this curriculum would not only be more engaging but also yield higher rates of information retention (Mobley, 2007).

Teachers would also see significant benefits to their professional development. In an attempt to best promote the mental development of their students, teachers frequently look for content that engages critical thinking (Picower, 2015). Unfortunately many history curriculums are inherently limited to lower level thinking tasks such as remembering or understanding, while one focussed on activism is rich with higher order tasks such as juxtaposition, analysis, metacognitive thinking, evaluation, prediction, synthesis and creation. Another benefit to teachers is that this curriculum initiative would foster a better sense of class community by encouraging students to share their interests and areas of passion (Barrett and Pachi, 2019). This would give teachers a way to make authentic connections with their students to better understand them and display interest in their lives. When the student to teacher relationship is strengthened, classroom management becomes easier.

At the district level this curriculum would help meet the goals of many mission statements and board directives. Most schools are founded on the values of promoting citizenship and engaging students about activism clearly adheres to this type of statement. It would also help districts meet the updated list of state standards that must be covered by social studies teachers. Every 10 years the list of standards are reviewed and adapted. This year the standards have changed at all levels to include an ethnic studies component.

The purpose of this new component is to educate the youth about a variety of voices that make up the American network and diverge from the traditional Eurocentric interpretation taught by most history textbooks. By looking at history through the lens of marginalized populations and focussing on their battles, this curriculum would provide a tool for many districts to properly comply with the state standards.

Finally, my rationale for answering this question revolves around the betterment of society. As mentioned above, we are in the midst of an unprecedented period of worry. The need for societal change is just as prominent now as it has ever been, and activist activity is in jeopardy (Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Hale, 2010; Research Group on Socialism and Democracy, 2021). The causes for this are numerous: A technological revolution has usurped physical presence for digital opinion; the power gap between the oppressed and oppressors have become large enough to create widespread disillusion; difficult living conditions for the middle class consume most of their time and mental energy leaving little for attempting change; misinformation campaigns have left citizens confused and unsure about what to fight for; and political stratification has made unifying under a single cause nearly impossible. All of this is topped off by the Covid-19 pandemic which has ravaged societal norms, distracting from and exacerbating all of the issues previously mentioned. These stacked conditions have enabled the growth of societal problems with dire consequences on both local and global scales. Considering that the need for change is at an all time high and a generation of citizens are facing novel barriers for achieving that change, the necessity of using history to teach effective activism becomes vividly clear. By learning from the past, the activists of today may use their voices and ideas to

overcome these modern hurdles resulting in positive changes that could, in a metaphorical and sometimes literal sense, save the world.

In this chapter, I have described my personal history and reflections on this question. I followed with an explanation of why this question is important to ask and how to answer it. Finally I outlined the positive benefits answering this question will have for the educational community and society at large. In the next chapter, I will review relevant scholarly literature to help understand and answer the overall question of how history can be used to teach students effective activism, by breaking it down into three smaller questions.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will review the significant literature pertaining to the question “How can history be used to teach effective activism?” by breaking this question down into three smaller ones. The first section will focus on literature that answers the question of *what* effective activism is. It will define and contextualize effective activism through four specific elements which, through theory and data, are analyzed for their significance in meeting social change goals. The second section will answer both *why* we should teach effective activism and *how* we should teach it. It answers *why* by examining scholarly critiques on the status of modern social justice and youth involvement then linking those critiques to schools. Section two then answers *how* by examining research on successful pedagogical methods educators have already attempted when teaching activism. The third section provides a rationale for the research, articulating how the literature review deepens understanding of the overarching guiding question and influences the creation of an effective activism curriculum. The final section summarizes the major findings. By reviewing four specific elements of “effective” activism, the unique role schools can play in addressing critiques on the quality of modern activism, and the landscape of pedagogical methods for teaching students activism, the question of how history can be used to teach effective activism is better understood and more easily answered.

### **What is Effective Activism?: Four Elements Defined**

Due to the context-dependent nature and inherently complex structure of social movements, there will never be clear cut, textbook examples of success factors in creating social change. If there were, there would be no need for activism in the first place because the solution to any given problem in humanity would be the equivalent of typing in the value of X (societal issue) in a calculator to get Y (the successful tactic). In reality, what leads to societal change in one scenario might not in another because of a variety of context-dependent factors such as time, location, social norms, implementation techniques, tactic to grievance relationship and a seemingly endless list of other influences. The result is a social movement field which is increasingly diverse and complex in its examination of methods, problems and outcomes. Therefore, when attempting to find success factors that make activism *effective* the field of research must be significantly narrowed.

This process begins by defining the term “effective” which has been described academically in many ways from raising resources, to promoting awareness or passing legislation (Cheezum et al., 2013; Hale, 2010; Post, 2015). To clarify, I will define it as a measure of any activist’s, or organization’s, ability to achieve their targeted goals. This outcome-oriented categorization narrows the scope of research by excluding any analysis on the quality of targeted goals. If the movement achieved its targeted goal it is considered “effective” activism, regardless of whether or not that goal had its *intended* impact on society (Goetz & Jenkins, 2018). This still leaves an infinite number of measurable factors that may contribute to making activism effective as opposed to



ineffective, so in order to narrow the scope of research further, only four elements will be discussed due to their frequency of citation and high saliency in the field of social movement studies. They are 1.) physical vs. digital activism 2.) the public and private sector as targets 3.) use of framing and 4). structures of activist organizations.

The framework for reviewing how each of the above theorized elements contributes to the effectiveness of activism uses a macro level research approach. A significant portion of the literature examining activism success is localized to an individual movement or event, which is then analyzed for its effective components (Dundua, et al., 2022). As some researchers have suggested, this approach can be restraining because of its context-dependent nature which limits its findings to the scope of that single movement, arguing instead for a larger scale of examination that can reveal significant patterns across time, level and movement type (Buffardi et al. 2017; Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Larson & Lizardo 2019; Nulman & Schlembach 2018). Nulman and Schlembach (2019) describe three levels of social movement analysis. Micro level research examines individual movements, meso level examines groups of movements fighting for the same cause as well as their interaction with the state and macro level research examines societal or institutional change. They argue that taking a step back to integrate all three levels of research can reveal patterns that cannot be seen at each individual level, such as shared mobilization styles and comparable responses to institutional or economic conditions. Nulman and Schlembach (2018) share this macro level analysis perspective using a term they call Institutional Movement Logics (IMLs). They explain that by analyzing many different social movements across time, an activism

shape is revealed which predicts reliable combinations of social issues, tactics and targets (ITTs). These ITT combinations are learned culturally, meaning that certain targets elicit consistent tactics based on what social norms have taught them about how to interact with that target, as opposed to what tactics are most effective given the issue target combination. Because both macro level data analysis and its relationship to micro and meso levels of research, can reveal enduring and predictable patterns, the following literature review will apply this style of examination to the field of activism specifically analyzing for efficacy as recommended by Numan and Schlembach (2018). Using an integrated macro level approach, the following sections examine the scholarly theories behind each of the four academically salient elements across multiple levels (micro, meso and macro) and social movement types to reveal patterns of efficacy.

### ***Targeting the private or public sector***

Across the fields of activism and social movements, the research is frequently divided between two main targets; the public sector (government) or the private sector (businesses and institutions). Though there is a significant amount of effective and ineffective activism on both sides, a plethora of literature suggests the public sector is a more effective target for activism.

One theory that supports this notion is rooted in the idea of Political Opportunity Structures (POS) which states that institutions can be measured by their receptiveness to claims and grievances from the public through input and output (Dunda et al., 2022; Kitschelt, 1986; Nulman & Schlembach, 2018). Input structures are ways that an institution is designed to receive messages from the public while output structures are

ways they are designed to respond or implement policies that address grievances of the public. Many sources support the notion that the public sector is well equipped with POSs making it a more reliable target for activists to meet goals (Buffardi et al., 2017; Cheezum et al., 2013; Dobbin & Kalev, 2021; Goetz & Jenkins 2018; Morris-Jones, 2010). They point to Congress's ability to communicate responses when activists reach out to them, issue specific commissions in the executive branch that monitor civilian needs, sanction committees that monitor and punish violations of civil rights and collaborative legislation drafting with nonprofits or grassroots organizations as accessible and responsive entry points for activists to interact with, and significantly impact, the government as a target for demanding equality across issues of feminism, racism, historical preservation, health equality and more (Cheezum et al., 2013; Dobbin & Kalev, 2021; Goetz & Jenkins 2018; Morris-Jones, 2010). Larson and Lizardo (2019) further support this claim, describing how their macro level analysis revealed that the public sector is a magnet for a wider variety of social movements covering more issue, tactic and target (ITT) combinations than the private sector. In other words, the shape of the social movement landscape showed that government is the more frequently preferred target to address issues of inequality.

In contrast, the private sector has been measurably less receptive showing fewer POSs. Youmans and York (2012) theorize that this is because, at its core, the goals and purposes of the private sector are to increase profits, avoid negative public relations, seek new markets and protect a larger class of non-political actors. These goals reflect private structures and practices that are in direct conflict with the conditions of activists who are

usually a minority part of the overall population, seeking to redistribute power and attempting to expose conflict. This makes the private sector a less receptive or ideal target for accomplishing specific goals associated with social change (Lightfoot, 2019).

The resilience of private institutions to accommodate change has been frequently studied across different social movements, such as the fight for gender and race equality, environmental activism and fair labor practices (Gerson, 2009; Lightfoot 2019; Dobbin and Kalev, 2021). Sometimes businesses flat out refuse demands of activists. In the fight for gender equality, men who seek childcare roles so their female partners can work must consistently risk their job stability, as employers are unwilling to accommodate working mothers despite frequent demands for change. Other times the private sector will come up with their own strategies or structures which drastically fall flat in their attempt to meet activist demands. As Dobbin and Kalev (2021) demonstrate, these privately driven social movement innovations are disguised as POSs for the purposes of saving face and maintaining stock prices but do little to nothing for the advancement of activist agendas. They find that initiatives of private institutions to stop discrimination in the workplace were not only ineffective, but frequently increased discrimination. Usually in the form of diversity or sexual assault training for managers and leadership-rating opportunities for lower employees, these methods were actually found to increase discrimination and sexual assault. Even with this knowledge, the private sector perpetuated these faux POSs which are still the most widely accepted forms of private intervention. Further, other studies show that attempts of consumer activism across different social movements can be ineffective because the cost ceiling is frequently too high for most civilians to

participate, and when they can they are often victims of “pinkwashing” (Lightfoot,2019). This is the deceptive business practice of marketing a product or service to activists when in reality that business does virtually nothing to support the activist cause. Examples like these demonstrate when the private sector becomes the target of activists' demands they will put more effort into dodging than addressing goals, if not outright rejecting them, because private motivations are in direct conflict with those of activists, further complimenting the theory that government is a more effective target due to its intrinsic POSs.

Some discussion is critical of this claim, with a variety of counterpoints. They claim that shifting political parties with differing motives can frequently block attempts of activists or create ideological stratification when consensus is required for success in government (Nulman & Schlembach, 2018). Others note the private sector is increasingly encroaching on the power of the public, resulting in government actors that are more loyal to corporate than public interests, as well as the fact that the institution of government itself can be unresponsive due to its complexities and separations of powers which slow or block the passage of activist policies (Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Hale, 2010; Nulman & Schlembach, 2018). Ferman (2020) adds to this rebuttal, describing the popular counter argument used by educational activists, that institutions in the private sector are ripe for intervention because the competitive nature of capitalism will encourage them to meet the demands of as many demographics as possible, best serving the public since their financial support is needed to survive. Educational activists who subscribe to this mindset argue that the public sector is failing to meet the needs of

families which are better met by the private sector. They turn to private and charter schools claiming the benefits of increased options and competitive drive creates institutions that are more structurally responsive to the goals of educational activists.

Though the research suggests the public sector is not a perfect outlet for effective activism, academic discussion clearly articulates its well tested benefits, making it a good target for achieving goals. In order to further narrow the pool of research, the following review will be limited to effective activism targeting the government. While the search for effective targets pits two different sectors against each other, so too does the academic discussion of effective tactics.

### ***Physical vs. Digital activism***

In the modern age of social movements, a relatively new discussion compares physical and digital activism in a competitive analysis for efficacy. Two of the main objectives of activists are gaining support for their cause to pressure those in power and gathering material and social (skill based) resources, both of which have been significantly linked as a factor of effective activism (Buffardi et al., 2017; Dejordy et al., 2020; Ferman, 2020; Nulman & Schlembach, 2018; Post, 2015). For the purposes of this review digital activism is defined as any attempt to meet those objectives online and physical activism is defined as any attempts to meet these objectives using physical public space. While some believe that the internet is an equally if not more viable way to make social change, others argue it has an inhibitory effect on activists seeking change (Sesen & Siker, 2019).

Those who distrust the potential of digital activism frequently cite arguments similar to Mitchel's in *The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public and Democracy* (1995). These arguments outline critical factors of democracy which significantly impact activist success and are inherently exclusive to public physical spaces such as parks and streets. These spaces are described as the most unrestricted and authentic arenas for activist representation and action because they are free of coercive forces and powerful institutions. The unrestricted and spontaneous nature of physical public spaces allows for opinions to be heard and actions to be seen regardless of a spectator's individual beliefs or preference, breaking down barriers of otherwise balkanized spaces. Utilization of these spaces is restricted only by whether or not you show up, as opposed to having the means to be there, resulting in a heterogeneous nature that more effectively spreads views, more accurately depicts representation and potentially unites different groups who would have otherwise been unaware of each other's presence and needs (Walljasper, 2005). Messaging and actions are not distorted by mitigators or interfering agendas, allowing spectators to make accurate judgements. The material aspect of physical public space is a key component to efficacy because there is a weight associated with non symbolic presence or action, increasing activist motivation and perceived power (Cheezum et al., 2013; Mitchell 1995; Walljasper, 2005; Wilkins et al., 2019). Only when space is tangible can it be overtaken by marginalized groups, who hold it hostage in exchange for attention to their demands (Wilkins et al., 2019). The resulting disorder in a space previously marked by order provides an impactful saliency that is shown to empower political actors in a way that cannot be achieved in the digital

realm. Further, when powerful targets try to reclaim this space, their transparent exertion of power over marginalized groups to a wide audience can galvanize others to join causes (Walljasper, 2005). The influence of physical space is well documented by Olzak (2021) who supports how these distinctive attributes have direct impacts on power holders. According to this study, in areas of police brutality many activists demanded the creation of a civilian review board to hold authorities accountable for their actions. A significant correlation was found between the use of physical space for protests and the achievement of a civilian review board while areas without physical protests were less successful.

The bulk of academic discussion comparing digital and physical activism revolves around proving whether or not digital activism shares the same merits described above for activists. Public space advocates point to many deficits, warning that although the digital sphere has created many spaces for activists to engage, this space is regulated and manipulated by agendas resulting in a faux democracy that can restrict and derail the goals of activists (Forestal, 2021; Youmans & York, 2012). Pointing to the fact that a majority of online activism occurs on private platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Tik-Tok, many messages are selectively curated based on algorithms that decide what content you receive and where your content is sent (Forestal, 2021). This manipulation of information and messaging can inhibit activist goals because content is distributed based on predictions of what will keep you engaged on the platform, not what will build support for a cause. Additionally, the most popular digital activism platforms discourage anonymity in favor of being able to create and track preference profiles (Vie, 2021). This allows the targets of activists to more easily retaliate since activist



information is easily accessible (Youmans & York, 2012). Performed through the action of community policing, this is when users falsely flag activists they disagree with as spam or inappropriate to get them and their content removed from the platform. This digital environment is highly regulated, frequently manipulated by institutional agendas and limits the activist's power to gain support and resources, creating more barriers that don't occur when utilizing physical space.

Another inhibitor of effectiveness caused by online activism is its confinement to the digital realm caused by the psychological impact of its use. As mentioned previously, there is a certain saliency associated with physical space that leads to higher commitment and stronger responses from activists. In the digital realm, activist action is frequently limited to sharing and receiving information and opinions in the form of reactions or comments that show support or dissent, posting or reposting in-group endorsed content or signing online petitions (Vie, 2021; Youmans & York, 2012). The high accessibility of these spaces and limited amount of energy necessary when using them makes these platforms low cost and low risk to engage in. While these activities create a wider audience potential, the low threshold nature of activity in these spaces yields a weak impact on their causes (Schumann & Klein, 2015). Frequently referred to as "Slacktivism," online activism is seen to be limited in the digital space to largely symbolic support (Wilkins et al., 2019). It is absent of the commitment necessary to gain valuable support or resources for social movement success, like campaigning, protesting, voting and communal meetings (Schumann & Klein, 2015; Sesen & Siker, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2019). Critics cite how many movements like Occupy Wall Street can gain up to

20,000 supporters online, only 300 of which actually show up in physical space (Sesen & Siker, 2019). Empirical support finds that activists who engaged in online activism were significantly less willing to engage in critical resource gathering activities for their cause such as donating money or volunteering time to attending discussion panels (Wilkins et al., 2019). When digital activism fails to gather resources and tangible support, the only impact it has on social movements is spreading information, which is believed to be significantly less mobilizing today because of its oversaturated and repetitive nature online (After Globalism Writing Group, 2018). Many people are already aware of the issues they care about and the process of learning about new ones has lost novelty because it is so easy to be informed.

Many scholars use psychological theory to explain why digital activism does not make the leap to physical space and can inhibit actions that would build resources for social movements. They believe there is a substitution effect guided by the homeostasis principle which states that “unfulfilled needs should cause psychological tensions and evoke targeted behavior to resolve the latter” (Schumann & Klein, 2015, p. 309). In the case of digital activism, those with the need to address social injustices resolve the tension by participating in low threshold online action which substitutes for actions that would have been taken in physical space. The user perceives these actions as impactful because they have either spent energy consuming and analyzing content that has kept them up to date on a societal problem, or because they have enhanced their groups status in quantity of opinions and membership, therefore relieving tension in place of other

actions that would have gathered resources (Schumann & Klein, 2015; Sesen & Siker, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2019).

Not all scholarly research aligns with the argument that cyber activism is detrimental to the efficacy of a social movement. Papacharissi (2009) argues that online petitions and crowdfunding create the same resources that would exist in physical space. Others argue that digital means allow veteran activists to diversify their tactics and recontextualizes the low barriers of the medium as an easy entry point that allows new participants to join movements who would not have been able to otherwise (Macafee & De Simone, 2012; Schulman & Klein 2015). Other researchers agree but note the context-dependent nature of these claims when put to the test, revealing that online action can serve as a stepping stone for offline activism under specific conditions such as having previous experience in offline spaces, or having the perception of their online actions as being impactful (Wilkins et al., 2019). Sesen & Siker (2019) explain a more balanced approach describing the interconnected relationship between both tactics:

Although protest events spread on Facebook, Twitter or Youtube, they do not start or end there. The heart of social activity beats on the streets, not on the screen. Therefore, it is important to understand the impact of new communication technologies on the dynamics of participation in civic and social movements in the upcoming period, which will be largely driven by and shaped by communication technologies. (p. 117)

Noting the complex relationship between these two forms of social movements, the research acknowledges that activism in physical space is significantly related to the

effectiveness of activist tactics and should be utilized in some capacity. Unlike the scholarly debates around physical vs. digital activism and private vs public targets, the academic discussion around framing as an element of efficacy does not place one category over another.

### ***Framing***

Framing is described as an ability of activists to strategically design and utilize messaging and control how a movement is viewed by outsiders (Nulman & Schlembach, 2018; Skrentny, 2006). Because every social movement has a different audience, there is no single frame that is better than others. Instead, research has consistently shown when activists skillfully adapt their frames to the appropriate circumstances they face, the efficacy of their movement is known to significantly increase across multiple social issues (Dundua et al., 2022; Goetz & Jenkins; Hale, 2010; Nulman & Schlembach, 2018; Skrentny, 2006).

One widely agreed upon method of effective framing is to articulate messages and demands in a way that is as widely inclusive as possible. In order to gain maximum support, it is critical that activists frame their movements strategically to unite differing demographics as opposed to separating them (Curtin et al., 2016). For example, Hale (2010) describes the importance of framing environmentalist demands as beneficial not just for climate change enthusiasts, but also capitalist supporters who can profit from their advances. Campbell (2011) gives another example, demonstrating how the separation between white and black activist goals in the Occupy Wall Street movement negatively impacted their ability to address the issue of wealth equality. Santos (2020)

echoes this sentiment, observing that when activists frame their movements through the lens of care and compassion, solidarity between groups is fostered. This empathetic lens focuses on sustaining or repairing social relationships and fulfilling the needs of both in group and out group members. The care framework can be more attractive and uniting for onlookers, which in turn increases support for their movement (Campbell 2011; Curtin et al., 2016; Santos 2020). Alternatively, some movements utilize disruptive, discrediting or violent framing under the assumption that this lens will attract more attention, utilize anger to mobilize demographics and create a power cost to oppressors (Cress & Snow, 2000; Gibson & Williams, 2020; Rojas, 2006). Though there is significant debate on the overall efficacy of these tactics, through the lens of framing many scholars believe this is costly because it can offend potential allies and create separation along ideological lines (Giugni, 1999; Rojas 2006).

Strategic framing considers not only the growth of supporters, but also the reaction of, and impact on, their target. The way a target perceives any given movement has a direct connection to their response, making them more receptive, resilient or dismissive of activist demands (Simmons, 2021). Awareness and control of this perception-response relationship through proper framing is a critical factor of effective activism, especially when the target is the government, because proper framing requires walking a fine line of threat and cooperation (Buffardi et al., Goetz & Jenkins, 2018). Skrentny (2006) finds that in many cases oppressed or disadvantaged groups can successfully push the state to act on their behalf by framing their movements in ways that place politically elite control and social order at risk. Though this tactic worked for many

black activists during the civil rights movement, other scholars argue that this framing can have adverse effects by risking the benefits of a moral perception which increased sympathy and receptiveness to help from policy elites (Rojas, 2006; Skretny, 2006). A pool of literature also adds that framing movements in ways that discredits or attacks their government targets too aggressively can derail change attempts by turning the public against politicians. Without public support, political actors lose power to pass legislation or take other political actions that would accomplish the goals of activist movements (Morris-Jones, 2010; Hall 1995). Instead, legitimizing the political process strengthens the government institution, its ability to make change and willingness of actors to cooperate. Overall, the careful framing tactics activists use to balance threatening and cooperative messaging significantly impact their social movement's efficacy by finding a sweet spot between applying pressure, and eliciting reactions that strengthen their target institution's ability or willingness to meet their goals.

### ***Organizational Structure***

When it comes to activism in the public sector, organizations such as non-profit, volunteer and grassroots groups play a crucial role in making change with some group analyses claiming that 75% of organized groups reported successfully impacting the law through policy blockage, drafting or passage (Buffardi et al., 2017). Scholars have found that the variance of structures and practices within these organizations has a direct impact on their efficacy (Ferman, 2020). By comparing and analyzing many different organizations, patterns have emerged revealing evidence of which structures and practices are correlated with an organization's ability to get policy passed.

One effective structural feature of activist organizations that has been regularly cited is interconnectedness to other organizations (Buffardi, et al., 2017). DeJordy et al. (2020) uses the term “inhabited ecosystem” to describe this phenomenon, attributing the health of a social movement environment to the strength and quantity of its interrelated and dependent parts. Having ties to other separate groups, of both similar and different structures or goals, can allow an organization to share their resources and delegate tasks to specialized partners who are better prepared to handle skill-specific assignments (Buffardi et al., 2017; Cheezum et al., 2013; Post, 2015). Connections also facilitate the faster spread of good tactics, as individual organizations in a strong network borrow successful practices and learn from each other’s mistakes, (DeJordy, 2020). The benefits of interconnection can also contribute to activist success by efficiently linking the micro efforts of grassroots groups to the macro level goals of national organizations (Ferman, 2020; Post, 2015) . When small groups link to their larger counterparts, the interplay of necessary action on both levels of a social issue are better managed. Although connections between organizations can clearly offer merits, some research warns of the potential harm that organizational ties may elicit. Individual organizations face many risks if they don't choose and manage their relationships strategically. Some ties may deplete an organization's resources, large networks with conflicting agendas can result in stalemates or fragmentation and absorption of smaller groups by larger ones can cost autonomy and power (Buffardi et al., 2017; Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Post, 2015).

A variety of other less emphasized, yet still significant, structures and practices are mentioned repeatedly throughout the literature that are shown to strengthen

organizations as a valid outlet for accomplishing the goals of activists. One practice is specificity in choosing goals to achieve and policies to focus on, as opposed to broader initiatives that try to tackle the whole issue at large (Buffardi et al., 2017; Hale, 2010; Cheezum et al., 2013). By working on specific goals, supporters can clearly identify what they are working towards, increasing their motivation and focussing their efforts in ways that avoid spreading resources too thinly (Buffardi et al., 2017; Cheezum et al., 2013). If there is ambiguity, however, supporters can lose sight of what they are fighting for or even how they can help.

Another way activist organizations are structured for success is through strong preparation. Most research on organization efficacy mentions having strong training programs or impactful tools which are known to create a well developed infrastructure for transforming individual action into collective action (Buffardi et al., 2017; Cheesum et al., 2013; Dundua, 2022; Ferman, 2020). Examples include providing enough information for members to gain a deep knowledge of the cause they are advocating for and programs that allow participants to practice necessary skills for action, such as campaigning, debating, taking leadership roles and lobbying, before using them in the field. Well structured organizations also prepare members with critical tools and resources such as contact lists of policy makers, glossaries that clarify useful policy advocacy terms or binders filled with talking points that condensed activist views and goals briefly (Cheezum et al., 2013; Ferman 2020; Post, 2015).

The final structure of success for activist organizations mentioned in this review is close integration with policymakers or other targets with power. Johansen and LeRoux



(2013) find when organizations are connected to legislators and other politicians, they can leverage those relationships to benefit their causes. Organizations can gain insider information about the policymaking process, revealing what political changes are more or less feasible, become more closely tied to the legislative drafting process, gain access to government funding and better persuade lawmakers by offering their followers as constituents (Buffardi et al., 2017; Cheezum, 2013; Johansen & LeRoux, 2013; Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Post, 2015). Though ties to government may be an influential part of activist success, some scholars emphasize the importance of balancing independence, mirroring the discussion on cooperative and threatening frames (Buffardi, 2017; Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Hale, 2010). These ties may dilute the potential for change by subjecting outcome goals to the differing agendas and compromising nature of the political realm. Goetz and Jenkins (2018) go as far as to measure the strength of feminist activism by its autonomy from the state claiming, “Feminist policy initiatives have proven highly successful and sustainable when both accommodation and autonomy are pursued — that is, when feminists engage with policy authorities, yet maintain a base in civil society and grassroots movements” (p. 728). With the influence of organizations on social movements clear, the theoretical and empirical analysis of their structures and practices shows that interorganizational ties, specificity in goals, strong preparation tactics and connections to powerful politicians all help to determine their efficacy as outlets for activists.

In this section four elements of effective activism were reviewed. When it comes to increasing the ability to reach targeted goals, the research suggested that activism

targeted towards the public sector, or government, may be more successful because as an institution there are more opportunity structures, while the purposes motivating the private sector are incongruent with the goals of activists. The literature also suggests that digital activism, while having the potential to create an impact, is not a replacement for physical activism. The two may be used together for a wide impact, but there is an inherent saliency to physical space that makes it a necessary component of activist efficacy. Third, scholars note the significant impact of framing on efficacy, when activists frame their movements in ways that unite diverse demographics and elicit assistance from power holders, they are more likely to succeed in meeting their goals. Finally, organizations were shown to be an effective outlet for activist participation as long as they were well situated in a strong network, or “ecosystem”, that managed resources well, picked specific goals, worked cooperatively with powerful institutions like the government and were well prepared with tools and training. The research on these four elements of activism reveals direct factors that correlate to activist efficacy narrowing down the response to the question of *what* effective activism is. For a complete understanding of how history can be used to teach effective activism, the next section will examine the roles of schools in teaching effective activism and the methods currently used to teach it in history classrooms.

### **The Why and How of Teaching Effective Activism**

After answering *what* effective activism is through the examination of four different elements, this section will answer two other critical questions. The first question asks *why* it is important to teach effective activism in the first place. It is answered

initially through a summary of critiques about the current quality of social justice in American society and youth involvement, followed by a connection of these critiques to the roles of schools that mention their dual potential to address or exacerbate deficits in activism, and closes with an exploration of challenges schools face which result in ineffective activist pedagogy.

The second question asks *how* schools are currently teaching effective activism. This question is answered by exploring the empirically supported pedagogies teachers are currently using to integrate activism in three areas: justifying history as a source for studying activism, making texts or information actionable and project based learning. This exploration builds an outline for best practices by piecing together different theories and methods which scholars have examined across the educational landscape and are specifically linked to addressing the critiques of society and challenges facing schools articulated when answering the previous question.

### ***Why Teach Activism?: Critiques on the Status of Modern Social Justice***

While activism is certainly alive and present in America today, the quality of that activism is in great question. Many scholars have noted challenges that paint a picture of ineffectiveness in the social justice sphere. Alluding to unmet goals that are important to the political left, scholars claim their power to organize activists has been attacked and undermined by capitalists and powerful elites who have successfully exacerbated the condition of social problems in areas of racial, economic, gender and environmental equality (Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Hale, 2010; Research Group on Socialism and Democracy, 2021). The inability to increase minority voter turnout, pass national

legislation for Black Lives Matter and make links between race and class for the purposes of group unity during Occupy Wall Street are examples that portray the current state of the leftist agenda and initiatives as jeopardized (Hooker, 2016; Nulman & Schlembach, 2018; Research Group on Socialism and Democracy, 2021).

Activist burnout, which is the condition of being tired or overwhelmed by participation in social justice, is another regularly cited problem (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Maslach & Gomes, 2006; Oakes, et al., 2015). Causes of burnout include the overwhelming burden of tasks and energy required to complete them, poor leadership and organization for causes, exhaustion from repeated failure or perceived ineffectiveness, crippling stress as a result of high emotional investment associated with the moral nature of issues and disillusion caused by the large scale of issues paired with minimal support. This persistent burnout in the modern realm of social justice causes many activists to either function ineffectively or completely disengage from the field of activism regardless of the specific issue being combatted (Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Hale, 2010).

Many have also noted the withdrawal of support from youth who could otherwise serve as useful agents in social change. Support for this claim is backed by statistics claiming that between 1966 and 2000, the percentage of students that consider addressing political events an important goal of life declined from sixty to ten, while youth with voting registrations are less likely to use them than older generations (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Twenge, 2009). Barrett (2018) claims the reason for this trend is that young people regularly “felt they had no voice, were ignored by politicians, and did not have the

resources or the competences needed to engage politically” (p. 1). Other research rejects this notion, instead explaining that the motivation to engage in activism is high, but their knowledge and skills on how to do so are lacking. Issues of race, gender, environment, war, economic instability, and unethical political leadership can all inspire youth to mobilize but ineffective outlets such as social media mitigate their potentially significant impact (Barrett, 2018; Chambers & Phelps 1994). As the research above suggests, despite the clear prevalence of social movements in America, there can be a significant disconnect between activism efforts and successful outcomes which highlights a need for citizens, particularly youth, to be taught effective practices.

***Why Teach Activism?: The Potential and Challenges of Schools in Teaching Effective Activism***

Some scholars believe the deficit in current American activism and youth support is connected to the failing role of schools to reinspire students to participate in activism or, if they are already inspired, teach them how to do it effectively (Picower, 2015). They claim secondary education plays a significant part in addressing the problems of the current and future social justice landscape through its potential to invest in students as a resource. Since the culture and practices of adult activists are rooted in the habits developed throughout youth, putting effort into teaching effective activism would reverse patterns of inefficacy in the future (Barrett, 2018; Beason-Manes, 2018; Carlson, 1998). If schools don't play their part however, some scholars believe the trends will worsen (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Carlson, 1998). Barrett & Pachi (2019) claim that failure to make change can have a cyclical effect where legislators and power holders will get

comfortable and normalize neglecting the views and efforts of youth, which in turn reinforces student feelings of powerlessness and burnout causing them to withdraw further, continuously re-enforcing both patterns. If schools have been directly correlated with the potential of benefiting social justice efforts, why aren't they living up to this potential?

Most scholars agree that while teachers attempt to teach social justice, they are challenged by the lack of resources available to do so. Teachers have reported feeling unprepared or daunted by the task when districts ask them to include a social justice component without clear guidance or tools on how to do so (Hengen, 2012; Kiesel & Abdill, 2019; Picower 2015). Armed only with the strict curriculums they were originally given, teachers find little wiggle room to adapt to the added expectation of teaching new, let alone effective, activist content. Many educators claim that being provided new curriculums or proper training is essential for teaching activism in the classroom because the effort of making these changes on their own significantly cuts into their personal life and mental health (Kiesel & Abdill, 2019; Picower 2015). This lack of resources can either cause teachers to be satisfied with ineffective practices or neglect them altogether.

Another frequently cited challenge to teaching activism is targeting effective methods that mobilize students. For example, many find that an emphasis on information gathering falls short of the true potential of activist education. When schools and teachers do prepare social justice curricula they are frequently in the form of texts that expose injustice and assessments that track knowledge retention of those injustices. (Barrett, 2018; Hengen, 2012; Kiesel & Abdill, 2019; Picower, 2015). Picower (2015) points out

that this is a misguided attempt at teaching activism because while the students' awareness does indeed increase, that awareness is limited to the classroom space having no impact on structural inequality. Hengen (2012) adds that a pedagogical focus on informing can cause students to miss the distinction between interpreting and changing the world, arguing instead for methods that encourage students to actively participate in that change and strengthen skills which can be applied to the real world. The widespread absence of an action component to pedagogical methods has encouraged student passivity towards activist agendas (Beason-Manes, 2018). Even when schools target tangible social justice outcomes, the methods of culturally responsive pedagogy or multicultural curriculum development often miss their target of teaching students to engage in effective activism (Picower, 2015). These methods are designed to acknowledge and integrate the unique culture and disadvantages of students into lesson plans by normalizing heterogeneous cultures and creating classroom policies that perpetuate equity. While these methods do go beyond merely informing students of injustice, the distinction is again made between inside and outside the classroom (Kiesel & Abdill, 2019). Schools become equitable environments but the institutions and practices of society at large remain unchanged. Other pedagogical methods may be successful but are tailored to students who already have a disposition to engage in activism and are privileged with the time and resources to engage (Hengen, 2012). Absent are low barrier lessons that can mobilize all students regardless of disposition or privilege.

Some scholars argue for an overall lens shift in educational themes and ideas which may be more successful at teaching effective activism. Carlson (1998) mirrors the

criticism of information as a priority, utilizing three of philosopher Plato's voices to articulate his views of educational missteps. He claims logos, the voice of scientific and philosophical truth and informational deconstruction, is the dominant rhetorical voice used in the field of activist education because it is seen as unbiased and detached with minimal room for error. Without also incorporating thymos, the rhetoric "of rage at injustice from the perspective and position of the disempowered, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized" and mythos, the rhetoric of "personal story-telling, cultural mythology, autobiography, and literature", social justice education will be ineffective (Carlson, 1996, p.543). Logos, when used alone, can inhibit activism by focussing solely on theory and waiting for a calculated solution to inequality, while also reinforcing the ideal that emotional or action oriented education is not valued because it is not truthful or valid, inadvertently silencing the underprivileged for being personally positioned. By arguing for the addition of challenging activist and visceral narrative lenses to education in the form of thymos and mythos, Carlson makes it clear that the emphasis on pure information that dominates social change education is inadequate for teaching. Critchlow, (1998) argues the absent, yet critical, lens in activist education is one of civics or political science, explaining that most history courses focus on social components, dissecting movements and marginalized groups, leaving absent an examination of the systems those groups were challenging and utilizing to gain rights. Incorporating a political science lens when teaching history arms students with an understanding of the rules and processes of the political world which can be leveraged to engage in effective activism. It also demonstrates the significant bilateral impact that political and social history have on each



other, clearly articulating to students how their engagement in these systems could result in tangible social justice changes.

***How to Teach Activism: Successful Pedagogy for Teaching Effective Activism***

Although the field is far from uniform, scholars reported and analyzed various attempts of educators who have found success in teaching effective activism resulting in their students' ability to not only understand social change, but perform it in ways that tangibly meet the goals of activists. There are many names for these methods such as the Open Classroom approach, Targeted Messaging, Creative Problem Solving, Case Study approach and Texts as Tactics, but these pedagogies frequently overlap practices making it simpler to categorize them by general method and referring to their names when necessary.

**Justifying History as a Source.** Many scholars note that history is ripe with lessons that are not only still relevant today, but can be applied outside the classroom. The Case Study Approach is characterized by its unique vignette method of connecting history to activism (Critchlow, 1998). Here the teacher is tasked with cherry picking historical events and situations that relate to the overall civic lesson outcomes desired and involving students in a deep dive that explores one historical issue from multiple perspectives. The case study of a past event or issue is paired with questions that encourage students to take the roles of the figures involved to solve problems associated with their particular historical vignette. This method helps students engage in activism by dissecting targeted lessons of the past so they may be applied by students of today through learning from past failures and integrating successes.

Scholars have made specific connections between historical events and their potential to be learned from by future generations, especially under the context of the four elements of effective activism discussed in part one. The resistance to socialist and union activism of the progressive era can articulate the difficulty in targeting the private sector in making change (Critchlow, 1998; Research Group on Socialism and Democracy, 2021; Wandersee, 1993). Links between the protests of the civil rights movement and the passage of gender and race laws have been directly correlated with the value of non-symbolic, or material, pressure put on legislators while sit-ins of the same period punctuate the already empirically proven value of physical space (Andrews et al., 2016; Biggs & Andrews, 2015; Gillion, 2012). The challenging length of women's suffrage movement which began after the Civil War (1865) and ended in the 1920s has been attributed to issues of poor framing that divided supporters on ideological and methodological terms (Faupel & Werum, 2011; Nulman & Schlembach, 2018). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) ability to thrive from 1909 until this very day is linked to its adaptive and multifaceted connections to other organizations (Meier & Bradley, 1993). These serve as a sampling of historical examples that could be cherry picked for their relevance in teaching modern effective activism by using the Case Study Approach.

**Using Texts and Information.** While many scholars have noted that texts and information focused curriculums have limits when applied to teach effective activism, very few researchers advocate abandoning them completely. In contrast, research has shown that abandoning information in favor of skill exclusive pedagogies can lead to

decreases in student ability and understanding, since a deep knowledge base serves as a prerequisite for critical thinking skills, such as dialectical analysis, associated with strong activist performance (Hengen, 2012; Mobley, 2007). Instead, many argue that texts and informational foundations, when utilized correctly, are an integral part of teaching effective activism (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Critchlow, 1998; Hengen, 2012; Kiesel & Abdill, 2019; Mobley, 2007). Kiesel & Abdill (2019) explain that information can create useful tools for activists as long as it is actionable, or usable in practical ways to advance a cause. Whether that be through persuading others to support a social movement or unveiling resources and methods that benefit activism, actionable information is seen as an appropriate way to teach effective activism.

Hengen (2012) argues that texts themselves are an underutilized source with very few educators realizing their ability to make material change. Using the method of Texts as Tactics, educators can teach their strict curriculums in creative ways that allow students to use them to make material change. An example includes a reading of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. This book is a regular part of history curriculums across the country and describes the poor practices of the meatpacking industry. Instead of teaching *The Jungle* curricula with the objective of informing students about corrupt companies, the Text as Tactics approach prescribes that teachers make clear connections to texts and their material changes. The curriculum was reframed to examine specifically how reactions to the book resulted in activist support and legal changes, followed by an assessment asking students to write their own version of *The Jungle* that would apply to a social issue they cared about today. By highlighting the power of writing, reading and

publishing texts to make tangible changes, teachers can use information to mobilize their students in the real world.

**Projects as Practice for Activism.** A widely accepted method of teaching effective activism involves creating and enacting a project that empowers students to actually solve real world problems and practice performing successful activism (Barrett, 2018; Beason-Manes, 2018; Chambers & Phelps, 1994; Kiesel & Abdill, 2019; Mobley, 2007). Using Creative Problem Solving (CPS) as a framework, this form of activist education breaks the task of problem solving down into nine steps that each help students develop different critical skills for activist efficacy (Beason-Manes, 2018). Those steps are: Identify the problem, Research the problem, formulate challenges, generate ideas, combine and evaluate ideas, draw up an action plan, implement the action plan, reflect then adjust and share results with new understandings. Although all nine steps aren't always followed to a tee, core elements associated with project based learning are frequently repeated throughout the literature.

One of these elements is an information gathering component. Many project based activist curriculums either feature a teacher lecture component or a student research component where youth learn about core principles or background information that gets them up to date on the social issues they are addressing or provides necessary background information (Beason-Manes, 2018). Throughout this process students learn about factors that have contributed to their social problem, what has been attempted in the past to fix it, potential unused solutions and any other information that helps best prepare students to plan their own attempts at making change (Beason-Manes, 2018; Mobley, 2007). One

project based curriculum focussed on improving conditions for the homeless, requiring students to research the current laws shaping their cities response to homelessness and the availability of low income housing (Mobley, 2007). The information gathering process serves as a necessary prerequisite for the planning process.

Another element seen as important to project based learning for activism is problem solving through planning. Developing the planning skill allows students to practice being strategic as opposed to reactive through the process of drafting the detailed and thought out steps they will take to meet their activist goals, as well as deadlines to prepare for time constraints (Beason-Manes,2018). When project planning is done in groups or as a whole class, Barrett and Pachi (2019) suggest using an Open Classroom Approach. This tactic puts an emphasis on unrestricted student choice and democratic conversation. Taking a hands off approach, students are free to pursue areas of interest, become exposed to differing ideas and opinions while expressing opinions that differ from their classmates and come to their own decisions in the planning process in an idea driven yet respectful environment (Barrett, 2018).

Most student planning that occurred during project based curriculums also involved connecting with the larger community, or organizations outside of school, to help draft plans for, or become part of, their project, enabling students to access experts who provide professional information and resources (Beason-Manes, 2018). This type of connection can vary depending on what kind of project is implemented. Students may reach out to community service programs, teaching the value of volunteering to increase societal capital over individual capital and working to service the greater good (Barrett &

Pachi, 2019; Beason-Manes, 2018). Other connections might be to established service-work organizations and leaders which aim to pass progressive policies or weaken harmful political and social institutions. Drawing a distinction between volunteer groups and service-work groups, scholars note that service work organizations embrace advocacy and can sometimes involve disruptive practices, exposing students to a different set of skills needed in their planning process (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Chambers & Phelps, 1994). When paired with service-work groups, students tried to solve social problems facing the financially underprivileged, homeless and elderly by planning restaurant fundraisers, awareness events and film screenings, financial advice councils, and opportunities to sign petitions that pressure government actors (Beason-Manes, 2018; Mobley, 2007). Some scholars note that students should plan to connect directly to organizations and figures in the political realm (Kiesel & Abdill, 2019). This benefits students by exposing them to the complex systems of government, teaching foundational civic knowledge and giving practical experience in navigating political structures (Kiesel & Abdill, 2019). Students who connected with political actors planned for candidate campaigning, testifying before legislative committees or letter writing to national congress (Barrett & Pachi 2019; Beason-Manes, 2018; Kiesel & Abdill, 2019). No matter what the outlet, connecting to activist leaders, organizations and communities outside of school during the planning process helped students practice strategic skills which could be applied when engaging in effective activism on their own.

A third element that is repeated throughout the literature is an implementation component. Here students are tasked with taking actions that carry out the plans drafted

in their projects making the jump from theoretical to tangible or performative activism.

Implementing plans allows students to practice the tactics they learned about in the classroom, building unique skills and meeting activist learning outcomes only achievable in the real world. Many scholars note that implementing project plans through action enables students to actively wrestle with the flawed and challenging nature of society as opposed to experiencing social justice in a safe vacuum of best intentions

(Beanes-Manes, 2018). Chambers and Phelps (1994) explain that Implementing plans for activism provides

opportunities for students to test their judgment under pressure in the face of opposition, and in the fluid and swiftly changing circumstances so characteristic of action; opportunities to exercise responsibilities and perhaps to try out one or another of the skills required for leadership; opportunities for students to test and sharpen their intuitive gifts, and to judge their impact on others; exposure to new constituencies; and exposure to the untidy world, where decisions must be made with inadequate information and the soundest argument does not always win, and where problems do not get fully solved, or, if solved, surface anew in another form. (p. 53)

Another quintessential benefit of implementing plans is the opportunity for exposure to diverse demographics and cultures (Barrett, 2018; Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Mobley, 2007).

When implementing their plan, students are usually responsible for working cooperatively with people comprised of different backgrounds, opinions and cultures than the ones they are used to, as well as the disadvantaged populations they elected to help in

the first place (Barrett, 2018; Barrett & Pachi 2019; Beason-Manes, 2018; Mobley, 2007). This type of exposure has been directly linked to increases in empathy and care which in turn, breaks down harmful stereotypes contributing to social injustice and becomes a motivating factor for youth to engage in activism in the future. (Kiesel & Abdill, 2019, Mobley, 2007).

Besides these three core elements of information gathering, planning and implementing, some scholars describe other critical aspects to ensure project based pedagogy leads to effective activist learning. Beason-Manes (2018) notes that a high level of facilitation is necessary to help guide students throughout the activist learning process. Student capabilities are increased when there are structures in place to aid student comprehension and participation, such as reminders of the nine steps of CPS placed around the classroom or websites that are set up preemptively for student group contact. Kiesel & Abdill (2019) studied the merits of a targeted messaging system which automatically connected students to activist information, organizations and events that pertain to their areas of interest and study, easing them into the process of engagement. Another frequently mentioned factor of project based learning success was a reflection component. Whether dispersed throughout the curriculum as journal entries or implemented as a singular retrospective discussion evaluating the whole project process, a reflection component for students enabled the critical thinking necessary for students to improve on their activist abilities through self-analysis and understanding through reinforcement of the activist lessons for deeper comprehension (Beason-Manes, 2018; Hengen, 2012; Mobley, 2007).



In order to understand how we can use history to teach effective activism, this section broke the inquiry up into two smaller questions asking *why* teaching effective activism is important in the first place and *how* schools have already attempted to do so. It is important to teach activism in schools because a jeopardized progressive agenda and activist burnout are exacerbating social injustices in society while youth are either detached from the activist realm or ineffective when attempting to engage. Schools have the potential to reverse these trends through investing in youth but are challenged by lack of resources, practices that limit the impact of social justice to the classroom space and misguided content lenses that fail to mobilize students or make the connection between learning and action. Though schools across the country face challenges research has examined different tactics that illuminate how schools can be successful in teaching effective activism. They include, engaging in case studies of historical activism that dissect applicable lessons, using texts to provide actionable information or make connections between engaging with literature and material outcomes and utilizing a project based curriculum to help students practice the skills of activism. The research associated with the *what*, *why* and *how* of effective activism is revealing when standing back to look at the bigger picture providing a rationale for the research above.

### **Rationale**

In articulating how history can be used to teach effective activism, the term *effective* must be defined. Described as the ability of activists to meet their targeted goals the literature above describes empirically researched elements of doing so. By revealing specific tactics and targets that improve activist efficacy, teachers will understand what

lessons they need to teach their students outlining higher quality informational content that maximizes student chances at achieving activist success. In this case the research on what effective activism is suggests four things to teach students. The government is a valid target. Internet activism must be utilized in addition to physical activism, not in place of it. Attention to framing is crucial in its ability to unite demographics and elicit help from power holders. Benefits of organizations are numerous in their ability to manage resources and make networks of connections. If teachers can focus their content on these ideas, their students will understand how to be effective activists in four specific and usable ways.

Though including these lessons in content will never perfectly ensure activist success, that does not mean teachers should undervalue their importance. Instead, its value lies in decreasing the margin of error for students as much as possible in their activist attempts. Every bit counts because, as the research suggests, activists are facing novel challenges impeding on their success. With the status of activism potentially in jeopardy, the justification for teaching its successful methodology in schools becomes clearer. The literature further supports that the quality of efficacy is of significant importance because effort as a measure of activism is leading to debilitating burnout. In other words, effort doesn't equal results. Instead students must be taught that effort must be channeled in the right places as prescribed by the four elements discussed above.

Finally the research on methods of teaching effective activism serves as a foundation for what teachers can do to implement these crucial lessons in schools. Education is not just about what you teach but also how you teach it. Combining all the

research on successful pedagogical attempts suggests that history classrooms are in fact a valid environment for teaching about activism. Just because it happened in the past, doesn't mean it cannot be used today. The research in this literature suggests that teachers may be most successful at teaching effective activism by combining the Case Study approach, Texts as Tactics method and Project Based Creative Problem Solving (CPS). Using relevant information from the past through an action-taking perspective shows students how that information can be used while project based CPS would give students the opportunity to practice using that information, developing their skills and making change in the real world. Coinciding with many of the scholarly views included, for activism to be effective it can not be purely theoretical.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, scholarly information was gathered surrounding the following questions: *What* is effective activism, *why* should we teach it and *how* should we teach it. Research of four specific elements supports that efficacy, as measured by ability to achieve specified outcomes or goals, increases when the public sector is targeted, physical space is utilized, appropriate framing is practiced and organizations manage resources and exist within strong networks. The research also revealed that jeopardized progressive agendas, activist burnout and a withdrawal of impactful youth participation have led to the exacerbation of societal problems. Schools have been mentioned for their unique position to invest in youth as a resource for present and future activists, as well as their current failures to do so, revealing the critical importance of teaching effective activist practices. The literature suggests the best practices for doing so may be through

historical case studies that dissect relevant information from past examples, texts and information that is made actionable, or used to draw connections between information and material outcomes, and project based curriculum that allow students to practice activist skills.

In the next chapter this research will be used to build a curriculum that teaches students what effective activism is and how to evaluate it paired with opportunities to engage in it. I will use the four elements discussed in part one as a guide for the development of informational texts in the form of a powerpoint and four post-powerpoint lessons with clear learning objectives. I will use the Case Study approach to choose the historical event that most prominently features those four elements and format the information in a way that allows it to become actionable in the post-powerpoint lessons. Finally, I will link those four elements to a large project that utilizes the Creative Problem Solving approach so students can practice using the information they obtained from the powerpoints in meaningful ways that create change outside the school and, extending the actionable nature of the information in the first powerpoint even further.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

Scholarly discussion in the field of social justice supports the anecdotal notion that activists are struggling to succeed in meeting their agendas, or in other words, be effective in their fields (Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Hale, 2010; Research Group on Socialism and Democracy, 2021). When it comes to the fair treatment of populations, equitable distribution of resources, and overall institutional sustainment of an ethical civilization, we must address the problems activists are facing so they may find better success when fighting for the betterment of society. At the same time, schools are notably unsuccessful at teaching activism through social studies, either because teachers feel unprepared and overwhelmed due to a lack of resources, or because students fail to connect the information they learn in the class to the ways they should be applied in the real world (Hengen, 2012; Kiesel & Abdill, 2019; Picower 2015). Offering a solution to these problems, this chapter proposes a curriculum with the targeted purpose of using history content to teach students effective activism through evaluation and use.

A curriculum is a justified solution to these problems for many reasons. First, it arms educators with the tools and guidance they need, saving time and energy to be more efficient while addressing the psychological/motivational barriers that prevent them from teaching activism. Second, it helps activists win the fight over the betterment of society by supplying current and future generations with actors who are more willing and better prepared to engage. As cited in the literature review, schools are in a unique position to

invest in youth through activist education, teaching them habits of best practice that are sustained throughout adulthood (Barrett, 2018; Beason-Manes, 2018; Carlson, 1998). A curriculum with targeted effective activism objectives would serve as that investment. Third, by combining the Case Study, Texts as Tactics and project based Creative Problem Solving (CPS) approaches, this curriculum will allow students to see connections between historical content and their real world, while also enabling them to act on those connections, extending awareness, and application of, their learning outside the boundaries of the classroom. Instead of structuring history chronologically with traditional texts that limit the use of their information, this curriculum will cherry pick a single historical movement based on its relevance to teaching the four elements of effective activism (Case Study approach), guide students through an evaluation of efficacy (Texts as Tactics) using four post-powerpoint lessons and ask students to make their own activist attempt, applying the lessons they learned from the powerpoint and development of evaluation skills, to increase their efficacy (Project Based CPS). By combining these approaches to the development of a social studies curriculum, the overall question of how history can be used to teach effective activism is answered.

In this chapter I will start by providing a description of the curriculum which is split into two major objectives. The first is teaching students to understand and evaluate activist efficacy through historical examples of social movements. The second is teaching students to actively practice effective activism through creative problem solving. Each part of this section includes an explanation of how the pedagogical models of best practice influenced the development of the curriculum. Next I will explain the context for

performing the curriculum by describing the setting this curriculum is meant to be implemented in and the audience it is intended for. Finally, I will propose the assessments involved in collecting student data and timelines for both creating the curriculum and carrying it out.

### **Curriculum Description**

This curriculum was designed with three sections that take two distinct forms. Section one, a powerpoint presentation, and two, a series of four lesson plans, combine into a dedicated introductory unit that would occur at the beginning of the year. Their completion serves as a set up and segway to section three, a project based learning experience, which takes a different form. Here, the curriculum takes a supplementary form to be taught alongside the school's supplied offering of a traditional U.S. history curriculum. The overarching objective of section one and two is to teach students to understand and evaluate effective activism through a past historical social movement. The overarching objective of section three is to teach students to actively practice effective activism. The following curriculum description is split into two parts, one for each overarching objective. Each begins with a justification of how its pedagogical models best meet the educational outcomes of the unit followed by a description of the curriculum itself.

#### ***Understanding and Evaluating Effective Activism through use of Historical Examples***

This unit starts with the building of foundational knowledge, which will be used later for the purposes of engaging in higher order analytical thinking and application to real world actions. The building of foundational knowledge is an important step in the

learning process because it leads to a deeper, longer lasting, understanding of content while arming students with the resource of actionable information, or knowledge that is taught for the purposes of intentional usage later (Kiesel & Abdill, 2019). When a foundation of actionable information is not taught, it can result in shallow understanding and poorer activist practices (Hengen, 2012; Mobey, 2007). In order to ensure a solid foundational knowledge of actionable information, I will use the Case Studies approach to lessons that serve as a prerequisite for engagement in the project based portion. The Case Studies approach to curriculum building prescribes that information be selected and curated based on its relevance to themes or learning objectives of the class. Under this approach, major historical events are selected and isolated in vignette style for students to viscerally explore from multiple angles, paired with guiding questions for making connections between the historical example and their tailored learning outcomes. In the case of this curriculum's construction, information will be selected in the form of a specific social movement that is tailored to two overarching objectives: understanding what effective activism is through the four elements discussed in chapter two and evaluating effective activism through those four elements.

The Texts as Tactics approach is another pedagogical method guiding the curriculum's construction in this section because the curated information selected using the Case Studies approach will be used in the project based portion making it actionable. The curriculum is also guided by the Texts as Tactics approach because it will include facilitations and assessments which clearly draw the connections between the knowledge and skills being learned and the practical ways they have been used to make change in the



past, displaying to students how they can do the same. The post-powerpoint lessons' use of targeted questioning, class discussion and juxtapositions to other social movements will facilitate the connections between the content and its practical uses.

Section one of the project will consist of a powerpoint presentation that details the Labor Movement that straddles the turn of the 20th century. It will include contextual information that sets up the movement such as the history of labor activism in America and the causes of labor problems which gave rise to the movement itself. The meat of the presentation will be a detailed dive into the movement itself, describing its major organizations, tactics used, impacts of tactics, role of government intervention and landmark achievements. The Labor Movement was chosen because of its relevance in articulating the importance of physical space, government intervention, organizational strength, and proper framing when performing effective activism. It will include dense information to be presented as a textbook for students or used as a teacher's copy of a powerpoint lecture which they would adapt to be less dense when presenting to students. It will be visually oriented with substantial pictures and include links of relevant primary sources, videos and articles to vary the pace and style of learning. The powerpoint will begin and end with evaluation exercises that prime students to think about how to be effective as activists leading into the four post-powerpoint lessons

In section two each of the four lesson plans are dedicated to their own element of effective activism and include objectives designed to help students understand how they can be utilized effectively to efficacy and draw direct connections to their significance in the Labor Movement. Every lesson has three similar structural components. Students will

be presented with a text or source that helps demonstrate a core concept of effective activism. A contextualizing activity/lecture/assessment before or after the text will clearly explain the element to students and allow them to best internalize how that element can be used to make them more effective activists. Finally an assessment will require students to revisit their labor movement PPT/text and link it to the newly learned element.

### ***Practicing Effective Activism***

Fulfilling on the promise of providing actionable information through Texts as Tactics, it is critical that students are able to apply their learning through action. This is why the structure of the second part of the curriculum will be guided by Project Based Creative Problem Solving (CPS). This pedagogical method is designed to engage students in solution oriented thinking and practices by breaking the process of problem solving down into nine steps focused on the skills of research, planning and implementing an action plan (Barrett, 2018; Beason-Manes, 2018; Chambers & Phelps, 1994; Kiesel & Abdill, 2019; Mobley, 2007). By integrating the project based CPS approach to this curriculum, students will be given opportunities to apply their learning of how to evaluate the efficacy of activism attempts, and their new knowledge of what those factors are, to participate in effective activism themselves. This will allow students to not only understand how evaluating effective activist techniques are important to making change in the real world, but also to apply that understanding tangibly outside the classroom, letting students develop and practice their own activist tactics with the target of being effective. Whether they succeed or fail, getting a chance to engage in positive

change will arm students with valuable experience which better prepares them for future attempts and increases their efficacy.

For this portion of the curriculum students will be placed in small groups and tasked with picking a social problem they want to address. The first phase of this project will be research. During this portion students must research and write a paper explaining the background of the problem and its causes, a history of attempts to solve it, a description of activist organizations surrounding the issue and their agendas, the existing laws associated with causing the problem and solving it and potential direct-action solutions to the problem. When their paper is submitted they will enter the planning stage. Here students will be tasked with developing a multifaceted plan based on their research for implementing their previously outlined solution by brainstorming, drafting and presenting an organized and detailed series of goals steps. It is required that the plan include attempts to address causes of the problem itself or enact solutions to it, rhetorical framing devices to be used for communicating to potential supporters and targets, elicit government assistance or pressure by engaging with an existing political structure or targeting a law to create, remove or change, and finally, include some form of physical manifestation of involvement. During this phase students will be required to connect with an activist organization with the option of requesting plan feedback, interest in helping to carry out their plan or ways their plan can be integrated or adapted to fit the already existing methods and plans of that organization. After submitting their plan, students will implement it, which requires all group members to take an active role. During this process, students will submit periodic journals reporting progress, efficiency and

necessary modifications of their plan, reflections on involvement and lessons learned from the process. They will also be tasked with taking pictures of their involvement or the impact of their work. The project will culminate in a celebration where each group shares a brief presentation of their plan, achievements and pictures. It will also include a classwide Q and A session to help reflect and make recommendations for future participants. With the curriculum itself outlined, the next section will describe its setting and audience.

### **Context: Setting and Audience**

This curriculum is designed for an upper level or AP high school U.S. history course. It is meant to be flexible and adaptive to other courses for easy integration into other subjects as it has the potential to cover standards in all four strands of the MN state standards of social studies including, Civics, Economics, Geography U.S. History and World History. The connection of information to activist action is not limited to the subject of U.S. History. That being said, it was designed with implementation at my school in mind.

I teach at a small public charter school in a metropolitan area. This middle school is Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) focused, with a heavy emphasis on multi-lingual (ML) support. Curriculum here is guided mostly through state standards, but allows for teachers to go off the beaten path when developing lessons due to the inherent flexibility of a charter school. At just six years old, the school started as an elementary program but has grown in that time to serve just under 400 students in preschool to eighth grade. The school is continuously growing with plans to open a high

school for the 2022-2023 school year. This high school will be ninth and tenth grade only, opening up to eleventh and twelfth the following year. Plans for the high school are centered around an Advancement Via Individual Learning program where students will learn college readiness skills in conjunction with their core classes.

The population at this school is ninety percent Somali and one hundred percent Black American. Over sixty percent of the students are part of the ML program and currently receiving reading or writing academic assistance. The other forty percent range from highly gifted to far below grade levels. The entire population is on the free and reduced lunch program. Students come to this school because they receive the benefits of flexibility and close student to teacher mentorship that is possible at a small school. Many students, being first or second generation East African, also benefit from the combination of an American style educational system that teaches our culture, and the comfort of being surrounded by students of a similar background. A project based curriculum would hugely benefit this community of learners by providing them with content and assessments that are focussed on action and performance and can play to their strong suits as learners. The activist content will also increase engagement because it is closely related to the demographic of students who are all of minority status and face difficulties of injustice in America. With the context understood, the next section will describe the curriculum's assessments and projected timelines.

### **Assessments and Timeline**

To track if students have achieved the learning outcomes of understanding how to evaluate effective activism practices and how to engage in them, there are multiple

assessments used throughout the curriculum. Section one includes evaluation prompts at the beginning and end of the units requiring students to score activist efficacy on a scale of 1-10 including an explanation of their score guided by core questions. It also includes samples of formative assessment questions to ensure students are comprehending the core concepts. These appear scattered within the powerpoint and included in some of the linked primary source investigations. Section two's lesson plans include assessments such as graphic organizers, homework questions requiring written responses, class debates and group discussions to ensure the objectives of understanding elements of efficacy are met. Section three's project based portion includes three major assessments: a research paper demonstrates abilities to identify problems and gathering actionable information, an organized plan pitch will demonstrate the student's ability to collaboratively create and organize impactful solutions and a summative powerpoint presentation will demonstrate lessons learned, preparedness for, and likelihood of, engaging in future activism, and recommendations to improve student efficacy for future classes. These major assessments serve as indicators of how well students are able to perform effective activist tasks holistically. Also in this section are smaller assessments such as journal entries where students are required to record their reflections, giving educators valuable feedback throughout the large scale process.

The timeline for project implementation is flexible, depending on what content educators want to add or eliminate from the text/lecture portion, and how committed teachers and students are to their activism projects, but most literature recommends a flexible and lengthy time frame to improve chances of project success (Beason-Manes,

2018). For the purposes of my own implementation sections one and two would have a target period of one month or 20 school days. The project based portion in its entirety will be taught alongside the school offered curriculum for the rest of the year, so its timeline is drastically longer because opportunities to meet in class are dispersed between periods of lessons dedicated to the school's provided U.S. history content. The research portion would last four weeks with one day per week in class dedicated to this type of instruction and student work. The planning process would target a period of eight weeks of bi-weekly class meetings dedicated to this type of instruction and student work. The timeline is elongated here to account for any accommodations necessary when working with organizations outside of school. Implementation would last indefinitely until the end of the school year with class meetings dedicated to instruction and group work on a tri-weekly or monthly basis. The final celebration and reflection will be scheduled as soon as all projects are complete.

The timeline for creating this project targets one month for developing and organizing the Labor Movement powerpoint/texts. I am targeting a three week period to gather materials, organize and write lesson plans for the four post-powerpoint lessons. I am targeting another three weeks to plan and develop a project guide that includes instructions and tips for students, a timeline and assessments to be completed.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explained how schools are in a unique position to invest in students as future activists, but fail to do so because teachers feel unprepared by lack of resources and attempts to teach effective activism frequently are limited to classroom learning as

opposed to real world engagement, justifying the creation of an activist curriculum that integrates the Case Study, Texts as Tactics and Project Based (CPS) approach. The curriculum itself was explained in two parts in relation to their overarching learning objectives while explaining how each part is guided by the three pedagogical models. Then the setting and audience for this project was described. Finally an explanation of the assessments and timeline associated with the implementation of the curriculum was offered. In the next chapter, I will take a birdseye view of the planning and implementation that was involved with this project. I will offer my retrospective reflections on answering the question of how we can use history to teach effective activism, and my progressive insights for future development and usage of this curriculum.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Overview

After eight months of concentrated research writing and content creation designed to determine how history be used to teach students effective activism, what follows are my overarching reflections on the process. First I describe some of the major learnings of the process which occurred in the form of a perspective change on historical activism. Then I revisit the literature review from a birds eye view to reflect on how the scholarly discussion on effective activism was relevant to my project. Next I evaluate my own work by describing the implications and limitations of its final form with included recommendations for future scholars. This is followed by a description of my intended plan to implement and build upon the work here accompanied by a justification of potential benefits my work has for other educators and school districts. The chapter concludes with a summary and final reflection about teaching effective activism.

#### Major Learnings

Throughout the scholarly process of capstone researching, writing and learning I have shifted my understanding of activism's relevance in schools. From a historical perspective, I came into this project under the preconceived notion that the activism of today is considerably less effective because I noticed a lack of societal change during my lifetime. My research revealed, this is not unprecedented. Learning about the Labor Movement and Women's Suffrage Movement from most institutionally prescribed curricula boils each one's history down to its landmark struggles and achievements,

unintentionally creating an illusionary narrative that their activism had a direct and seemingly more efficient impact on positive social changes. Upon finishing my capstone project I have learned that these movements, and the majority of others described in U.S. history curriculums, did not achieve major changes until about seventy years of activism. While traditional textbooks only highlight the most recent activism related to the major achievements of a movement, there is almost always an entire lifetime's worth of less successful activism that goes neglected.

Past social movements may not be any more effective than today's, but that doesn't make them any less valuable from a historical educator's perspective. It's in these failed attempts and evolution of tactics that students can learn the most. The practical skills associated with history arise from understanding the mistakes of the past so we don't repeat them in the present. If students see activism as an action with an automatic result, they will be deprived of the nuanced lessons of evaluation or trial and error that makes the information worth teaching and using in the first place.

Therefore, although my preconceived notion that activist movements of the past were more effective was wrong, it is clear that students should still study historical activism because there is just as much learning to be had from previous failures as there are previous successes. This major shift impacted my view of the project as a whole, but insights on specific portions such as the literature review are equally revealing.

### **Revisiting the Literature Review**

From a holistic perspective, I started my literature review looking for sociological research that uses data to measure efficacy in activist practices. I was imagining there

would be a large pool to draw from but I quickly realized that the available literature was limited and disjointed. There were no unified standards when it came to tools of measurement, practices or conclusions, therefore I had to weave my own connections and patterns from what was available, resulting in the four categories discussed. I relied heavily on theoretical literature as opposed to data, making the limited research based literature extremely valuable to supporting the elements of effective activism that should be taught to students. Don Mitchel's research on physical spaces accounts for the measured loss of public areas and its direct impact on activism (1995). This source was so crucial to supporting and articulating the value of physical space that I included it as a text in my curriculum. Nulman and Schlembach's research on Issue, Target and Tactic combinations over time was critical in supporting the theory that government is an effective target by providing data over multiple eras of activism showing inherent reception to demands over the private sector (2018).

Examples like these were too few and far between revealing a distinct need to balance theory and research so scholars can better understand how activists can achieve their goals. In summary, my literature review revealed a lack of foundational data that is necessary for building assumptions about effective activism upon. This lack of data directly resulted in some of my project limitations discussed in the next section.

### **Implications, Limitations and Future Research Recommendations**

The implication of my work shows that much of how we teach history would benefit from being restructured in a way that leaves students with a more honest understanding of historical content, accompanied by practical ways to use those

understandings to navigate or improve society. For my project it was teaching activist skills but the potential in other areas is limitless, such as linking the economic boom of the 1920's and The Great Depression to investment strategies that help students better navigate the stock market in response to economic cycles or linking Thomas Jefferson's value of agrarian research to teach sustainability practices. While the implications are valuable, making them a reality proves to be a challenge, resulting in many limitations.

From the very beginning of this project, my first limitation was that I had bitten off more than I could chew. Tackling the task of improving the efficacy with which our country achieves social change, let alone finding a way to teach those concepts to students is a daunting task. The nature of social change is inherently multifaceted and requires a dedicated analytical workforce for data collection that is just beginning to be compiled, but this research is clearly needed in both the historical and sociological fields of social studies. As a single person splitting their time between capstone work and a teaching career, I could only scratch the surface of the potential for both understanding effective activism and finding the best way to teach it.

Another limitation of my project is that it was designed as a supplementary curriculum. This structure made it difficult to fit all the information and activities I wanted into a limited time frame. In hindsight, for a deeper and more enriching understanding of how to link history to effective activist practices, students could use an entire year's worth of content. My original plan was to create four separate powerpoints detailing four separate movements that each relate to one element, but the amount of research involved in truly understanding the cause-effect dynamic of just one social

movement was enough to create an entire unit's worth of content. I would recommend two suggestions for future researchers in this regard. First, that others pick up where I left off and detail more historical social movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement or Abolition Movement, to more clearly articulate the four elements I have chosen for my project which could eventually culminate in an entire year's worth of curriculum units. This would allow teachers to cover more U.S. history standards, provide breathing room to fully digest concepts and create more opportunities for assessments that guide students in practicing activist tactics before performing them in the project based portion. Second, future researchers may study and reveal other elements of effective activism that could be incorporated, providing students with more robust tools to engage in activism and improve their overall efficacy.

A third limitation of my project is its lack of accessibility and differentiation. Being designed for an upper high school level class assumes that students have a certain level of background knowledge which frequently is not the case in practice. In order to fully understand the content in the PPT/text students should have a basic understanding of the way our government works and historical contexts of turn or the 20th century American society. While creating this portion I tried to find a fine line between including information that would be helpful for a full understanding, and cutting information that would be redundant to cover because it is assumed students have learned it in previous classes. For example, even though some students might know what a strike is, I created a slide that breaks down the goals, methods and outcomes of strikes to consider learners of different levels and backgrounds but did not do this for other terms such as boycott. This

issue appears again where I have gone out of my way to include PPT information on the roles and powers of the judicial and executive branches but nothing on the legislative branch. Future work could improve this by including further differentiation of the information.

Collectively, though the implications of this work are far reaching, the potential for achieving them greatly depends on a high quality of work that fills gaps in what has been achieved here. More extensive research needs to be done, the scope of the curriculum should be widened and the texts should be differentiated to achieve this. Despite its flaws the project itself is worthwhile as a stepping stone for myself and others in the profession to build upon.

### **Project Use and Benefits to the Profession**

I will be using this curriculum as a launching point in a career long quest to improve societal conditions. This curriculum will be implemented as described in the project description alongside my school's main U.S. history offering and taught throughout the year with the intention of using what is learned from the first experience to improve upon the process. What is presented in this paper and the following artifacts are a skeleton outline of this project that will add layer after layer as the years go on. For example, after the first round of projects, I will use a student's previous work as an exemplar for future classes to learn from during the instruction process. Having a tangibly complete version of the activist project for students to reference will help conceptualize the scope, scale and form of potential activist work while motivating learners to put in a high level of effort after seeing the potential impact of the project.

Another way I intend to build upon this project's foundation is to include more activist tools. As students engage in their projects I plan to gather resources to help them achieve their goals which could be used to enhance the experience for future classes. For example, when considering government intervention during the planning phase, students may need assistance accessing points of contact. Tools and resources such as guides of civic structures and processes, comparisons that display differences between different levels of government (city, state, national) and literal contact information for political parties and their representatives would serve as helpful scaffolding that would better facilitate the learning experience of being an activist and enhance student efficacy. The student reflection portion of the project is a third way this project is meant to be built upon, serving not only as a way for students to digest their learning but also to provide useful feedback on the experience. Through journal entries that request records of challenges and roadblocks to the final presentation's requirement that students provide retrospective advice, there are multiple outlets embedded within the project to serve as a tool of self enhancement through student feedback which will be incorporated for the next round of learners.

Though beginning as a skeleton structure, this project provides a strong foundation for other teachers to benefit from. As cited by Picower (2015) many teachers don't teach activism because they lack the time and resources to do so. Researching, gathering and organizing the necessary information to make a quality powerpoint can be a months-long process that teachers simply can't afford to engage in. By providing educators with that information in a way that is pre-tailored towards teaching activism

while also being flexible enough to adapt to their own needs helps surmount the psychological hurdles and resource deficits. This also benefits administrators by providing a more hands on history curriculum that encourages critical thinking and develops practical skills which accomplishes the civic component embedded in many district's mission statements.

The future addition of exemplars, tools and resources paired with the incorporation of student feedback creates a series of steps that will allow myself and other teachers to build upon the skeletal framework of the curriculum in its current state. Even with its limits, the curriculum still benefits teachers by cutting down the preliminary research that is a barrier for many who want to teach activism in history courses and benefits administrators who want to achieve civic components of their school's mission statements. The final section summarizes all the findings in this chapter and ends on a final reflection.

### **Summary**

I began this chapter by articulating how my initial view of past activism being more effective than present was wrong and the new relevance of learning about historical social movements. Then I revisited the literature review to point out the deficits of empirical data needed to support theories of activist efficacy. I followed this with a description of the implications my project has for restructuring historical content in a way that links them to other skill based lessons. This section also outlined limitations of my work, such as the need for more research, an expanded curricular scope and greater dedication to differentiation. Finally I described how this project would use student



feedback, exemplars from a full teaching cycle and tool creation to build upon the framework provided along with the benefits this project has for others in the educational profession.

In conclusion, throughout the entire part of this process there has been no part that is perfect. It exists in a field that is ripe for exploration but the intimidating nature of uncharted territory can persuade many not to engage. To those who may be intimidated to take a step in the ring to fight for a better society I say this: Just like activism itself, combining social change objectives with historical content is a messy, challenging and sometimes draining task. Just like activism itself, we cannot let the concept of *perfect* get in the way of starting to try, because the stakes are too high to wait. Just like activism itself, our purpose as educators is to make the world a better place. I hope this capstone work will help you embrace this, the same way completing it helped me learn it.

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