



**HISTORY EDUCATION RESEARCH JOURNAL**

ISSN 2631-9713 (Online)

Journal homepage:

<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/pages/history-education-research-journal>

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### How to cite this article

Brooks, C. (2021) 'Discursive differences in teaching the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision and the preservation of narratives of American progress'. *History Education Research Journal*, 18 (1), 7–27. <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.18.1.02>

Submission date: 16 June 2020

Acceptance date: 2 December 2020

Publication date: 20 April 2021

### Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymized during review.

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# Discursive differences in teaching the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision and the preservation of narratives of American progress

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study research explores the discursive practices of three White secondary US history teachers while teaching about the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision. Using critical discourse analysis as a methodology, this study examines teachers' use of naming, verb tense and presupposition to explore the subtle differences in meaning conveyed to students about the *Brown* decision and how these differences correspond with teachers' historical knowledge and beliefs about the goal and role of teaching history. In revealing these discursive differences in historical narratives, this study demonstrates how master narratives of American progress rooted in hegemonic Whiteness are upheld or disrupted, and sometimes both. This study supplements existing research about the teaching and learning about the history of *Brown* and raises questions about the different historical narratives presented to students even when purportedly covering the same topics.

**Keywords:** history/social studies education, critical discourse analysis, teachers, master narrative, hegemonic Whiteness, historical narratives

## Introduction

In her 2009 TED talk, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie warns of the 'dangers of a single story' that reduces individuals, events and even continents to stereotypical depictions devoid of complexity, reliant on simplistic explanations that obscure individual agency AND human desire, and 'robs people of dignity'. Of the ways in which stories are told, she notes that 'who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told are really dependent on power' (Adichie, 2009). When it comes to teaching history, the stories taught in classrooms and portrayed in textbooks have been, and continue to be, sources of great contention, particularly questions of which histories to teach, how to represent minoritized groups, and how to teach about race, racism and Whiteness (Brown and Au, 2014; Au et al., 2016; Lopez et al., 2013; Carretero and Bermudez, 2012; Journell, 2009; Howard, 2003).

The decision of the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* is one historical event that seemingly lacks such controversy, at least in secondary history classrooms, and is a signature feature of US history courses, state standards and social studies textbooks (Hess, 2005). While academics and activists are engaged in ongoing debates about whether the *Brown* decision is deserving of its status as an unblemished democratic achievement (Hall, 2005; Guinier, 2004; Bell, 1980),

most 'school' representations continue to depict *Brown* as a wholehearted success and an important entrenchment of American democracy (Hess, 2005). Woodson (2016) describes this 'success' story as a 'master narrative'.

Using the concept of master narrative, this paper supplements research about how *Brown* is currently taught in high school classrooms. The following details how three White, eleventh grade US history teachers in California taught the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in their respective classrooms. Applying a methodology of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Van Leeuwen, 2008; Gee, 1999), this study places particular emphasis on teachers' discursive patterns, specifically examining practices of naming, sentence subjects, verb tenses and presuppositions. Focusing on these items complicates notions of a ubiquitous *Brown* narrative and shows how even slight linguistic differences can alter historical explanations. And yet, despite differences, this paper also raises questions about the overarching message of *Brown* as a signifier of American progress, and explores whether and how discursive practices actually disrupt a stable master narrative of American progress (McAdams, 2006). Ultimately, despite each teacher's unique version of *Brown*, in effect, all versions bolstered a master narrative of American progress rooted in White hegemony.

## Literature review

### Teaching race, racism and African American history

A substantial amount of research has examined the role of race and racism in the social studies (Woysner and Bohan, 2012) and problematized depictions of minoritized groups in the social studies curriculum, including textbooks (Calderón, 2008, 2014; Brown and Brown, 2010, 2011, 2015) and state standards (Eargle, 2016; Journell, 2009; Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2012; Shear et al., 2015; Anderson and Metzger, 2011). These authors' findings indicate that despite the removal of overt racist imagery of the past (Crocco, 2004), textbooks, curriculum and social studies pedagogy continue to rely on stereotypical and un-agentic representations of African Americans (Eargle, 2016; Lintner, 2004), who are often portrayed as victims of discrimination, or in capacities limited to a few historical events, rather than as the major drivers of social change (Journell, 2009). According to VanSledright (in Hawkman and Castro, 2017: 28), Black history is often confined to 'freedom quest' tropes and limited to the events involving Enslavement and the civil rights movement (King and Brown, 2015; Busey and Walker, 2017; Bolgatz, 2005).

A lack of agency attributed to communities involved in social struggle holds true in most research documenting how the civil rights movement is taught (King, 2014). In their analyses of textbook narratives of the civil rights movement, Woodson (2016, 2017) and Aldridge (2002, 2006) find that accounts included few African Americans, generally portrayed as messianic figures (for example, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr), with little reference to the movements supporting these individuals (see also Wineburg and Monte-Sano, 2008). Selecting a few African Americans as 'exceptional, outliers, and atypical', King (2014: 11) argues, denies sociocultural agency to entire communities and propagates otherness. In addition, (Hall 2005: 1234) finds that depictions of Martin Luther King Jr remain 'frozen in 1963', where his speeches 'retain their majesty yet lose their political bite'. Reducing social movements to individual heroism precludes more complex understandings of systemic racism and collective action. Demonstrative of this, Wills (2019) studies the teaching of the civil rights movement, finding that students' explanations of racism were often pinned on individuals' actions, thereby preventing more structural understandings of racism. In addition, as noted by Salinas et al. (2016),

the civil rights movement frequently occludes other histories leading up to the *Brown* decision involving other collectivities of colour. This finding is confirmed by Santiago (2016), who examines the teaching of the *Mendez v. Westminster* court case preceding *Brown*, which ruled school segregation unconstitutional, finding that teachers reduced *Mendez's* complexities in order to draw cross-racial parallels between Latinx and Black movements. Finally, Hall (2005) describes the dominant narrative of the 'short civil rights movement', starting with the *Brown* decision in 1954 and culminating with the Voting Rights Act in 1965, symbolizing a 'triumphal moment in a larger American progress narrative' at the expense of a true accounting of the movement's successes and challenges. These dominant understandings have been co-opted by the conservative movement and tokenized as part of a new 'colour-blind' ideology that concedes the existence of racism, but relegates it to a time 'in the distant past' mainly in the South, and understood as 'individual bigotry' (Hall, 2005: 1237).

### Teaching *Brown*

In examining the teaching of *Brown*, Hess (2005) argues that there is a stark contrast between the historical explanations proffered by academics and the history frequently taught in schools. For academics such as Hall (2005), the *Brown* decision is wrought with ambivalence, rampant with contradictory effect. Scholars including Derek Bell (1980) have argued that *Brown* was more about post-Second World War interest convergence and the need of the United States to appear as a liberal democracy in the face of Soviet competition.

Other studies have challenged the actual effects of *Brown*, asserting that many school districts did not desegregate until the mid-1970s, and that integration did not necessarily undo the psychological damage of racial discrimination (Gay, 2000). In fact, integration often meant that African Americans had to travel across cities to attend White schools taught by largely White teachers (Gay, 2003) who continued to harbour racist attitudes (Halvorsen, 2012), and the decision also led to the firing of Black teachers and the consolidation of Black community-based institutions (Watras, 2012). Today, US schools are more segregated than ever (Orfield et al., 2019). Moreover, Noguera and Wing (2006) find that even in so-called integrated spaces, racial inequality persists (see also Lewis and Diamond, 2015). Despite this complicated background, in most school contexts, the *Brown v. Board* decision is taught as a full-throated success.

### Theoretical frame: Master narratives and hegemonic Whiteness

This study was guided by two theoretical concepts: master narratives and hegemonic Whiteness. The idea of master narrative applies Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony to the field of history, and explores how teaching history is used as a means for operationalizing normative ideas about power. Apple (2004) argues that schools are instruments through which dominant ideologies are imparted, and that they often do the bidding of systems of power, albeit sometimes unwittingly. With respect to history as a discipline, Trouillot (1995: 28) argues that 'power is constitutive of the story ... that power itself works together with history'. History is seen here not as a series of *a priori* facts, but as an ideology embodied – a positional take with specific aims. Raymond Williams elaborates on:

the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded. Even more crucially, some of these meanings are reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support

or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture. (Quoted in Apple, 2004: 5)

Here, a so-called 'traditional' past is systematically constructed in the service of maintaining existing power relations. These narratives are frequently termed 'master narratives', which Hammack (2011: 313) defines as a 'collective storyline' viewed as compulsory for group members – 'a story which is so central to the group's existence and "essence" that it commands identification and integration into the personal narrative'. Within the context of the United States, Woodson (2016: 185) ties master narratives to the reinforcement of White supremacy, defining master narratives as 'social and historical mythologies that portray reality in ways that reinforce White power and position'.

Notions of exceptionalism, progress and redemption are central to master narratives about the origins of the United States (McAdams, 2006, 2013; VanSledright, 2008) and are inextricably linked to Whiteness. Calderón (2008, 2014) notes that the 'main story' most often taught in history classrooms is one that reinforces White settler nationalism, which, in effect, erases, obscures and sanitizes histories that threaten to complicate or delegitimize the American colonial project. Hughey (2012) describes this as hegemonic Whiteness, wherein Whiteness functions as the unexamined norm and Whiteness is presumed as normal (see also Dyer, 1997). Chandler and Branscome (2015) and others have examined the pervasiveness of Whiteness in social studies education (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Hawkman, 2018, 2020; Smith and Crowley, 2014; Crowley and Smith, 2015; Hawkman and Shear, 2020). Given the findings of this research, critical scholars see the purpose of history as a means for speaking back to master narratives through counternarratives (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995), a central tenet of critical race theory, which seeks to 'replace comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities' experiences' (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012: 24).

Hammack (2008: 222) describes the possibility of multiple, and at times competing, master narratives that coincide with individuals' personal identities and cultural affiliations, and through social interaction and practice. In this study, I view the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision through the lens of master narrative, seeking to observe how teachers' versions diverged from, and converged with, typical 'master' treatments as described above, and to locate counternarratives. To do so, I deploy critical discourse analysis, specifically focusing on how language shapes meaning.

## Critical discourse analysis

### Theory

In this paper, I utilize critical discourse analysis as my methodology to provide a way for both viewing and analysing data. According to Kress and Hodge (1979), language is a means by which ideology operates, establishing institutional practices that appear commonsensical, natural and hard to identify, and yet conferring power through the recruitment of individuals into certain subject positions, connected to differential status, and often legitimizing existing power relations. This type of positioning also occurs through learning history; discourses are located in the historical narratives taught to students that inform their understandings of themselves, their social groupings, their place within nations, and their world views. As Gee (1999: 18) explains, it is impossible to separate individual actors from the discourses they represent and enact, and of

which they are 'carriers' – 'through our words and deeds, we carry on conversations with each other through history and in doing so, form human history'. For the purposes of this paper, I use 'narrative' as a stand-in for 'discourses'. It is in this way that White hegemonic master narratives are enacted discursively; through the language that teachers deploy, and through their decisions about who to name and how to position historical actors, history is made and remade for students.

## Method

To demonstrate ways in which language both shapes and is shaped by social relations (Halliday, 1994), this paper utilizes methods of critical discourse analysis to show both the micro-mechanizations of language usage in classroom-provided historical narratives *and* the larger discourses that these practices invoke. I coded transcripts of each teacher's lessons on the *Brown v. Board* decision at a clausal level, specifically examining the types of nouns and verbs that comprised each clause. In order to address the question, *Who are actors?*, I tracked who or what were featured as sentence subjects, noticing whether they were individuals, collectivities or nominalizations (actions turned into nouns). Key to the use of nominalizations are questions regarding suppressions and deletions (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Machin and Mayr (2012: 85) explain that when 'the agent is missing', responsibility is obscured. By omitting individual actors, nominalized verb groupings – such as racism, segregation and colonization – appear to be naturally occurring, 'inevitable', and 'something that must be responded to and adapted', rather than questioned (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 85). I also examined patterns of nomination, looking at who was named, and whether the naming was individualized or generalized (for example, institutions). To address the question, *Who is acted upon?*, I tracked who or what was positioned as a direct object.

As with social actors, the ways that actions are described and attributed to various types of people differ and have material consequences. Thus, to understand how agency attribution differed across groups, I looked at what types of verbs characterized actions, making note of active versus passive verb constructions. On a macro-level, I employed Fairclough's (1989) tool of presupposition in order to probe 'what kinds of meanings are assumed as given in a text?' (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 153).

Because I wanted to compare the embedded power relations across all three classroom contexts, I limited my clausal analysis to teachers' lessons involving the *Brown v. Board* decision, despite having field notes that spanned their units. I supplemented these data with qualitative interviews in order to understand whether and how teachers' lessons confirmed or undercut their stated goals and beliefs about their role as history teachers. In the findings below, I include a mix of examples of teachers' discourse and more general insights gleaned from interview data to present a fuller picture.

## Study design

### Participants

This study featured three eleventh grade US history teachers, Christopher, Samuel and Talia (all pseudonyms), all of whom identified as White. I recruited them through snowball sampling based on acquaintances' recommendations. I sought to capture a range of classroom contexts, and I was able to achieve some degree of representation in terms of class type, school demographics and school type. To that end, Christopher taught Advanced Placement (AP) US history and Samuel taught regular US history at

large, suburban, predominantly White high schools, while Talia taught regular US history at a smaller urban charter school populated predominantly by students of colour. All of the teachers had seven years of teaching experience, were of similar ages, and had gone through one-year credential programmes. Christopher and Samuel both had undergraduate degrees in history, and Talia majored in American studies.

Importantly, each teacher expressed feelings of autonomy with regard to their curriculum, asserting that their choices about what to teach were not shaped by their school administrations, parental fears or a predetermined curriculum. Christopher relied on an AP US history textbook for homework, but his classroom teaching did not engage the textbook. Samuel relied heavily on his school's textbook for both homework and classroom activities. Talia did not use a textbook at all. Christopher worried about covering all of the AP curriculum, but no other fears were expressed by participants. This sense of freedom reflected Thornton's (1991) finding that teachers are curricular and pedagogical gatekeepers. Finally, all three teachers reported reading widely outside the requisite classroom materials to learn about their subject. Christopher described reading a biography of Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's, which informed his 1950s unit. Samuel referenced texts and films that informed his historical understandings, although the bulk of his knowledge about the civil rights movement appeared to come from his school's adopted textbook and another non-adopted textbook. Finally, Talia described learning about the civil rights movement in a college course that included clips from the documentary *Eyes on the Prize* (DeVinney et al., 2010). She was so inspired by the documentary that she watched the entire 14-hour series on her own. Additionally, each teacher described experiences living and working in communities that diverged from their own suburban upbringings: Christopher had spent time on a Native American reservation, Samuel had lived in Japan for two years, and Talia had studied abroad in Mexico, was Jewish, and had been involved in activism for most of her life.

### Limitations and researcher positionality

Despite this semblance of parity, it is important to note the limitations of this study and the fact that these findings are not generalizable. Had I observed a different group of teachers, my findings would have been different. Moreover, although student demographics were part of my selection criteria and I sought a cross-section of classrooms, I focused on teachers' linguistic practices and their perceptions of their classrooms, schools and communities, rather than on the students. Beyond demographic data collected from school district websites and teachers' anecdotal descriptions, I did not collect additional information about students. Finally, my own positionality as a White woman and former history teacher provided me with an insider-outsider status that inevitably shaped this research. It is possible that my insider status as a fellow White person made teachers feel more comfortable in opening up about their dilemmas related to addressing race in their classrooms. However, my outsider status as a researcher and former teacher might have invoked feelings of insecurity, inviting a need to perform in certain ways and/or 'say the right thing', in part because of the lack of ease White people frequently feel when talking about race.

### Data set

In this study, I utilized comparative qualitative case study methods (Baxter and Jack, 2008) to collect data that included preliminary interviews, classroom observations, curricula and debriefs. I observed each teacher's units on the civil rights movement,

which varied in time spent and placement in their respective courses. Talia and Samuel both taught three-week units specifically about the civil rights movement and dived into a variety of different historical events, including the murder of Emmett Till, the march from Selma to Montgomery and the Black Power Movement, along with more contemporary issues such as the police murders of young Black men. In contrast, Christopher's civil rights movement lessons were embedded within a broader unit on the 1950s, which moved quickly and spanned an array of topics, including the booming economy, the women's movement, communism and cultural trends such as the expansion of materialism, and the development of supermarkets, fast food and motels.

Although the three teachers' coverage of the movement varied, each taught lessons on the *Brown v. Board* decision, which I used as a comparative sample. After observing lessons, I conducted informal follow-up debriefings and final wrap-up interviews, and I collected curriculum samples. Prior to observing their teaching, I conducted formal interviews with each participant lasting between 60 and 120 minutes, wherein I sought to understand how they approached teaching historical moments involving race, their views of history and their goals as teachers (see Box 1). I audio-recorded and transcribed each event, and I wrote analytic memos during each phase of research. It is important to note that teaching and learning are highly complex activities (Gebhard, 2019), and the lessons I observed are not generalizable to each teacher's overall teaching practice. Instead, I used their narratives of *Brown* as emblematic of *some* of the different linguistic practices utilized, and not as a complete assessment of anyone's entire linguistic repertoire.

## Findings: Three versions of *Brown*

### *Brown* as a narrative of hegemonic Whiteness – Christopher

Christopher's presentation of history most closely typified a master narrative of the United States. He viewed history as a collection of facts operationalized to support certain arguments. He emphasized the importance of data and evidence to support arguments, asserting in our initial interview: 'You can argue basically anything, although weak arguments don't have good data backing them up.' In both his interviews and teaching, Christopher frequently presented counter-perspectives to historical injustices, creating a permission structure that excused and/or downplayed the harm caused by the initial policy. For example, in his discussion of how he teaches manifest destiny and westward expansion during our initial interview, he explained:

I think now there's a trend to say, well this is a horrible thing because Native Americans passed away, animals were killed, they lost their land, they cut down the trees, they were violated. But they could also argue on the other side, well we live a really nice lifestyle here. And that wouldn't have been possible if we didn't do these things.

With this explanation, Christopher neutralized genocidal violence by using passive voice verbs such as 'were killed', and descriptors such as 'passed away', 'lost' and 'cut down' trees, with no clear agent responsible for said degradation. Then, when discussing how he teaches post-Civil War Reconstruction, Christopher cited Robert E. Lee as a 'shining example' of a former Confederate soldier who 'made good' by becoming a 'chancellor of a school, and a lot of African Americans joined that school, and he spent the last five years of his life educating people, not in the sense of racism necessarily, but on the idea of bringing the country together'. In this narrative, Christopher left out other facts about Lee, such as his belief that African Americans



**Box 1: Interview protocol**

- For the purpose of this study, I am interested in how historical events are framed in US history classes.
- I'm hoping that you can speak in as much detail as possible about if and how you approach the following events. Please include pedagogical strategies, as well as narratives and your overarching goals for these events.
- Think about it as if you're telling me stories about how you think about these topics, and then how you approach them in your teaching.
- I also want to say that it's OK if you don't cover any of the topics mentioned; if this is the case, perhaps you can tell me why you don't.

How do you decide what historical events to focus on in your class?

Probes:

1. What are the determining factors?
2. What kind of external pressures or forces shape your decisions?
3. Do you wish for more autonomy in choosing the historical events that you focus on?

Now, we'll jump into the historical events section.

In terms of concrete lesson plans, teaching approaches, activities and such:

- How do you teach about the Constitutional Convention or the drafting of the constitution?
- How/what do you teach about manifest destiny?
- Do you teach about Bacon's Rebellion?
- Do you teach about the Salem witch trials? What do you teach?
- How do you teach about the Enlightenment/Enlightenment ideals and/or the Scientific Revolution? If so, what do you focus on?
- How/what do you teach about Westward expansion and the acquisition of Western territories (California, Texas and so on)?
- How/what do you teach about the lead-up to the Civil War? (Antebellum Era, Great Compromise, Missouri Compromise and so on)?
- How/what do you teach about the Civil War?
- How/what do you teach about Reconstruction? Do you talk about the Great Compromise of 1877? What do you say?
- How/what do you teach about immigration?
- How/what do you teach about US imperialism?
- As a follow-up, do you teach about Puerto Rico's history as a commonwealth of the United States?
- How/what do you teach about the Holocaust?
- How/what do you teach about post-Second World War domestic policies in the US?
- Do you teach about *Brown v. Board*? If so, how?
- How/what do you teach about the civil rights movement?
- How/what do you teach about the Cold War and US interventions abroad? Which countries do you focus on?
- How/what do you teach about 9/11/2001?
- What other units do you teach about that weren't yet mentioned?
- To what extent is violence a major course theme or emphasized within these histories?

Now, with the remaining time, I'd like to ask a few broader questions:

- What do you fear gets left out of your teaching of these units? Do you address those gaps in any ways? If you had the freedom to teach these units differently, what would you do differently? What is preventing you from doing that?

**Box 1: (continued)**

- Where/how does race come up in your teaching?
- How do you suppose your own biography shapes the way you teach these units?
- Is there any way in which your own race or your own racial/ethnic/cultural history shapes the way you teach these units?
- Do you think a teacher of a different identity would teach these units to these students differently? How so?
- What effect do you think the textbook (and curricular materials) have on how you teach these units and how the students learn them?

were not intelligent enough to vote and his unwillingness to punish students involved in 'attempted lynchings and kidnappings of Black women who lived nearby' (Toscano, 2017). In these and other examples described below, Christopher betrayed a sense of resignation at the crueller parts of United States' history, asserting that sacrificing 'part of your ideals' is necessary in order to 'negate what you believe is opposite of your ideals'. This belief lined up with his hesitancy to judge historical actors who acted brutally, stating in his final interview, 'my stance on judging the past is to judge yourself first through the filter of where they're coming from...'

**Christopher's teaching of *Brown***

The civil rights movement was a relatively small facet of Christopher's unit on the 1950s, and his lesson on *Brown v. Board of Education* comprised only half of a 90-minute class period. Christopher's version of the *Brown* decision was one in which racism did not figure prominently. Instead, his narrative centred on the decision making of two White men and neutralized discussion of racism as 'taking the easy way out', thereby reifying a White-centred version of *Brown* where collective action by people of colour was rendered invisible.

To begin, Christopher limited most of his discussion to the interactions of two White men: Justice Earl Warren and Justice Hugo Black. Other individuals mentioned by name included President Dwight Eisenhower and President Andrew Jackson. He did not name any of the people of colour invoked in the lesson. Instead, he used referents such as the 'little girl from Kansas', to refer to Linda Brown, 'her dad' to reference Linda Brown's father, Oliver Brown, and 'she' when referencing Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine known for integrating Central High School in Arkansas. His descriptions of the Black actors in this history were one-dimensional, mostly characterized by their colour. Describing Linda Brown, he said: 'Basically she's Black, the other school is White, and she has to go to the farther school.' His lack of Black actors and failure to name them stood in contrast to his descriptions of other figures in his 1950s unit, which was peppered with the names and descriptions of various White men, including E.J. Korvette (founder of supermarkets), Ray Kroc (founder of McDonald's) and Kemmons Wilson (founder of Holiday Inn).

Also emblematic of a White-centred historical narrative was Christopher's account of the actual *Brown* decision, in which he ascribed sole agency to Justices Warren and Black in deciding *Brown v. Board*. Of the lead-up to the decision, he stated:

Well, Warren sits down with him for two weeks. They go back and forth arguing about this because Warren wants something. He wants every single judge on the Supreme Court to unanimously decide this. He's like, I don't want any dissent because that will get used later on, and he gets it.

After weeks of arguing, Justice Black, a former Ku Klux Klan member, says, yeah, we gotta desegregate the schools. Alright, and they make a decision.

In this explanation, the central change-making action is that 'they make a decision', referring to Justice Black's and Justice Warren's pre-eminent roles. Christopher did not explain *why* Warren wanted to decide *Brown* without dissent, other than to say that 'it will get used later on'. This ambiguity masked any direct reference to White supremacy or racism that might explain Warren's insistence on a unanimous opinion. Moreover, the passive grammatical structure of the explanation mirrors this ambiguity: there is no actor in the sentence – dissent 'will get used', but by whom was never stated. White supremacy remained unexplained, invisible, and devoid of the multitude of actors who contributed to the decision.

In the lessons observed, Christopher often presented historical moments when people were denied rights not as morally and politically settled, but rather as controversial and ripe for debate. This was evident in his explanation of the lead-up to the *Brown* decision:

[Justice] Black's like, hey you're going to win, you've got the majority of the court, I'm going to dissent, I don't feel that we should be pushing this on the states. And there's three reasons for that. You might have racist tendencies, that's the obvious answer. But the second answer is this: that he doesn't believe the national government should tell states what to do, and you have to understand that's actually a pretty legitimate argument for every case. You have a group of Supreme Court judges who can't be replaced, who can't be fired, and you never pick them, and they get to decide how you live your life ... So, there's a difference right there, so there's an element where Justice Black had a good point. It's not just overt racist, alright?

Emphasizing the multifaceted nature of court decisions is not inherently problematic and, in fact, is a common practice in secondary history classrooms, enabling students to think critically about how laws are made. However, by framing issues of minority rights as open for re-litigation, Christopher conveyed a sense of moral equivocation to his students. By invoking his alleged commitment to 'neutrality', Christopher showcased what Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008: 3) describe as 'white logics', which 'parades as objectivity', but which fails to recognize the historicity of the commitment to objectivity as having developed as part of the eugenics movement in order to preserve White supremacy.

Although Christopher did mention racism in this explanation, he neutralized it by framing it as 'the obvious answer,' signalling that blaming racism is a straw man – the 'easy' way out of an argument. His use of the phrase 'racist tendencies' functioned as a euphemism for racism, and it is telling in terms of his views on how racism functions. The use of the word 'tendencies' implies a belief that racism is naturally occurring and a passive habit, rather than a set of systemic practices. Moreover, Christopher framed the *Brown v. Board* debate as about federalism versus states' rights, reminiscent of the 'lost cause' ideology, which depicted the Civil War as a conflict over states' rights rather than about slavery in order to soften the brutality of Enslavement and justify its existence (Stewart, 2019). In effect, by downplaying the role of racism as a motivating factor in conjunction with repeated pronouncements that 'arguing this does not make you racist', Christopher inoculated a states' rights argument against claims of racism.

Finally, in his lessons on *Brown v. Board*, Christopher articulated an understanding of racism that was limited to individual feelings. This view was most evident when he asked students to identify with Hazel Bryan, the White woman in the background of the iconic picture of Elizabeth Eckford, who is screaming at Eckford as she entered the newly desegregated Central High School. In this instance, he asked students to imagine what it might feel like to 'have to have so much hate'. Here, Bryan is used as a symbol for the face of racism. In projecting her hate as difficult to imagine, Christopher drew a distinction that freed him and his students from implication in racism. He concluded that overcoming learned racism required 'strong individual will': 'It takes an individual that's strong to sit there and say that's a moral wrong, and I'm going to step up against it, and maybe I'm the only person to say that, but it's difficult ...' Reminiscent of Buchanan's (2016) findings, this discourse reified an understanding of racism as limited to individual feelings and actions, apart from Christopher and his students.

In sum, Christopher's lesson on *Brown v. Board* focused almost exclusively on White actors, downplayed the centrality of race and racism in the court's decision, undermined the role of Black people in eliciting change, and limited his explanations of racism to individual feelings rather than structural analyses. In each of these ways, Christopher's version of *Brown* reinforced a narrative of hegemonic Whiteness.

### **Clashing narratives and *Brown* as a vacillating success – Samuel**

Samuel's narrative of *Brown* was the most difficult to categorize, mainly because the ideas he presented were often in direct conflict, perhaps reflecting his own vacillations regarding the purpose of teaching history. Samuel saw himself as social justice-oriented, was in an interracial marriage, and expressed a desire to include marginalized voices and stories in his curriculum. At the same time, he asserted that it was not his responsibility to impart moral judgements on historical events, claiming in our final interview, 'I don't have a dog in this fight', and arguing that 'as far as extrapolating lessons to apply to our present-day society, I feel that that's dangerous territory for me to, like, wade into ... I would rather have them draw their own conclusions'. When discussing his own cultural background in our initial interview, he reported:

I don't have deep-seated cultural pain that traces back to slavery or, like, centuries of systemic oppression of being afraid to go out at night or that the police are going to shoot me. Something like that doesn't exist in my social mental makeup, but it does in many of my students, and so I learned that you have to be sensitive to that and aware of it when you present things.

In this interview, Samuel also identified his desire to use historical examples that might have 'shock value' to engage students, making them 'care about it because it's so bad'. He struggled with how to maintain cultural sensitivity without doing a 'disservice to people who fought those fights to pretend that it was less traumatic than it was'. In terms of questions about what to teach, Samuel articulated a conflict between his desire to teach about 'American life' – 'the food, art, music, family life' – versus the 'political economy' – 'what did the president do and what did he say in this speech' – and other information that enhances students' fluency in the dominant culture: 'You feel like you're sacrificing stuff, like, I mean, stuff that the community will also be, like, what do you mean, you never learned about JFK?' These competing views voiced in Samuel's initial interview were also reflected in Samuel's narrative of *Brown*.

### **Samuel's teaching of Brown**

Samuel's unit on the civil rights movement was the most exhaustive in terms of historical detail. His unit lasted over three weeks, starting with integration efforts during the 1950s, spanning the 1968 passage of the Voting Rights Act, and ending with a documentary about contemporary issues facing the Black community. His account of *Brown* featured many social actors, including Black actors (Jackie Robinson, Isaac Woodward, Anthony Johnson, Rosa Parks, Homer Plessy, Linda Brown and Thurgood Marshall) and White actors (President Truman, George Wallace and President Eisenhower). While none of these individuals were elaborated on in much depth, there were some notable differences in depiction. Black actors were often described in passive voice without clear agents to whom responsibility for oppression could be attributed. In one example, while describing the emergence of Homer Plessy's court case, he explained:

Homer Plessy **got on** a train, **sat** in the part of the train reserved for White people and was *asked* to move ... basically he was upset that he was *asked* to move to the place of the train.

The verbs used to describe Plessy include active (got on, sat) and passive voice (was asked, was asked to move) verbs. Notably, the agent (the person responsible for his having to move) was absent. The lack of responsible agent within this sentence downplayed the role of individual and collective agency in Plessy's story, eliding the fact that Plessy was deliberately recruited by the Citizens' Committee of New Orleans to sit in that part of the train in order to challenge the existing segregation laws (Reckdahl, 2009).

The majority of sentences in Samuel's classroom lesson had subjects that were events or nominalizations, such as 'segregation' and 'racism', or an abstract 'you'. For example, in a discussion of segregation, Samuel explained: 'These policies are enforced by literally the law, and that is called Jim Crow, it's the nickname, Jim Crow laws, enforce segregation.' In the first clause, 'these policies' were the receivers of the action and 'the law' was the doer of the action (the enforcement). Then, in the following clauses, 'that' and 'it' were the sentence subjects (referring to Jim Crow) that 'enforce' segregation. As such, the sentence subjects were not people, but rather a mix of abstract conjunctions ('that'), impersonalized pronouns ('it') and 'these policies' – imbued with officiality and also seemingly natural, exemplifying Machin and Mayr's (2012) notion of suppression which allows the avoidance of specificity. Samuel's pervasive use of nominalizations and agent suppression obscured individual responsibility for promoting segregation and upholding a racist system.

Samuel was the only teacher to bring up the persistence of school segregation in today's society, acknowledging that 'obviously we do not have segregated schools anymore, at least not officially, but if you drive around ... and visit different schools, you will find that the racial composition in some places sure doesn't seem like it's that mixed'. Yet, he balked at discussing affirmative action, stating, 'If I go down that road, that's going to be like a whole day', and reified racist tropes about the 'Other'. In his final interview debriefing the unit, he reported on an attempt he made to contextualize how efforts at integration might feel today, asking students:

How about this idea of bussing? Do you think that's a good idea? Okay then, how about we pick up half of you guys and ship you out to East Oakland and then take half of the kids from Fruitvale and bring them here. Is that good? And they were, like, ooh ... I don't think I want to be on that

bus. ... [laughs] And I was, like, yeah, you probably don't, do you? So, like, if we actually did it, then what happens? How would your parents feel? Yeah, that raises some shit.

Here, Samuel's initial attempts to foster students' empathetic reactions with those living in the segregated South were subverted by his acknowledgement of his students' continued segregation and signalling of 'Otherness' (in this case, 'kids from Fruitvale') as dangerous and something to be avoided. Samuel was also the only teacher to discuss restrictive covenants, a racist real estate practice that precluded the sale of houses to Black people and other people of colour, in his lesson about *Brown*. Yet, despite his discussion of a critical piece of history, he couched his discussion as a joke: during his lesson on Jim Crow segregation leading up to *Brown*, he laughed as he explained how his Chinese-American wife's family struggled to obtain a house with a racial covenant, saying, 'I was kinda like, oh ... uh, sorry?'

Perhaps most notable in Samuel's lesson on *Brown* was his description of institutional racism, which reflected the muddled and conflicting logics that frequently characterized his teaching of *Brown*. The following passage illustrates how Samuel's discursive explanation created a permission structure that suggested that Enslavement was not that bad:

I left you with a somewhat provocative thesis that the idea was that racism started to get institutionalized in this country because there was a need to control the enslaved community ... but then, as the slave population rose, the need to control that population also rose, and so these racist laws started to get created and White supremacy was kinda like born.

This passage is revealing in terms of both Samuel's attempted and delivered outcomes. It seems that Samuel was attempting to demonstrate to students that racial delineations were not clear cut when the country was founded, and that laws were created to further entrench a White supremacist system. However, when analysing this explanation on a clausal level using presupposition (Fairclough, 1989), the explanation actually conveyed a message that countered Samuel's presumed intention. In an illogical chronology, Samuel attributed the creation of racist laws to a boom in the enslaved population, which then led to the birth of White supremacy. This description ignored the role of White supremacy in enabling the capture and enslavement of Africans in the first place. Samuel falsely attributed the passage of laws to the need to control a population that was already – by nature of their enslavement – under control. Samuel attempted to draw a connection between the creation of laws post-Enslavement, such as the Black Codes, but his delivery was muddled by illogical presuppositions and a different message was conveyed.

Ultimately, Samuel's narrative of *Brown* vacillated between including critical aspects of history that are commonly left out of discussions of the court decision and moments that subverted his intended aims. Acknowledgements of ongoing segregation, racial covenants and institutional racism are all key aspects of history that counter master narratives of *Brown* that are largely simplistic and celebratory. Moreover, including a variety of historical actors – Black and non-Black – provided a richer narrative of *Brown* that was not limited to White subjectivity. At the same time, Samuel's use of nominalizations suppressed the agency of White perpetrators of violence. And his frequent use of jokes watered down the seriousness of discussions of racial covenants and reified racist tropes about students who live in different areas, effectively justifying ongoing segregation. Ultimately, Samuel's efforts to impart critical history were subverted by discursive practices that did little to advance a

counternarrative of *Brown* that disrupted notions of American progress or privileged the subjectivities of non-White actors.

### ***Brown* as counternarrative and celebration – Talia**

Talia viewed teaching as inherently political and as a means to dismantle White supremacy. For her, learning history should be a corrective to dominant Eurocentric narratives. In her ruminations on the overarching message about America conveyed to her students during her initial interview, she stated:

I try and set up that deep contradiction because I feel like that is what we're wrestling with because, like, what a contradiction: that you are offered a promise on top of, or at the expense of, the eradication of a people and the enslavement of a people.

This premise animated Talia's teaching – she did not shy away from discussing distressing historical topics, described anti-Black racism as 'terrorism' and reported showing emotion as a practice of solidarity. In her preliminary interview, she explained that as a White teacher of mostly students of colour, she felt her students needed to know 'she was there for them', and she emphasized the importance of discussing White supremacy:

I think just a lot about being totally comfortable with the fact that we are looking in the face of White supremacy and really how ugly it is when it gets challenged and rocked, because the backlash to the civil rights movement is like so horrific and violent that you have to be willing to really look at that and be emotional.

She described her lesson on Emmett Till's murder as 'the hardest day of the year ... there are tears, mine and my students'. In a follow-up interview after the lesson she elucidated:

You're looking at things that are, like, so grotesque and inhumane and you just can't turn into just teacher, you have to be, like, human and teacher, whenever it comes to race, I'm never the expert in the room.

For Talia, teaching history invoked a sense of awe at the bravery of the historical actors she taught about, and a sense of urgency rooted in the acknowledgement that many of the same structures continue to oppress her students today.

### ***Talia's teaching of Brown***

Talia's lesson on *Brown* and its aftermath took up two class periods and was part of a three-week unit dedicated to the civil rights movement during which she weaved together past and present racial injustices to highlight a view of the movement as ongoing. Her lesson on *Brown* centred Black people as agents of change, brought together past and present activists and social movements, and invited students to make historical connections across groups and individuals. Her narrative most closely resembled a counternarrative; in centring the work of people of colour, *Brown* was depicted as a victory directly resulting from their collective actions. This matched Talia's view that history relied on both charismatic leaders *and* movement members, and her hope of empowering her students to work towards social change.

Talia's *Brown* included collectivities and individuals from groups such as the Little Rock Nine, the American Indian Movement, the Chicano Movement, the Braceros, the

feminist movement, the Zoot Suit Riots, the Black Power Movement, Latinx, Japanese and Chinese immigrants in San Francisco, Black Lives Matter and more. On a clausal level, Talia depicted the social actors in her discourse as agentive – powerfully shaping events, evident in her near exclusive use of active verbs.

Talia's narrative of *Brown* also highlighted connections between White and Black people. For example, she elaborated on the unusual friendship that developed between Elizabeth Eckford of the Little Rock Nine and Hazel Bryan, the White woman who protested Eckford's enrolment in Central High School, after Bryan underwent a 'transformation around her own racism'. Talia also expounded on Earl Warren's key role in the *Brown* decision, and the ways in which he was influenced by the organizing efforts of those working on Sylvia Mendez's case in California.

Similarly, Talia used nominalizations to imply that segregation negatively impacted both White and Black people. She described the effects of segregation as damaging *all* children, regardless of race: 'children playing together was outlawed in some places ... dancing together was outlawed, playing checkers was outlawed, playing pool ...'. Like Samuel and Christopher, Talia's discourse here failed to name agents to whom responsibility for segregation could be attributed. The missive, however, was different. By leaving out specific actors imposing these laws, Talia conveyed a message that all were hurt by Jim Crow laws, regardless of race.

This approach aligned with her explanation of Earl Warren's rationale for the court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board*:

He's saying by nature, if you separate the schools and we know the schools were unequal, but he's saying, even if they had the same books, and the same buildings and the same qualified teachers, the fact that they're separate is what makes them unequal, because it psychologically sends a message that one's inferior and one's superior because you can't be together.

While Talia did not shy away from discussing White supremacy, she also forged cross-group identification – the ability to understand individuals' motivations without collapsing group differences or vilifying the 'Other'.

In describing the Warren court's final decision, Talia repeated, 'We won. We won', with a lilt of awe in her voice. This celebratory take was especially interesting given Talia's articulation of American progress as in a dialectic relationship with oppressive backlash and her keen attention to racial injustice. Although Talia was fully cognizant of the persistence of contemporary segregation, she did not bring up the fact that there were no White faces in her classroom. While Talia's narrative centred the work on Black people, and referenced histories not always mentioned in teaching of *Brown* (such as the *Mendez* decision), Talia also promoted a hegemonic version of *Brown* as an outright success, rooted in notions of American progress.

## Discussion

These three versions of *Brown* complicate Adichie's (2009) notion of a single story, and counternarratives more broadly. At first glance, each teacher covered the same event and included many of the same people. And yet, in their naming of actors and framing of actions, meanings were very different. Critical race theorists envision counter-storytelling and counternarratives as a way to revise history so that it accounts for how White supremacy has shaped, and continues to shape, its production (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Talia's version of *Brown* most closely represented a counternarrative; her



unit's essential question was, 'How does the dominant narrative about the civil rights movement serve to maintain the status quo?', and she used words such as 'unveiling' and 'hidden history' to describe her teaching goals during her initial interview. And yet, even she relied on a glamorized, progressive interpretation (Jupp, 2005; Barton and Levstik, 2004) that highlighted the psychological damage to children rather than more critical interpretations about interest convergence (Bell, 1980; Guinier, 2004). Christopher also thought of his 1950s unit as a counternarrative. For him, showcasing the benefits of 1950s materialism offered a counterpoint to a narrative that it was 'only the civil rights movement'. He explained in a debrief following his lesson on *Brown*:

I'm not criticizing my history teacher, but I never got the good stuff of the '50s ... so I have to hit that materialistic culture's pretty good, and it's not equally distributed, and that's an issue. But, for that group within it, it's pretty good.

The juxtaposition of Christopher's and Talia's 'counternarratives' highlights the ways that theory and language are operationalized to different ends, while Samuel's narrative showcases what it looks like when teachers lack ideological clarity.

While each teacher reified dominant narratives of America to varied extents, there were important differences in what was shared, reflective of teachers' larger sentiments about their responsibilities, the purpose of teaching, and meanings of race in the United States. Christopher and Samuel both expressed a commitment to 'neutrality' – they argued at multiple points in their preliminary and follow-up interviews that students should never know their politics. For them, history teachers must stick to 'the facts'. And yet, neither acknowledged the lack of neutrality in imparting a belief that *Brown* was about states' rights, or in invisibilizing Black people's agency, nor did either recognize the ramifications of so-called neutrality writ large (see also Zinn, 1994). In terms of their views on race, both Christopher and Samuel expressed a reluctance to draw distinctions between different subsets of American society, arguing in their initial interviews that doing so might suggest those groups (in both cases, African Americans) were somehow different or apart from the 'regular' American groups. Their view is consistent with Bonilla-Silva's (2003) theory of colour-blind racism wherein racial inequality is downplayed or dismissed, and therefore continues unperturbed, albeit more covertly.

Rather than being intended as a 'gotcha' that chastises teachers for their use of narratives grounded in hegemonic White logics (Berchini, 2019), this paper seeks to identify how these White discourses circulate, often regardless of intention (Blaisdell, 2018). Narratives mediate self-understandings of identity and the social world, that is, the 'other' (Wertsch, 1998; Bruner, 1990). Therefore, the narratives that teachers present may have larger implications for how students learn and reproduce dominant ideologies about race (Hagerman, 2018). While this study does not capture students' interpretations of the narratives imparted by their teachers, it does raise questions about just how different narratives can be, even when purporting to cover the same content or curriculum. Moreover, this paper's finding that White hegemonic discourses circulate in alignment with *and* in spite of teachers' stated views about teaching history means that teacher educators, curriculum developers and policymakers cannot take for granted the neutrality of certain narratives or the requisite corrections that come in the form of counter-curriculum, including more representative or diverse curricular materials. Indeed, what is 'counter' depends on one's starting place – beliefs, identity and sense of purpose all shape the facts chosen to tell stories. While I originally sought to unearth *what* teachers taught about topics related to race and/or racism, this research

revealed the coequal importance of *how* teachers teach particular topics. Because language 'structures our thoughts', and because 'white attitudes and preferences masquerade as common sense', taken together, these processes shape identity formation and views of others, which has important implications for the perpetuation of dominant racial ideologies (Leonardo and Manning, 2015: 6).

## Conclusion

In light of the recent protests against racial violence gripping the United States, society is engaging with the meaning of history in new ways, from reconsidering the purpose of Confederate monuments, to public dialogue about the possibility of reparations, establishing antiracist book clubs intended to raise White people's racial consciousness, and engaging in mass demonstrations. The need for new understandings of the circulations of racial ideologies is at the forefront of public discourse. A nationally representative study by the EdWeek Research Center (2020) found that 81 per cent of US teachers viewed themselves as antiracist. When asked about what makes an 'antiracist educator', a majority described one who teaches 'multiple perspectives and treats everyone fairly' and articulated an antiracist curriculum as promoting 'diversity and equality'. Yet, is curricular inclusion and multi-perspectivity sufficient for dismantling an education system rooted in White supremacy and racial hierarchy? As this study shows, mere inclusion of a more diverse cast of figures will not necessarily dilute overarching messages of American progress or White hegemony. Moreover, although 81 per cent of teachers claim antiracism as part of their identity, this study illustrates just how different teachers' definitions and enactments may be.

I argue that fostering a critical language awareness among teachers is one way to disrupt hegemonic Whiteness and simplistic views of American progress. Fairclough (1992: 90) warns not to assume 'that people are aware of the ideological dimensions of their own practice'. Because teachers play a critical role in facilitating the instructional experiences of their students (Gay, 2000; Thornton, 1991), developing teachers' critical language awareness – not only in terms of their understanding of historical narratives, but also in identifying their own ideological underpinnings – may help teachers gain insight into the meanings they convey to students. Teachers and teacher educators can use critical discourse analysis to examine their own implicit biases. For example, by focusing on the social actors featured in their classroom lessons, teachers can consider questions such as: Who shows up? What treatment do they receive? Are they actors or are they acted upon? Are they always described in passive tense? Noticing these patterns may alert teachers to the implicit messages they send to students via the narratives they teach.

Given Chandler's (2009) call for race and racism to be made more explicit in classrooms, and King's (2018: 2) claim that 'our historical knowledge is connected to how we see ourselves and come to understand people', it is well worth examining the historical narratives employed by teachers in ways that destabilize the White logics undergirding the teaching of history. While ideological clarity alone will not end White supremacy, locating the White logics that pervade narratives of American history is a necessary first step.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to recognize and thank Andrea Del Carmen Vasquez, Ethan Chang, Ron Glass, Cindy Cruz, Brad Olsen and Dale Brodsky for their contributions to this paper.

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