

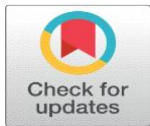


Examining Cultural Barriers to Teaching Anti-Racist History in the Rural U.S.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am Professor and Coordinator of Secondary Education and Social Studies Education at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida, which resides on the traditional land of the Timucua people and the Seminole Tribe. After earning my Bachelor of Arts degree from The University of Alabama, I taught middle and high school social studies in Atlanta for five years, then earned my PhD from The University of Texas at Austin. Last year I worked at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, as a Fulbright Distinguished Scholar. My research interests include civic education, the teaching of controversial issues and difficult history, and the teaching of social issues. My husband and two of my sons are attorneys, and our third son is in college at Acadia University in Nova Scotia. I am originally from Alabama and am a huge Bama football fan.

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Having taught high school and middle school social studies in Florida and New York, Seay now teaches undergraduate methods and graduate courses on the social studies curriculum. He researches and writes about intersections of race and historical narration in the context of American schooling. Seay completed his undergraduate work in education at The Florida State University and a Master of Arts in History at Missouri State University. He earned his PhD at The University of Florida.

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INTRODUCTION

Although research focusing on rural schools and race is scant, a handful of studies indicate that race matters a great deal in rural history education. It matters particularly in terms of divergent cultural memories and uses of history (cf. Nordgren, 2016; Seay, 2019) that students and teachers may bring to the classroom. This article summarizes studies of rural White history teachers who contended with narratives of White dominance in the school and community (cf. Castagno, 2014; Leonardo, 2009, 2013; Vaught, 2011). The teachers faced unforeseen difficulties engaging students in sensitive topics, such as racialized violence and other historical systems of inequality that remain in the present.

THE RESEARCH

The overview of findings below operates partly as a framework for visualizing different cases of White dominance in teaching cultures and partly as a summary of research on whiteness in history classrooms. It also reveals a pattern of White dominance in rural education research: Rural history teachers in predominantly non-White communities are underrepresented in the literature.

In developing summaries of classroom studies, we used an adaptation of the synoptic text method (Jupp et al., 2016; Pinar, 2006). We sought plain expressions of textual meaning in classroom studies pertaining to the teaching of race-related historical topics. The studies under review drew from classroom observation data as well as interview data collected from research participants. Seay's (2019, 2023) interviews relied partly on visual elicitation techniques (cf. Barton, 2015; Boucher, 2018a, 2018b) that were designed to sustain difficult discussions about racialized violence.

FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

The term whiteness describes behavioral patterns, habits of mind, discourses, and cultural preferences that people exhibit in different social contexts (Bonilla-Silva, 2012, 2014). Settings for White dominance in rural America have included performances of racist caricatures, public lynchings, segregated public accommodations (including schools), the policing of Black bodies, and discriminatory policies and practices in education (Anderson, 2016; Leonardo, 2009, 2013; Roediger, 1991; Rosiek & Kinslow, 2016). Curricular materials water down or omit such topics (Brown & Brown, 2010; 2014). Among many Americans today, enactments of White dominance represent uncritical and at times fatal behavioral holdovers from centuries ago. These enactments are particularly problematic in rural settings whose histories contain racial violence, and where some people remember these histories and many forget. Within these differences commonly lie misunderstandings and, sometimes, seeds of controversy. In the cases we examined, rural teachers faced sociocultural tensions around race-related topics as they confronted curricular omissions, parental pushback, and students' anti-Black racist remarks. In addressing these enactments of White dominance, teachers encountered very different ways of using knowledge in particular cultures of history (cf. Nordgren, 2016; Seay, 2019, 2023).

In some cases, teachers may encounter pushback if race-related issues are viewed as too controversial or difficult in a rural setting with a traumatic past (Washington et al., 2022). One case study by Seay (2019) focused on a white female history teacher's approach to historical racism and examined barriers to implementing racially conscious teaching. The context was a high-poverty rural Florida high school with an equal mix of Black and white students. Early in her career, the teacher's colorblind belief in social equality had given way to a different perspective on race (cf. King & Chandler, 2016). She asserted that were it not for her experience of teaching in low-income, rural schools, she would never have been aware of the extent of racial divisions in the United States. However, after a few years of attempting to teach history through a lens of racial consciousness, she met significant resistance from a small group of White parents who claimed that teaching African American history was "wrong"; their language intimidated her. As a result of these encounters, she taught fewer lessons about African American history. In placating a minority of White people in the community, she "pulled back" on potentially controversial topics and whitewashed her own instructional interpretation of the curriculum. In effect, her teaching began to mirror her earlier colorblind stance.

Seay (2023) interprets these findings as aspects of historical culture and cultural memory (Nordgren, 2016) that normalize whiteness (cf. Bonilla-Silva, 2014). In this particular case, the teacher's narrative choices strengthened connections between past and present that omitted stories of racial oppression and violence. Her choices aligned with narratives of "universal values" and "universal experience" (Fitchett et al., 2015; Lipsitz, 1990; cf. King & Swartz, 2014)

and were grounded in an uncritical concept of “nonviolence” (cf. Butler, 2020; Seay, 2023). The result was an interpretation of the curriculum that appeared a particular preference for historical narration in her rural school setting (cf. Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Another rural teacher unexpectedly encountered difficulties when she found herself navigating “open” and “closed” issues around race (Camicia, 2008; Hess, 2009). Washington & Humphries (2011) describe a White female history teacher in a predominantly White, working-class, conservative community in rural Florida. This teacher was mindful of race-related issues and wanted her students to engage with difficult history. However, in a class discussion, a few of her White students indicated that they viewed as “open” specific issues around race – slavery and biracial marriage – that most people today would consider as settled. These seemingly settled issues became “controversial” within this particular setting because the students in question openly expressed racist viewpoints, thereby marginalizing or excluding their few Black classmates. The teacher concluded that she needed to make the distinction between “open” and “closed” topics more explicit when addressing issues related to race. She wanted to minimize the possibility that students might share opinions that are considered racist in the larger society and that could damage the classroom community (Washington & Humphries, 2011).

In other cases, White teachers’ unwillingness to critically interpret the curriculum may hinder inquiry about racism and thus reinforce master narratives about race and racial violence in the rural South (Washington et.al, 2022). Chandler and Branscombe (2015) studied three White male U.S. history teachers in rural northern Alabama who “taught about conflict in non-conflictual ways,” in part by reinforcing colorblind perspectives (Chandler & Branscombe, 2015, p. 61, 76). The teachers were aware of topics related to racism and violence in history; they were unwilling to critically engage students in making sense of these topics. Their main barrier to critical engagement was a vague and undefined racist terror that the teachers wanted to avoid in class. Ostensibly, their decisions to pull back the curricular reins were meant to protect students of color in the classroom. However, the lack of student engagement, teachers’ self-censorship, and the discussion of fear in teaching particular historical topics also indicate patterns of White dominance in the rural social environment (see Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Rural school settings are especially fertile ground for studies that investigate teachers’ and students’ cultivation of historical knowledge. Further research that analyzes teachers’ planning, curriculum, pedagogy, and relationships with students would inform the education of preservice teachers in rural settings as well as identify local needs for supporting the professional learning of rural inservice teachers. Teachers can carry out such rese as a series of self-studies/critical reflections or as group studies within departments. Research should be informed by sociological and historical knowledge about the rural school community.

Practical Suggestions

We offer the following suggestions for teaching about history and race in rural settings:

- In some southern rural schools with a history of racial violence (Anderson, 2016; Hahn, 2003), Black and White descendants of victims and perpetrators might be together in a teacher’s classroom. Some students’ family backgrounds influence their beliefs about the causes of the Civil War, the Jim Crow era, and racism in the U.S. today. Teaching about race and racism in such settings may be very personal for some students, and teachers should plan for these possibilities (Washington et.al, 2022). Planning can include taking advantage of local archival sources, constructing a regional and local narrative about Native American and African American experiences, and creating opportunities for students to engage these narratives with stories of settlement from their families’ past (cf. Sleeter, 2015; Tieken, 2008).
- The New York Times (2022) has an excellent collection of resources on teaching about race and racism that can be applied especially to rural students. Some of the question prompts for students to investigate and reflect on include:
- How would you describe your identity?
- What assumptions have people made about you based on your race, religion, gender, the way you dress, or anything else?
- What does your accent say about who you are?
- How do you connect to your heritage?
- How much has your ZIP code determined your opportunities?

- Does your teacher’s identity affect your learning?
In addition, there are some compelling topics that rural students may have unique perspectives on:
- Memorials and names of buildings
- Students’ views on race and racism
- Learning about slavery in the U.S.
- Racial diversity by neighborhood
- School segregation and educational inequality
- Missing indigenous women in rural areas
- Teachers benefit from understanding which race-related topics in particular are challenging for them, and why. We recommend exercises in the Learning for Justice publication “Let’s Talk!” (Learning for Justice, 2023). This resource provides guidance on, among other things, helping teachers examine their own beliefs about race, helping students talk about whiteness, participating in critical conversations on controversial issues, and dealing with strong emotional content.
- Finally, we recommend the book, *Thinking About Teaching: A Rural Social Studies Teacher’s Path to Strive for Excellence* (Jakubowski, 2023). The book provides an experienced teacher’s perspective that can benefit both practicing and pre-service teachers in its discussion of such topics as civic participation, digital literacy, social issues inquiry, and local history.

The study of place and positionality can help rural teachers and students to critically engage with the past. Attention to local factors that affect uses of historical knowledge can provide insight on cultural barriers to anti-racist teaching. Rural teachers who pay attention and who contend with narratives of White dominance can help to fill gaps in local memory and can resist pressure to avoid potentially controversial topics.

Q & A WITH Elizabeth Yeager Washington & Travis L. Seay

Question #1

Teacher’s Question:

Were any rural history teachers who successfully implemented anti-racist history included in the study? If so, what can we learn from them? And if not, why not?

Elizabeth Yeager Washington & Travis L. Seay’s Response:

This is a fair question that requires a somewhat complex answer. The short answer is no, and this is probably due to previous means of selecting research participants. Rural settings in the U.S. are most often, though not always predominantly White, and most rural classroom research on history education has been conducted in such settings. This is not to say that anti-racist pedagogies do not become activated in these settings. Yet in these settings, various forms of resistance to teaching history through a lens of anti-racism frequently weave into stories about instruction. Future studies of rural history education might extend into predominantly non-White communities. There may be rural schools and classrooms where “anti-racist history” becomes “successfully implemented” and where anti-racist teaching practices are broadly valued.

In classroom research that investigates barriers to developing anti-racist pedagogies, questions about teaching cultures arise. Teacher training, interview responses, and instructional data figure into descriptions of “culture,” as do factors of local history, student populations, administrative stances, and local tastes, preferences, and techniques concerning historical narration. Thus, research questions related to the effective implementation of anti-racist instruction, as well as to factors that bar teachers from a sense of effectiveness, should prioritize ethnographic/historical data related to the cases under investigation. To date, very few rural studies of history education have taken this approach.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

What other resources, like Learning for Justice, would be helpful for rural classroom teachers?

Elizabeth Yeager Washington & Travis L. Seay's Response:

Zinn Education Project. ([Zinnedproject.org](https://zinnedproject.org)). Role-playing exercises, counternarratives, and primary sources. Inclusive Teaching at The University of Michigan (sites.lsa.umich.edu). Lesson plans on anti-racism that can be adapted for secondary-level instruction. National Rural Education Association (<https://www.nrea.net/resources>). Equity, diversity, and inclusion resources; racial equity tools; resources for parents and caregivers; podcasts; resources for teacher education programs; teacher professional development

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

How do the textbooks and other district-provided materials factor into teaching anti-racist history? I would be especially concerned about new/novice teachers relying solely on what they are given—how can we ensure they are accessing high-quality materials that teach true history?

Elizabeth Yeager Washington & Travis L. Seay's Response:

Focusing on the regular use of primary sources in teacher education programs and during in-service professional development can help teachers to visualize the narrative limitations of many state-adopted texts. Partnering with professional historians and other history educators who address historical racism—as workshop leaders on PD days, as guest speakers, and as guides in selecting sources and developing compelling questions—can be transformative for teachers. Although these decisions often fall to professors and administrators, we encourage teachers to have conversations with their department heads and other educators about ways to present and investigate diverse perspectives using historical evidence. In short, networking and assertiveness are keys to problematizing and supplementing existing texts.

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

Teachers can be hesitant to engage in controversial issues. How can teachers work with administrators to set themselves up for success when engaging students in these conversations?

Elizabeth Yeager Washington & Travis L. Seay's Response:

In preparing to engage in controversial issues, teachers should develop lesson plans that align with state instructional standards. Teachers should be able to support their rationale for augmenting standards with sources, questions, and activities pertinent to the controversial issues being taught. Additionally, instructional goals—at the classroom and school levels—should be a regular topic of conversation between teachers and administrators. The more that administrative and classroom goals not only converge but become articulated through regular communication, the less friction teachers might expect

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

I know students can get emotionally hot in these kinds of conversations. How can teachers prepare themselves to respond appropriately to students' emotions so that these conversations don't go off the rails?

Elizabeth Yeager Washington & Travis L. Seay's Response:

Setting classroom norms for discussion is of course an important first step. However, it is also important for teachers to preview lessons with their students and do some of the emotional preparation ahead of potentially difficult conversations. The inventory/reflection activities such as those in the Learning for Justice materials we recommended can aid this preparation. Additionally, teachers can encourage students to view their conversations as vital to an ongoing process of inquiry and learning. All knowledge is partial, in other words; dialogue about difficult social issues is a way of fleshing out our respective blind spots of experience and knowledge.

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