

**Whiteness in the Social Studies Classroom: Students' Conceptions of Race and  
Ethnicity in United States History**

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### **Abstract**

*In this study, the researcher examined student conceptions of “Whiteness” as it relates to past and present U.S. history. Using Critical Race Theory as the lens, this study employed mixed methods, analyzing teacher observations, classroom artifacts/student work, survey, and interview data from White students and students of color at an ethnically and economically diverse urban high school. The results showed most students could explain that race had an important role in U.S. history and could supply examples of race playing a role in specific historical events. However, students of color were more likely to express that racism is still common in the current day, while White students were more likely to express that racism is uncommon.*

### **Purpose**

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

Taking an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) in my practice, as a White social studies teacher at an ethnically and economically diverse urban high school, I wanted to better understand my students' beliefs about race and their conceptions of "Whiteness" in both the past and present. Unlike other fields, such as mathematics or English education, there has been limited teacher research published in social studies (Manfra, 2009). As such, this study helps generate both global and local knowledge about teaching race in the history classroom. This study examined the following research question: What are my students' conceptions of race/ethnicity and "Whiteness" within the U.S. history classroom?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997), which has three main assertions:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
2. U.S. society is based on property rights, rather than human rights.
3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social and school inequity. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48)

By applying CRT to social studies, Tyson (2003) has argued that social studies teachers have generally ignored that in the U.S. race continues to be an institutionalized politically oppressive construction. Along the same lines, Howard (2003) has argued that the social studies curriculum must be more race-conscious and place race and racism at the center of the classroom. By extension, history, as one of the disciplines in social studies, should also be more race-conscious. Furthermore, this study also works from within a

perspective of critical White studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), which sets out to specifically examine constructions of Whiteness. This includes investigations around the meaning of Whiteness (Chubbuck, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe et al., 2000; McIntyre, 1997; Skattebol, 2005; Sleeter, 2001, 2008; Tatum, 1994, 1997) or the institutionalized power associated with being White and the privileges of belonging to the dominant racial group in the United States.

As a White social studies teacher, I challenge the institutionalized power that privileges White Americans in an attempt to better serve the needs of my students of color, as well as my White students. I intentionally racialize the curriculum in my U.S. history courses and make the relationship between race and power a central component of my courses. While the state history curriculum framework is heavily oriented toward the history of White Americans, I include many missing events related to the history of people of color in my curriculum and design class work, assignments, and projects based on a more racially inclusive view of history (cf. Martell, 2013).

Over the past 15 years, several studies have offered important insight into how race is taught (or not taught) in the social studies classroom. In their study of students in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. history class, Almarza and Fehn (1998) found that Mexican American students recognize the dominance of their teachers' "White" approach to history, which ultimately led to resentment of both the subject of U.S. history and their teacher. In another study of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. history class with a race-conscious focus, Howard (2004) found that most of the students previous social studies courses were race-invisible, students viewed social studies as a place to study the past, not the role of race in the past, and most students believed that their social studies teachers rarely discussed race (which

was particularly concerning in a racially diverse urban school). In a study of two teachers that co-taught a high school U.S. history/English language arts course, Bolgatz (2005) found that by making race an explicit component of the course, the teachers encouraged students to also openly discuss race. In a previous teacher research study, I found that my use of culturally relevant pedagogy helped Black and Latino students connect to the history curriculum, while, due to the constraints of the school curriculum, Brazilian, Asian, and Middle Eastern students did not feel their histories were included (Martell, 2013).

Much of the work on race and the history classroom comes from Terrie Epstein and her co-researchers. In a study of Black and White students engaged in a historical inquiry, Epstein (1998) found that White students' perspectives were more aligned with those they had learned in school, while Black students' perspectives were more aligned with their own or family's experiences, which were often marked by racial oppression or discrimination. In her study of history students in an urban school, Epstein (2000) found that the White students believed their teacher had taught "everybody's history," while Black students believed they had learned very little about people of color. Through a recent long-term ethnographic study, Epstein (2009) found that White students had similar historical interpretations to those of their teachers, while students of all ethnic backgrounds tended to ignore the teacher or historical texts that were not aligned with their pre-instructional views of the past. In a study of one urban history teacher's attempt to use culturally responsive practices, Epstein, Mayorga, and Nelson (2011) found that students developed a positive understanding of history and a more complex understanding of historical racism as a result of a history curriculum that connected to

their racial and ethnic identities. However, in the same study, students were less responsive to the teacher's attempt to teach the diversity within the experiences of White Americans in U.S. history.

While these studies asked students about the teaching of race in their history, there is little examination of White privilege or "Whiteness." Furthermore, most of these studies examine teachers and their classrooms from an outsider perspective, with an absence of the *emic* or insider perspective. This study attempts to fill both of these gaps in the research on race in the social studies classroom.

### **Methodology**

In this study, I employ action research to critically examine my practices as a high school social studies teacher and my students' learning in my U.S. history courses. Action research allows teachers to learn through a critical and systematic examination of their work. Yet, action research is not intended to only inform local practice. It can be a vital bridge from local knowledge to global knowledge of practice. This work intends to ultimately inform the practices of other teachers and teacher educators. Moreover, I work from a position of *inquiry as stance* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), examining issues of equity, power, and social justice (Campano, 2007; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In this work, I take on the dual role of teacher and researcher to challenge the status quo, which perpetuates power structures and continues to maintain inequity.

### **Context and Participants**

The participants for this study are the students in my U.S. history courses at an economically, racially, and linguistically diverse urban high school of approximately 2,200 students. The school is located in a former New England factory town outside of

Boston, Massachusetts, which experienced an economic decline in the 1980s.

Traditionally an immigrant community, the town has been a recent home to a diverse group of immigrants/migrants from the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Brazilians are one of the largest immigrant populations in the community and the town has one of the highest percentages of Brazilians in the United States.

This study included one honors-level and one lower-level sophomore US History I class and two regular-level junior US History II classes. The students' racial make up was 43% White, 17% Brazilian, 15% Latino, 7% Asian, 4% Black, and 14% multiracial. Thirty-five percent of my students identified themselves as having a language other than English as their first language and 41% were immigrants or children of immigrants.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I collected data for this study through four sources: survey, interview, teacher observations, and classroom artifacts/student work. Using what Creswell and Plano Clark (2006) called an embedded mixed methods design, where data sets have complimentary roles; I employed a qualitative analysis to examine the interview, open-response survey data, teacher observations, and artifacts and a quantitative analysis to examine the closed-response survey data.

**Survey.** I generated survey questions based on the study's research questions and CRT, with the purpose of investigating students' perceptions of Whiteness and its relation to their race and ethnicity. The survey included 28 Likert-style response items (see Table 1 for six of the items most relevant to this study), 8 demographic items, and 4 open-response items on their perceptions of Whiteness and history. To increase validity, I pilot tested the survey questions with a colleague's students. During this pilot, students

were asked to take the survey and circle the individual questions they found confusing or difficult to answer. I used the results of this pilot to improve the clarity of the questions. Students were then asked to explain why they found those questions confusing or difficult to answer. I then considered these students' comments in my revisions on the final survey. The survey was administered to all my U.S. History I and II students (N=75). I then employed descriptive statistics to determine general patterns in student responses to the closed-question items, and conducted independent samples t-tests on all questions to compare students of color to White students. The complete survey is located in Appendix A.

**Interviews, Teacher Observations, and Classroom Artifacts.** Following the survey, I purposely selected 13 students based on two factors: their representation of the racial/ethnic diversity of the students of color in my class and their willingness to be interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. A semi-structured interview protocol consisting of eight questions was used, with questions grouped around two themes related to race and learning history and the students' backgrounds. I recorded and transcribed the interviews. The interview protocol is available in Appendix B. I coded the qualitative data thematically, and I generated and tested assertions from the data. Table 1 shows the background and characteristics of the four interview participants.



**Table 1. Participants**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Race/Ethnicity, Gender</b> | <b>Grade/Level</b>     |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| Ana                | Latina                        | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Chuck              | White male                    | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Carl               | White male                    | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Dante              | Brazilian male                | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Elizabeth          | White female                  | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Jean-Pierre        | Black male                    | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Jamelia            | Black female                  | 11 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Keiko              | Asian and White female        | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Mark               | White male                    | 11 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Marcelo            | Brazilian male                | 11 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Rafaela            | Brazilian female              | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Ravi               | Asian male                    | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |
| Sinéad             | White female                  | 10 <sup>th</sup> grade |

Throughout the year, I kept several different memo pads in my pocket and noted various observations of students related to race and Whiteness. I also collected artifacts in the form of student work and my own class handouts.

In the first stage of the qualitative analysis, I took multiple passes through the raw data. This involved three thorough readings through all of my interview, observations, classroom artifacts, and open-ended survey data, taking extensive notes through each reading. After a rough coding of the data using a coding scheme I created based on my

research questions, I used the work of Erickson (1986) for guidance in the generation of assertions and then preliminary testing of those assertions. Those assertions that had evidentiary warrant are displayed in my qualitative findings. Finally, I proceeded to a final coding of the data. This was an iterative coding process, where my codes remained flexible, working through cycles of induction and deduction to power the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 61). There were 30 individual codes organized into two categories: student identity and teacher identity. There were also several “in vivo” codes, or what Miles and Huberman (1994) described as “Phrases that are used repeatedly by informants” (p. 61). The “in vivo” codes included: “Equality,” “History As Progress,” “Personal Experience with Racism,” “Racialize History,” “Racism is Individual,” “Racism Only in South,” “Racism is Stereotype,” and “White Power.” A complete coding dictionary can be found in Appendix C.

### **Results**

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

## **Race in History**

Most students identified racial discrimination as being a major factor in U.S. history. In the survey, 89% of students agreed or strongly agreed that White people discriminated against people of color in the past and 91% of students agreed or strongly agreed that White people had more power in the past. Moreover, there was no statistically significant difference in the responses of White students and students of color on these questions. In the interviews, students expressed in detail specific events that were examples of race playing a role in U.S. history. The students most commonly cited slavery, the Trail of Tears, the California Gold Rush, sharecropping, the Civil War, Japanese Internment, Jim Crow laws/civil rights protests, and the L.A. Riots as race-related events.

Of these events, 10 of the 13 interviewed students specifically used the California Gold Rush as one of their examples of racial discrimination. Traditionally, the Gold Rush has been taught in U.S. history courses from a Euro-centric perspective. The typical textbook narrative of the Gold Rush depicts it as European Americans flooding into the West in search of riches. Although in recent years more attention has been paid to the role of the Chinese in the Gold Rush, it is still predominantly framed as a White conquest of the West. In my teaching, I had intentionally designed my lessons on the Gold Rush to better reflect the diversity of the groups involved and the power structure that existed in California at the time. This included having students watch the *American Experience* documentary “The Gold Rush,” engage in a simulation involving a gold hunt following rules that represented the power structure of the time (See Appendix D), and an activity

that has students use statistics to better understand the racial demographics of California in 1850 and today. Chuck, a White student, said,

An example is the California Gold Rush, the Chinese, they were treated very badly, because they couldn't even mine the same place as Whites. Latinos were kicked out by the Whites, you know Whites were superior to the Latinos.

(Interview, May 22, 2012).

Rafaela, a Brazilian student, said,

In the Gold Rush, Mexican people were there first... [but] as soon as the Whites started to hear about it... and soon other cultures like Black people, Chinese people, they wanted to go and wanted to see what was happening. The Whites sort of just left behind their scraps for other races to collect and I think that wasn't really fair, because the White people had all of the advantages to go in and look for the gold first. (Interview, May 29, 2012)

By having my students experience the advantages or disadvantages of the Gold Rush, it clearly left a strong impression on their understanding of race and its impact on this historical event.

In the interviews and survey open-response items, almost all of the students could cite one or multiple historical examples of Whites using their political and social power to oppress people of color. Dante, a Brazilian student, said,

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

While Elizabeth, a White student, said,

There was ... Manifest Destiny. When Whites were forcing Indians out of their own land, onto reservations, without their consent. And there was also the Gold Rush, when there were immigrants, such as the Chinese and the Mexicans. They were also prejudiced too and weren't given enough rights ... They were the last ones to get gold. (Interview, May 29, 2012)

Jean-Pierre, a Black student from Haiti, said,

Back in the day, they use to have a Black school and White. Usually the White school have better supplies. Like better books and better teachers. Where like the Blacks, they didn't have that much like books. So the Whites, they would have a better education than the Blacks. (Interview, May 23, 2012)

The examples the students presented of racial discrimination included the oppression of Blacks, Asians, Latinos, and American Indians by Whites. Several students included immigrants as a group within the category of people of color. When I probed them on this usage, most students said that immigrants to the U.S. today come from Latin America, Asia, or Africa. Dante, a Brazilian student, echoed this when he said, "When people think of immigrants, they think of Mexicans and when people think of Mexicans, they think of just Hispanic people in general" (Interview, May 23, 2012). Although there are a significant number of White immigrants to the United States, perhaps reflecting the immigrants in their school, the students in this study viewed immigrants as people of color.

In interviews, students frequently expressed views aligned with the concept that United States society has been based on property rights rather than human rights, which

is a major assertion of CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). This was generally expressed in terms of Whites holding property or treating others as property.

Rafaela, a Brazilian student said,

In history, Black people didn't have the same advantages [as Whites], because they were treated as property. Then they were constantly in debt because they were uneducated... [and] didn't have anywhere to go besides where they were born. (Interview, May 29, 2012)

Students typically expressed that Whites oppressed people of color to gain or continue their economic advantages. Chuck, a White student, depicted this in terms of the Whites historically withholding education funding and resources from Blacks through segregation. He said, "Obviously Whites got the rich part of the school, like I feel like the school budget was more toward the rich White kids, because obviously they're not going to give Blacks the more money" (Interview, May 22, 2012). Students often spoke of historical systems of racism in similar matter-of-fact terms.

The students also supplied numerous examples from history where both Whites and people of color worked to end racial discrimination and oppression. Dante, a Brazilian male, said,

A lot of White people did [try to stop racism]. There were a lot of White people who were abolitionists, tried to end slavery, but I think it was like a minority. I think there have always been White people who have supported people who were oppressed. (Interview, May 23, 2012)

Mark, a White student, said,

Mostly the abolitionists, mostly in the north during the same time, they wanted and acted to help free slaves and help promote equality and idea that would last more than, instead of just freeing people and trying to end the whole system.

(Interview, May 21, 2012)

Leilah, a Brazilian student, wrote,

I believe White people have helped reduce racism, but I don't believe that they have been the leaders of the protests and movement to stop racism.

From the responses by White students and students of color, there is some evidence that my class was successful in helping many of my students see a race-conscious history (Howard, 2003; Tyson, 2003). Unlike the findings of Epstein (1998, 2000, 2009), which showed important differences between Black and White students' conceptions of history, in this particular context, White students and students of color appeared to have very similar conceptions of race in the past.

### **Race in the Present**

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

Students of color supplied numerous personal examples, or examples from their families, involving discrimination or oppression. Jean-Pierre, a Black student from Haiti, said,

Well, my grandfather use to tell me that in America, if you apply for a job, and your skin color is black or dark, and the White person applies for the same job, the White guy will go and get the job or you won't get it at all. (Interview, May 23, 2012)

He expressed that he often feels discriminated against for his race. Adding later,

For a job, based on the society, stuff like that, you're treated bad if you have darker skin. In school too. Well, at [this school] too, a few times, but not a lot of teachers, some teachers are really nice, sometimes treat students bad, but they are just teachers, what are you going to do about it? (Interview, May 23, 2012)

Greg, a biracial student, who is Black and White, wrote in the survey, "People view [Blacks] as criminals or up to no good." Connecting racism to his family's experience immigrating to the U.S., Dante, a Brazilian student, said,

I think White people are always a majority of the people in power, in this country at least, that allows them to keep power. For example, the laws like the Arizona immigration law, we talked about that... I think if there were more minorities in their [state house] it wouldn't have passed because, many of those minorities might have been of Hispanic descent [and] would understand that immigrants aren't bad people and wouldn't be racially profiled and be deported. So I think that for minorities, were more in position, more in charge, that wouldn't happen.



And since White people are in charge, they passed that bill in multiple states.

(Interview, May 23, 2012)

He later added,

Correct me if I am wrong, but this is something my mother told me, for South Americans, Brazilians, Chileans, we need a visa to come to this country, but some countries in Europe don't. Some can come and go more freely. I think it is a little weird that South Americans are treated differently. (Interview, May 23, 2012)

Teresa, a Latina student, who had moved north 2 years ago from Alabama, wrote,

When I lived in Alabama, the whites would get to do things toward black people or do something in school and I saw that they would get into less trouble than the black or Hispanics. They got to do as they pleased.

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

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

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

Most of the White students in this study, however, expressed that racism was primarily in the past, on a dramatic decline, or the result of a few individuals. These

students emphasized that people can stop racism by changing their individual behaviors and that racism will end when everyone becomes “colorblind.” In the survey, 88% of White students said that Whites had an advantage because of their race in the past. However, 31% of White students said they have an advantage today because of their race. In the survey open-response, Sandy, a White student, wrote,

I don’t think anyone of any race has any advantage over anyone else. I think everyone has the same opportunities.

Several White students cited the election of Barack Obama, as an example of how racism is now uncommon. Leonard, a White student wrote,

I don’t think whites have an advantage necessarily, because I think for one, that if we have a black president then that tells people that if you’re black or white, it doesn’t make a difference.

Many of the White students cited the equal opportunities of their peers of color at their high school or the people of color they interact with in the greater community, as well as the disadvantages they or their families had as Whites. Sinéad, a White student, wrote, “There is really no racism today. If there is, it doesn’t happen around me. Then again, I live in a white neighborhood.” She later wrote, “My Dad is white and he can’t get a job. No, white people don’t have an advantage.” Sinéad acknowledged that the racially segregated neighborhood where she lived may frame her views, but she also expressed internal frustration with the economic disadvantage of her White family. Harold, a White student, wrote, “Racists are such a minority today. There is very little people can do on a large scale. However, talking to people with ignorant views and somehow getting them to change is really all they can do.” Despite regular interactions with their peers of color,

many White students had a difficult time seeing racism as a system of disadvantage or prevalent in the community around them.

In the survey and interview data, White students were more likely than students of color to view the conditions of all minority groups as improving in history (See Table 1).

**Table 2. Difference in perceptions for students of color (n = 43) and White (n = 32) students**

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

<sup>a</sup> Maximum score = 5 (Strongly Agree). Multiracial students were included with the students of color.

<sup>b</sup> Two-tailed independent *t*-test

<sup>c</sup> Effect Size: Calculated using  $r^2 = t^2 / (t^2 + df)$ .

\*  $p < .05$

In comparison, students of color were less likely to express that the conditions for people of color have improved. In the interviews, students of color often expressed that the past and present system in the United States, whether it be immigration, employment, or education, is skewed toward Whites. Moreover, White students were more likely than students of color to express that Whites do things today to decrease racism. In the survey, 69% of White students agreed or strongly agreed that White people do things today to decrease racism, where 37% of students of color responded similarly (See Table 2).

**Table 2. Difference in perceptions for students of color (n = 43) and White (n = 32) students**

|   | Students of Color <i>M (SD)</i> | White Students <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>t</i> -Value <sup>b</sup> | Effect Size <sup>c</sup> |
|---|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Today, White people do things to decrease racism <sup>a</sup> | 3.21 (.773)                     | 3.66 (.745)                  | 2.514*                       | 0.08                     |

<sup>a</sup> Maximum score = 5 (Strongly Agree). Multiracial students were included with students of color.

<sup>b</sup> Two-tailed independent *t*-test

<sup>c</sup> Effect Size: Calculated using  $r^2 = t^2 / (t^2 + df)$ .

\*  $p < .05$

White students were more likely to express that Whites stop racism in the present. Furthermore, the White students supplied examples that Whites often ask people to not use racial slurs and Whites now make friends with all races. Chuck, a White student, said, “I feel like today Americans [have] found like the brighter side, and racism is less, seeing how it is really bad” (Interview, May 22, 2012). However, Whites did not exclusively hold this belief. Ana, a Latina student, said,

I think that [people of color] are treated equal now. Well, like different races go to all kinds of different schools. Like they are accepted to all sorts of different schools. And not just one specific like group of people I guess. I don't think people are as racist today as they were before. There is still some racism out there, but most people don't make a huge deal about it. (Interview, June, 2012)

Although most students of color expressed that racism continued to be prevalent in the U.S., three students of color expressed in the interviews or the survey a view that racism was essentially over.

There was, however, a small group of White students that expressed racism was common today. These students often cited examples from the media or their friends or family members who were people of color, which appeared to influence their view that racial discrimination exists in the present. Andrew, a White student, who emphasized that many of his friends were Latino, wrote in the survey, "The whole American system was created to give whites power and leave behind any other race, even though it is improving, but still not improved enough." Carol, a White student wrote, "In the United States, I feel whites still have an advantage due to their race. Most jobs would rather hire a white and some whites think some other ethnicities are all illegal [immigrants] and shouldn't be hired." Most of these students directly connected racial discrimination to economic advantages.

The race-conscious focus of my U.S. history courses appeared to be helping my White students see White privilege in the past, but it was less successful at helping them see their Whiteness in the present. While students could point to many historical examples of White privilege, it was more difficult for White students to point to

examples of racial discrimination in the present. In an examination of my U.S. History I and II curriculum materials, there were no lessons that had students examine racial inequity today and I spent very little time having students connect past racial inequity to the present. Although students would have a chance to explore racial inequity during my lessons on Hurricane Katrina, this was included in the last weeks of my U.S. History II course and after the survey and interviews for this study were administered. This offers strong evidence that my curriculum, although race-conscious in its approach to history, was missing important opportunities to examine race in the present.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Using action research, this study highlights the positive impact that a race-conscious social studies classroom can have on all students. However, it also shows the many barriers that teachers face in helping White students understand their role in a system that privileges them because of their skin color. Subsequently, this study offers several implications for the teaching of U.S. history.

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

Second, this study highlights the importance of rooting discussions of race not only in the past, but also in the present. Social studies teachers must do more to help students, especially White students, better understand the institutionalized power that privileges White Americans today. When history teachers include examinations of race in the present, they can help students see that it is the power structure that continues to perpetuate racism in the United States. They can help students better understand that racism is a system of disadvantage, rather than simply individual prejudices. Social studies teachers may teach about race and inequity, but that is not the same as teaching about Whiteness.

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

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### SECONDARY STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF RACE IN HISTORY CLASS SURVEY OF STUDENTS AT COURSE COMPLETION

#### Survey Questions

*Since history class often discusses how race has been involved in past events, I would like to know your views of race in United States history and today.*

*Please circle the best answer for each statement. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you may leave it blank.*

*When this survey uses the term “people of color,” it refers to non-White people, including Blacks/African Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, Brazilians, Asians, American Indians/Native Americans, etc. For this survey, Brazilians are considered a group separate from Latinos.*

**1. In the United States, racism has decreased over time.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**12. In United States history, White people have had more power than people of color.**

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

**13. In United States history, White people have done things to decrease racism.**

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

**14. In United States history, people of color have done things to decrease racism.**

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

**15. In this class, I learned about the positive things White people did in history.**

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

**16. In this class, I learned about the positive things Black/African American people did in history.**

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

**17. In this class, I learned about the positive things Latinos/Hispanic people did in history.**

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

**18. In this class, I learned about the positive things Brazilian people did in history.**

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

**19. In this class, I learned about the positive things Asian people did in history.**

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

**20. In this class, I learned about the positive things American Indian/Native American people did in history.**

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

**21. In this class, I learned about how people of color overcame oppression.**

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

**22. In this class, I learned about the history of discrimination.**

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

**23. In this class, I learned about races and/or ethnicities other than my own.**

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

**24. In this class, I learned about my race/ethnicity.**

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

**25. In the United States, I have an advantage because of my race.**

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

**26. There is very little racism in the United States today.**

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

**27. Today, White people do things to decrease racism.**

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

**28. Today, White people discriminate against people of color**

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

**Demographic Information**

**29. What is your age?**

14 15 16 17 18 19

**30. What is your grade level?**

9 10 11 12

**32. What course and level are you currently enrolled in?**

1-US History I CP1 2-US History I Honors 3-US History II CP1 4-US History II Honors

**33. What is your gender?**

1-Male 2-Female

**34. What is your race/ethnicity (If you are multiracial, please circle more than one)?**

1-American Indian/Native American 2-Asian 3-Brazilian 4-Black/African American

5-Latino/a or Hispanic 6-White/European American 7-Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**35. Is a language other than English your first language?**

1-Yes 0-No

If you answered "Yes," please list your first language here: \_\_\_\_\_

**36. Do you speak a language other than English fluently?**

1-Yes 0-No

If you answered "Yes," please list your first language here: \_\_\_\_\_

**37. Are you or your parents immigrants to the United States?**

1-Yes (Both I and my parents) 2-Yes (My parents only) 0-No

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

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

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### **Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

1. In the United States, have there been events in the past motivated by racism? If yes, can you think of some examples?
2. In the United States, have people of color had disadvantages because of their skin color? If yes, can you think of some examples?
3. In the past, did White people do things to stop or decrease racism? If so, can you think of any examples?
4. Did this class include the history of non-White people/people of color? If so, can you provide some examples? What is your reaction to learning this history?
5. Did this class include the history of White people? If so, can you provide some examples? What is your reaction to learning this history?
6. Did White people have an advantage (power; privileges) in the past? Can you explain why or why not? Do White people have an advantage (power; privileges) today? Why or why not?
7. Do non-White/people of color people have an advantage (power; privileges) in the past? Can you explain why or why not? Do non-White/people of color people have an advantage (power; privileges) today? Why or why not?
8. Today, is there something White people can do to stop or decrease racism? If so, can you explain? If not, why do you feel this way? Today, is there something non-White people/people of color can do to stop or decrease racism? If so, can you explain? If not, why do you feel this way?

**Appendix C: Coding Dictionary****LEVEL ONE CODES (S-)*****LEVEL TWO CODES (S-RE-)*****LEVEL THREE CODES (S-RE-REP)**

NOTE: There is no dash (-) if there are no levels below

| <b>Nickname</b>      | <b>Full Code Name</b>    | <b>Description</b>   |
|----------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <b>S-</b>            | <b>Student Identity</b>  | <b>Related to the development of the students' identity</b>                        |
| <b><i>S-HIS-</i></b> | <b><i>History</i></b>    | <b><i>Related to the student's experience studying history</i></b>                 |
| S-HIS-ADV            | Advantages in History    | Students expressed events where people of color or White people were advantaged    |
| S-HIS-DIS            | Disadvantages in History | Students expressed events where people of color or White people were disadvantaged |
| S-HIS-DEC            | Decrease in Racism       | Students expressed a decrease in racism  |
| S-HIS-INC            | Increase in Racism       | Students expressed an increase in racism   |
| S-HIS-RAC            | Racism in History        | Students expressed events motivated by racism                                      |

|               |                                    |  |
|---------------|------------------------------------|--|
| S-HIS-PC      | History of People of Color         | Students expressed historical events related to people of color                  |
| S-HIS-WHT     | History of White People            | Students expressed historical events related to White people                     |
| <i>S-RE-</i>  | <i>Racial or Ethnic Identity</i>   | <i>Related to the development of the students' racial or ethnic identity</i>     |
| S-RE-REP      | Represented Race or Ethnicity      | Students expressed that her/his race/ethnicity represented in curriculum         |
| S-RE-UND      | Underrepresented Race or Ethnicity | Students expressed that her/his race/ethnicity was not represented in curriculum |
| <i>S-NAR-</i> | <i>Multiple Narratives</i>         | <i>Related to the multiple narratives found in the curriculum</i>                |
| S-NAR-WHT     | "White History"                    | Students expressed that history is often from a White Perspective                |
| S-NAR-INC     | Included Multiple Narratives       | Students expressed that multiple narratives were included in curriculum          |

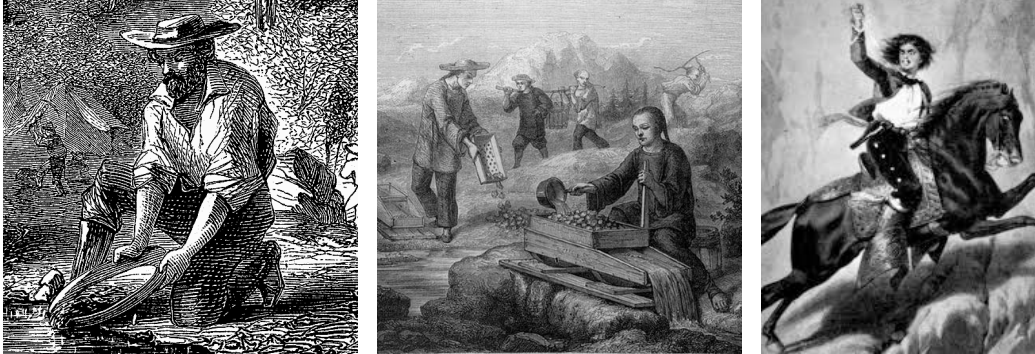
|               |   |  |
|---------------|---|--|
| S-NAR-MIS     | Missing Multiple Narratives                     | Students expressed that multiple narratives were missing in curriculum                           |
| <i>S-BAR</i>  | <i>Barriers to Student Identity Development</i> | <i>Related to barriers to the development of student's identity</i>                              |
| <i>S-FOS</i>  | <i>Fostered Student Identity Development</i>    | <i>Related to fostering the development of student's identity</i>                                |
| <i>S-WHT-</i> | <b>Whiteness</b>                                | <b>Related to the concept of Whiteness related to students.</b>                                  |
| S-WHT-CHG     | Challenge Whiteness                             | Student challenged Whiteness and institutionalized power that privileges White Americans.        |
| S-WHT-NOT     | Did Not Challenge Whiteness                     | Student did not challenge Whiteness and institutionalized power that privileges White Americans. |
| <b>T-</b>     | <b>Teacher Identity</b>                         | <b>Related to the teacher's (my own) identity.</b>   |
| <i>T-WHT-</i> | <b>Teacher Whiteness</b>                        | <b>Related to the concept of Whiteness related to teacher.</b>                                   |

|              |   |   |
|--------------|---|---|
| T-WHT-CHG    | Challenge Whiteness                         | Teacher (myself) challenged Whiteness and institutionalized power that privileges White Americans.        |
| T-WHT-NOT    | Did Not Challenge Whiteness                 | Teacher (myself) did not challenge Whiteness and institutionalized power that privileges White Americans. |
| <i>T-RE-</i> | <i>Teaching Racial or Ethnic Identity</i>   | <i>Related to the teacher's (myself) focus on the students' racial or ethnic identity</i>                 |
| T-RE-REP     | Teaching Represented Race or Ethnicity      | Teacher (myself) focused on the students' racial or ethnic identity                                       |
| T-RE-UND     | Teaching Underrepresented Race or Ethnicity | Teacher (myself) missed an opportunity to focus on the students' racial or ethnic identity                |
| T-RE-TCH     | Race or Ethnicity of the Teacher            | Teacher discussed (my own) race/ethnicity   |
| T-WHS        | Teaching "White History"                    | Teacher (myself) focused on history primarily from a White narrative or perspective                       |

## Appendix D: Gold Rush Lesson Handout

US History I  
Dr. Martell

### Gold Rush Hunt



Above: (left) A White panhandler, (middle) Chinese gold miners, and (right) Joaquin Murrieta

The California Gold Rush (1848–1855) began on January 24, 1848, when gold was found by James W. Marshall at Sutter's Mill, in Coloma, California. News of the discovery brought some 300,000 people to California from the rest of the United States and abroad. Of the 300,000, approximately half arrived by sea and half came overland.

The gold-seekers, called "Forty-niners" (as a reference to 1849), often faced substantial hardships on the trip. While most of the newly arrived were Americans, the Gold Rush attracted tens of thousands from Latin America, Europe, Australia, and China. At first, the prospectors retrieved the gold from streams and riverbeds using simple techniques, such as panning. More sophisticated methods of gold recovery developed which were later adopted around the world.

Today, we are going to do our own Gold Hunt. Much like the 49ers of the time, you will be assigned into one of the following three groups. You will need to follow the specific rules.

**Anglos or White Miners:** The White gold miners were often the first to show up to the site. As a result, they didn't look too carefully, because the Gold was plentiful and because their fellow Whites ran the government of California. If you are assigned to this group, you should simply wander around the class looking everywhere. If the Latinos are more successful than you at finding gold, you start spreading rumors that the Latinos are bandidos or bandits (refer to the Legend of Joaquin Murrieta) who have only stolen their gold and you and the other White men should attack them and steal their gold.

**Latino Miners:** Latinos (primarily Californios, Mexicans, and Chileans) were the second group to arrive. They were more skilled than the Whites, because in their home nations they were already miners. At the same time they faced discrimination from the Whites who ran the government of California. You should stay at least 10 feet away from any of the Whites, but you should also focus in on a specific area of the room and only spend your time in that area scouring over every crevice. By doing this, your diligence is much more likely than the methods of the Whites to find Gold.

**Chinese Miners:** The Chinese miners were actually banned by the Whites from mining new land. You must then only look for gold in places that the Whites have finished looking in. So, for you there will be a 3 minute delay to start. However, you are much more careful than the Whites and Latinos. Search hard in places no one is looking and it is almost assured you will find more gold than the other groups.

After the activity, we will discuss how it felt to be each group. We will also list the advantages and disadvantages of each group:

**Anglos/Whites:**

Advantages

Disadvantages

**Latinos:**

Advantages

Disadvantages

**Chinese:**

Advantages

Disadvantages