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Using Economic Analysis to Incorporate Reparations for Black Americans into the US History Classroom

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amelia H. Wheeler

I am a doctoral student studying Social Studies Education at the University of Georgia on the traditional homelands of the Creek and Cherokee nations. Soon I will graduate and transition to my new role as the social studies and ELA teacher for Joy Village, a local private school focused on the joy and thriving of Black children. As a scholar, my role as a former high school Social Studies teacher has resulted in my academic work centering on questions of how support educators committed to teaching for equity, especially those in the context of the Southeastern United States. A part of this goal is to create approachable and flexible instructional frameworks teachers can use to incorporate and legitimize questions of equity into their work with students, such as the necessity of reparations for Black Americans. Outside of my ten years as a Social Studies educator at the secondary and now university level, my most significant accomplishments include organizing for educational justice in my local community and being an active member in my Buddhist meditation group. In addition, I enjoy running, hiking, yoga, going to museums and concerts, and enjoying time with my partner and our adorable dog, Mr. Spock.

Chantelle Grace

I am a doctoral candidate and graduate teaching assistant in the Mary Frances Early College of Education at the University of Georgia in Athens, GA. However, I will soon transition into my new role as a Teaching Faculty I member at Florida State University in Tallahassee, FL beginning August 2022. My ultimate goal in my work is to provide opportunities for future social studies teachers to critically reflect on their growing identities and commitments as justice-oriented change agents. I am interested in teacher preparation, critical inquiries that center race in its exploration, and design-based research. My own professional development efforts have been focused on

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learning more about my privileges as a White-passing, Latinx and the ways in which my racial/ethnic identities have and continue to shape the ways in which I experience the world. Outside of my professional pursuits, I enjoy spending time with my amazing partner of seven years and our wonderful son. I also enjoy reading non/fictional books, playing volleyball, and binge-watching shows on various streaming platforms. Prior to enrolling in my doctoral program, I taught high school social studies for six years in the northeast Georgia region.

Keywords reparations, economic justice, United States history, economic inequality

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 60/147 (2006) asserted that if a state takes part in civil rights abuses, it is the state's responsibility to provide reparations. Reparations, in other words, are a host of practices, designed to directly remedy the effects of state-sanctioned civil rights abuses on victimized groups.

Since the end of the 1800s, many Black Americans and their allies have demanded the US government provide financial reparations for their unpaid labor during enslavement and post-slavery economic discrimination (Taifa, 2020). While mainstream attention to movements for reparations has waxed and waned throughout time, there is a current resurgence of interest in the topic. US History teachers interested in issues of equity understandably might want to incorporate this timely and important topic into their curriculum. This article explores how an economic frame can help US History teachers incorporate Black Americans' movements for reparations into their civil rights curriculum.

In this article, I contend that an attention to the economic consequences of civil rights abuses could help teachers situate the movement for reparations for Black Americans within their civil rights instruction. I draw on research for a book chapter I penned with my co-author, Chantelle Grace, titled Toward a New Frame: Teaching Reparations as a Civil Rights Struggle (Wheeler & Grace, 2021). We examined critiques of the dominant curricular framing of the civil rights movement and reparations lesson plans from major social studies organizations. As a result, we developed an instructional framework for US History teachers that might alleviate the shortcomings we found in the commonplace approaches to teaching the civil rights movement and reparations through attention to economic disparity.

THE RESEARCH

Our backgrounds and careers as secondary history teachers inspired our research. I situate myself as a White woman from the South who grew up in, as most White, middle-class people do—in relative segregation (Diangelo, 2018). It was not until adulthood that I learned about the 1912 White-led lynch mob that drove Black residents from my hometown, illegally confiscating their property, with most of the land still in possession of the town's prominent White families (Phillips, 2016). I was never taught this history as a child, and as a result,

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I became an unknowing accomplice to and beneficiary of the violent exploitation of Black Americans' civil rights. For this reason and many others, I became a secondary history teacher committed to teaching for equity. However, as a US history teacher, I found it challenging to connect the accumulated effects of centuries of state-sanctioned anti-Black discrimination with contemporary racial wealth inequity using a solely historical frame. The framework we developed is thus one we wished we encountered in our classrooms as students and later teachers.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our research (Wheeler & Grace, 2021) found that the dominant approach to civil rights instruction curtails US history teachers' ability to connect Black Americans' contemporary wealth inequity with state discrimination. For example, many social studies scholars devoted to racial equity advocated for the expansion of the civil rights curriculum beyond the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Act (Bruewer & Beilke, 2018; Hawkman & Castro, 2017). They drew their critiques from the work of historian Jacquelyn Dowd (Hall, 2005). Hall argued that the current approach operates under a "master narrative," which paints the civil rights movement as a short-lived Southern phenomenon led by a few sanitized heroes that ultimately resulted in the end of anti-Black discrimination (p.1234). In other words, the social studies scholars argued the civil rights movement's "master narrative" denied the ongoing state-sanctioned civil rights violations of Black Americans and their accumulated material effects. They proposed that US history teachers should instead draw on Hall's notion of the "long civil rights movement" to clarify two points. First, the long civil rights movement acknowledges that many Black Americans and their allies are still organizing for the complete protection of their civil rights. Second, Hall emphasizes that significant factions of the contemporary civil rights movement remain focused on receiving reparations for the centuries of state-sanctioned discriminatory policies. Adding an economic instructional focus could thus be helpful for US teachers who want to expand beyond the civil rights "master narrative" and connect the historic and ongoing denial of Black Americans' civil rights with racial wealth inequity.

The uneven portrayal of reparation struggles in social studies lesson plans further highlighted the usefulness of teaching the topic through an economic lens. We reviewed curricular resources from social studies' major organizations about how US history teachers could approach teaching reparations for discriminated groups. A troubling binary emerged in how the resources directed teachers to discuss reparations for Japanese and Black Americans. For example, in instructional materials, the $20,000 paid to Japanese Americans to compensate for their incarceration during WWII is uncritically depicted as an unquestionably just remedy for the economic loss and emotional turmoil this abuse inflicted upon them (Brugar & Clabough, 2017; Mccormick, 2008; Potter, 2005; Walsh-Moorman, 2020). The lessons on Japanese Americans' movement for reparations contrasted sharply with how curricular resources advised teachers to approach the topic for Black Americans.

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There were only three curricular resources for teachers interested in addressing the timely and important issue of reparations for Black Americans. All three recommended teachers approach the subject as a contemporary, politicized, and controversial debate (K. C. Davis, 2020; Hess, 2007; Moore, 2020). Directing teachers to have students consider if Black Americans should receive reparations as a contemporary political issue disregards reparations' connection to widely documented civil rights violations and resultant racial wealth inequity.

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATORS

In response to our research, we developed a three-pillar framework that might better help US History teachers situate Black Americans' movement for reparations within the "long civil rights movement" (Hall, 2005) through attention to economic factors.

The first pillar of this frame emphasizes that teachers should present Black Americans' movement for reparations as a "settled issue" (Hess & Mcavoy, 2014). This pillar encourages teachers to present reparations as an appropriate remedy for centuries of legal discrimination and an affirmative and healing choice for the entire country. As a result, instead of asking "should Black Americans receive reparations," teachers could ask, "how might the government remedy violating the civil rights of Black Americans?". For some teachers, this might feel like a risky shift. There is a widespread common-sense logic that says "good" social studies teachers "remain neutral" or "present both sides" of controversial topics (Geller, 2020).

Educators could fear framing reparations as a "settled issue" because of the perceived threat that they will be accused of "bias" by parents or administrators. Furthermore, in many Republican-led states, legislation has been signed into law that positions any discussions of systemic racism as a "divisive topic" and a tool of leftist, anti-American indoctrination designed to make "students" (i.e., White students) feel shame and blame (Gabriel & Goldstein, 2021). Within such contexts, teachers confront increased risk when they choose to bring the topic of reparation into their classroom and may feel the most prudent course of action to frame the issue as a debate. However, social studies researchers (Hlavacik & Krutka, 2021) have criticized the idealization of discussion framed as a deliberation between two equally viable sides when bringing in contemporary controversy. Thus, instead of mitigating risk by framing reparation as a debate, teachers should acknowledge that teaching about reparations is a risk, but one worth taking in the face of unconditional laws. While presenting reparations as a settled issue is more fraught than ever, for teachers committed to discussing this important topic, utilizing economic frames provides power pedagogical assistance.

Presenting students with accounts of how Black Americans incurred economic disadvantage due to the structural and systemic violations of their civil rights (Coates, 2014; Fleming, 2018; Hannah-Jones, 2020) provides them with the concepts and space for structural analysis. A structural analysis acknowledges that our current institutions and conditions are not inevitable or unchangeable but purposefully designed human constructions.

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This insight means that new choices will produce new institutions. Furthermore, providing students with highly regarded plans for the enactments of reparations (see Darity and Mullen, 2020) may allow them to consider how systemic mechanisms bring about institutional change.

Presenting reparations as a settled issue is ultimately a redemptive and affirmative position, one that empowers students as civic agents. Students can investigate what economic and social policy choices they could support or enact to produce a more just and equitable world. In other words, asking students how governments could distribute reparations positions them as the agentic creators, rather than passive recipients, of the institutions they live within and among. Presenting reparations as a settled issue is the first pillar of our framework because it acknowledges the economic disparity wrought by centuries of systemic violation of Black Americans' civil rights while presenting young people with a way to work towards a more equitable and just future.

Second, our framework emphasizes that students understand that movements for reparations take place within specific contexts. For example, Japanese Americans and Black Americans have distinct social, political, and economic nuances in their quests for reparations. Thus, in approaching the topic of reparations for Black Americans, teachers should have students analyze the specific factors and policies that have resulted in racial, and economic disadvantage due to civil rights violations. This degree of specificity is an essential part of the framework because it counteracts the propensity for standardized curricula to lump all marginalized groups into one "othered" category.

We see this trend illustrated in the Georgia US History standards about the Revolutionary War that instruct teachers to "Examine the roles of women, American Indians, and enslaved and free Blacks in supporting the war effort" (Georgia Department of Education, 2018). The standard hides the specificity of these groups and their experiences outside of the Revolutionary War. Put differently, when standards homogenize all marginalized identities as "other," they obscure the critical differences and thus full humanity of these groups. Investigating the topic of reparations using an economic frame is an antidote to this approach. Reparations are contextual practices. Students must first understand the specific harms wrought by civil rights violations before considering appropriate remedies. Thus, investigating reparations centers on the complex specificity of the structural discrimination faced by Black Americans instead of collapsing the contours of their struggle with all other marginalized groups. The second pillar of our framework emphasizes that discussing reparations within the US History course asks the teacher to attend to distinct economic ramifications of Black Americans' centuries of civil rights violations.

The final pillar of our framework invites teachers to contextualize reparations within Black Americans' long and ongoing struggle to secure their civil rights (Hall, 2005). Reparations are about making good on the ideals of American civil liberty in response to historical and contemporary discrimination. Because legal discrimination has resulted in racial wealth inequity, many modern civil rights groups, like Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in Americans (NCOBRA), incorporate demands for reparations within their campaigns. Thus, situating Black American's move-

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ments for reparations within the "long civil rights movement" (Hall, 2005) is vital for two reasons:

First, reparations call attention to the economic ramifications of civil rights abuse. When teachers acknowledge that many Black Americans seek reparations in response to the violations of their civil liberties, they help students link current material inequity with both historical and ongoing acts of state-sanctioned discrimination.

Second, situating reparations as part of the "long civil rights movement" could be a more generative and accurate approach than framing the topic as a contemporary political debate. Black Americans' movement for reparations is neither a new nor solely a hot button politicized issue. Instead, calls for reparations have always been a part of the civil rights movement because they are practices designed to remedy the materials harms of state-sanctioned abuse. Attention to the economic consequences of these abuses is helpful in this regard. Moreover, economic data about the material harm of civil rights violations moves the discussion of reparations out of the highly charged rhetoric of politics into more analytic and less polarizing grounds. In other words, economic analysis is helpful for teachers who want to incorporate reparation into their civil rights curriculum because it focuses on the material effects of civil rights abuses rather than appealing to contemporary political frictions.

This pillar of our framework argues that this approach is more appropriate because it situates reparations for Black Americans within their long movement for civil rights instead of presenting the topic as a decontextualized, politicized, and contemporary debate.

QUESTIONS TO RESPOND TO FOR THE Q & A:

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

You begin your article by referring to the UN GA Resolution 60/147 to underpin your argument for your argument. But the U.S. regularly ignores the UN or fails to ratify UN declarations and conventions (e.g., Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). Given that this is so, how do you make the argument to a UN skeptic that this framework does or should matter to Americans when contemplating US domestic policy?

Amelia Wheeler and Chantelle Grace's Response:

We would say to this UN skeptic that what UN GA Resolution 60/147 makes clear is that there is a recognized relationship between the states' abuses of civil rights and the necessity for reparations. In other words, I would emphasize that whether the US ignores this UN policy or not, the policy stands as a testament to the linkage between these two practices that are so often overlooked in the contemporary US framing around reparations. Furthermore, I would tell this skeptic that demonstrating the UN's commitment to enacting reparations for groups victimized by state violence highlights that in other contexts the practice is considered a matter of due process rather than a naïvely idealistic impossibility. Put differently,

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the policy provides a different discourse about reparations outside of the dominant frames offered within the US. We intentionally began the article with this policy as a way of saying 'look, other people around the world see reparations as a means to justice, equity, healing." and to draw a clear thread between civil rights abuse and reparations for Black Americans.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

Generally speaking, social studies teachers don't have a lot of training in economics. How crucial is it for teachers to have a firm grasp of economics to follow the approach you are advocating in social studies or history classrooms?

Amelia Wheeler and Chantelle Grace's Response:

I feel confident that if teachers can remember that economics is generally the study of the distribution of resources, they can follow the approach we advocate in this article. Every social studies discipline is oriented around a few specific concepts. For teachers with limited economic experience who are interested in bringing the discussion of reparations into their classroom, a starting point could be to recognize that economics is generally the study of the distribution of resources. Even without a strong economic background, if teachers come back to this as a central concept, they will be grounding the lesson within economic analysis. If teachers wanted an accessible text to grow their economic knowledge in a way that could frame how they approach economics in their classroom, I would recommend "Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Communities" by Gibson-Graham et al. (2013).

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

To what extent do you think adding an economic instructional focus can inform the curriculum in other countries as they work to reconcile their legacies of the enslavement of Black peoples?

Amelia Wheeler and Chantelle Grace's Response:

What a great question! Before we begin to answer, we must temper my response with the acknowledgment that because of locations, as a white and bi-racial Latina woman teaching in the American "Deep South,", our analysis of the affordances of economic instructional focus for other country's curricular opportunities will be limited and partial.

However, what comes to mind as we read the question is an argument by political-economist Nancy Fraser (2020) that any movement for justice must consider questions of both cultural representation and economic distribution. For countries working to reconcile their legacies of the enslavement of Black peoples, we take this to mean, that including more accurate representations of the mechanisms of Ani-Black racism, enslavement, and

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their ongoing effects, is not enough. Questions of economic distribution must be interwoven within these representations to create a curriculum that might truly move towards reconciliation. Some questions might include considerations of:

- What groups benefited economically from enslavement?
- How did enslavement create surplus capital? How was it distributed? Who controlled this process? What are the long-term effects in terms of wealth distribution?
- In what ways has this surplus of capital been utilized to increase and maintain the economic dominance of the ruling group?

Curricular resources that address these questions, alongside more accurate representations of enslavement, acknowledge that enslavement was first and foremost an economic system, designed to extract as much wealth as possible from human labor, and second, that this wealth very much remains a driving force in maintaining racial and class hierarchies today.

An example of a curriculum resource from the US context that does this beautifully is Angela Davis's (1983) book *Women, Race, & Class.* It demonstrated how accurate cultural representation coupled with interrogations of economic distribution highlights with striking clarity that racial reconciliation to truly manifest, economic reparations must be made. Furthermore, the group Rethinking Economics (https://www.rethinkeconomics.org/shop/) has produced more contemporary texts commenting on the need to reconceive questions of justice in terms of economic disruption Thus we would recommend those doing work like this in other countries to seek out similar texts or create their own – that draw a connection between cultural and economic marginalization through accurate representations and questions of economic distribution.

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

4. You say teachers should present the issue of reparations as a "settled issue," but how can it be settled if so many people in the US don't believe that Black Americans should receive reparations?

Amelia Wheeler and Chantelle Grace's Response:

There are many Americans that do not believe that the climate crisis is real, that the COVID vaccine is a necessary public health measure, or that gay marriage is a human right. It is true that in these individuals' opinions those topics are not "settled" issues. Looking further back in history, we see that there have always been dissenting opinions about issues we now consider "settled", like the voting rights of women and people of color, or even the abolition of slavery. So, the first point we would like to raise is claiming something is a settled issue does not mean claiming that everyone is 100% in agreement about an issue.

Instead, claiming that something is a settled issue is claiming that those with the authority to make truth claims about a topic, collectively and overwhelmingly posit the validity of that claim. I know appealing to authority is a fraught tactic, especially because such

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appeals can be used to squash non-dominant views. So, to be clear, when I say those with the authority to make truth claims, what I mean is those with the authority afforded from lived experience or empirical evidence. For example, when a significant portion of environmental scientists and those living in locations battered by the ravages of the climate crisis share the consensus that we are indeed in midst of an ecological emergency, then the issue is settled because there is an overarching consensus created by those closest to the issue.

Similarly, we have insurmountable evidence, both from extensive empirical research and the lived experiences of economic disenfranchisement of Black people, that enslavement and ongoing civil rights abuse have produced wealth for White people through mechanisms that have and do disadvantage Black people economically. When confronted with this evidence, leading movements for racial justice like Black Lives Matter, thought leaders such as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014), and policy analysis such as The Brookings Institute (Ray & Perry, 2020) and many others agree that the remedy involves economic redistribution is significantly substantiated. Thus, presenting reparations as a settled issue asserts trust in the collective voices that have the authority to make truth claims about the topic.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

privilegedBluntly put, groups with a vested interest in maintaining an unjust status quo have the incentive and the power to dispute any claim that threatens their dominance. This is an especially important point to raise because an unjust status quo affords these groups with exaggerated prestige and privilege. A paradox thus emerges - those with the least incentive to challenge injustice have the most cultural and material resources to do so. I think of my context here in Georgia, USA, for example, where a body of White, affluent, and overwhelmingly male Republic lawmakers just passed legislation that construes any discussion of race, racism, sexism, or structural inequity as a "divisive topic" that should be barred from classrooms. Why wouldn't such a group of lawmakers, whose gender, racial, and class privileges provided them undue access to the high seats of state power, work to block education about these topics? Maintaining the master narrative that figures their privileged place in society as natural and self-earned maintains their dominance. A final point I want to raise here regarding the question is that it is important to consider the motives of those who dispute reparations as a settled issue. So, to what degree must we let these interests guide the choices we make as educators? How do you see the current right-wing attack on all talk about race, critical race theory, or structural racism impacting the work you are encouraging teachers to undertake?

Amelia Wheeler and Chantelle Grace's Response:

We have been thinking a lot about this question lately, and we have three thoughts I would like to share with teachers.

First, we realize we are asking teachers to take varying levels of risk when we ask them to teach about reparations. Challenging entrenched power structures always entails risk, so

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it is important to acknowledge this from the start. However, teachers should remember the amount of risk we face is correlated to our social positioning. So, for example, because of Amelia's racial and class privilege, I face a muted risk in bringing up these topics compared to a Black colleague. Since she presents as a middle-class white lady, she has the cultural capital that affords her more latitude in the risks she takes. We have seen in our own classroom experience, that Amelia's critical engagement with topics such as racism and sexism receives far less scrutiny than Chantelle's, and her peers of color. Furthermore, our white male colleagues have even more latitude for taking these types of risks. So, to our fellow white teachers, who still make up a significant majority of the teaching work, we encourage you to recognize that when you take the risk to teach about reparations, you have the undue racial privilege that guards you against blowback. This acknowledgment also highlights the ethical imperative white teachers hold in taking on this risk. If we cower from wielding our privilege, we abdicate our responsibility for taking these risks to our colleagues of color, who are substantially more vulnerable to do the work themselves.

This leads us to our second point, in encouraging educators to teach about reparations amid this right-wing attack, we are urging teachers to engage in collective resistance. In the previous question, we referenced that these attacks function through the power of dominance. This is the type of power that allows the interests of a few to govern the fate of the many. When people stand together in a shared commitment to justice, however, we wield a different type of power, the power of collective resistance. This is the type of power that makes those in dominance quiver because they are innately aware that collective resistance can unseat them from their privileged positions. We know this all sounds heady, and perhaps far removed from the work of the classroom teacher, but it is not. When we as educators stand together, to assert that reparations for Black Americas is an act of just healing and a truly actionable way forward, we wield our power, power that can alter the course of institutional education. For example, the power of collective resistance is why Ethnic Studies is now a required course for graduation in California (Fensterwald, 2021). So, I urge you as teachers to see yourself as part of a larger movement for justice, to connect with peers who share these commitments, and to find groups you can plug into who can support you (for example BLM at School or Zinn Education Project). It is empowering to stand in solidarity with educators across the nation in resistance to these attacks and I encourage teachers to see stepping into this collective power as an enlivening and even joyous way to be in the world.

The last point we would like to offer teachers about teaching reparations amidst this right-wing attack is the small strides we have made in terms of educational justice have always been made by brave educators breaking unjust rules. For example, it used to be against the rules to center authors who were women or people of color on the syllabus, and many educators did it anyway (Crocco & Davis, n.d.; Givens, 2021). It was once punishable by death to teach people who were enslaved to read and write, but many enslaved people, especially women, found ways to educate their youth (Neal & Dunn, 2020). What these examples teach us, is we must not adjust to an unjust status quo, nor bend to accommodate power that seeks to enforce it. We must instead recognize that the legislation against teach-

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ing about racism and race is a tool of unjust dominance, rules we have an ethical imperative to transgress. And we must never forget that the power of dominance projects itself as if it is everywhere, when in fact, there are many pockets where it cannot see. Like those educators in the past who taught in the face of death, we want to suggest that we can draw from the courage of those who came before us to find our place of resistance to teach for justice in the face of the current right-wing assault on teaching.

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