

# **Implications of Pedagogy on the American Civil War for Social Studies Education**

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## **Introduction**

This piece is based on a mixed-methods study that examines university students' experiences in their high school social studies classrooms. The study took place in a mid-sized public university in the American Southeast, and the majority were education majors and were from the American South. The students were asked a range of quantitative and qualitative questions regarding their teachers' perspectives on the American Civil War and their teaching of the topic; most significantly the causes of the war. The data was analyzed to find regional divides as well as precisely what students are learning regarding the Civil War.

We found the regional divide on teachers' perspectives was apparent but not strong. After analysis, the study revealed a strong hesitance on the part of teachers in regards to examining the role of slavery in the Civil War and relating slavery's legacy back to current events today. We also noted that students were clear on the importance of 'effective' teachers relating all history back to current events, which reinforces the importance of teachers not being hesitant to teach the 'hard history' of the Civil War.

## **Literature Review**

Civil war leaves a deep-seated, divisive wound on any country. The American Civil War is no different. Lasting four years and taking an estimated 750,000 lives<sup>1</sup> (the equivalent of 7 million American lives today based on our current population)-- the Civil War was responsible

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates vary from 500,000 casualties to 820,000 casualties.

for more American deaths than all American Wars combined (Faust, 2012). The casualties per deployed were catastrophic: one in five Confederate men of military age did not survive the Civil War (Faust, 2012)<sup>2</sup>. Deeply divisive, even the sitting First Lady-- Mary Todd Lincoln-- lost brothers to the opposing Confederate cause (Berry, 2009).

The American simultaneous interest with and contention over the Civil War today is that the War is much more than a past event; it is a symbol of the regional and racial division of the American people. In a century that has seen both the election of Barack Obama, the first African American president, followed by President Trump's "Build A Wall" Campaign--a border which has been argued to be a "Monument to White Supremacy"(Lee Jr., 2019)<sup>3</sup>-- Americans today more than ever can understand the nonlinear history of the progress of racial equality in the United States.<sup>4</sup> As illustrated by both events, when there are strides forward in racial equality, there is usually a backlash that diminishes those gains.

Even today, more than 150 years later, Americans are still intrinsically divided on the Civil War. More precisely, they are divided on why exactly the Civil War was fought; was it over slavery? American consensus is far from unanimous on this topic: an August 2015 poll found that 49% of people from the South thought that slavery was the primary cause of the Civil War . Only 1% more (50%) of people polled in the Northeast thought that slavery was the

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<sup>2</sup> As compared to casualties per deployed for other American Wars: In Iraq and Afghanistan, 1 out of every 378 deployed Americans. In Vietnam, one of 58. World War I and World War II it was one out of every 40 (Waldman 2014)("American Wars" *US Department of Veterans Affairs*).

<sup>3</sup> In *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow*, Gates Jr. notes that the election of Barack Obama led to notions of the dawn of a "post-racial America." However, his presidency instead triggered a dramatic rise in public expression of white supremacy, and subsequently led to the election of "the most overtly racist President since Woodrow Wilson" (Gopnik, 2019). Gates Jr. argues that the rollback of policies today is similar to the regression of racial equality post emancipation in the Reconstruction era and Jim Crow.

<sup>4</sup> A 2015 poll found that 44% of Americans believe that race relations in the U.S. are getting worse, and only 18% said they believe race relations are improving ("McClatchy-Marist Poll").

primary cause (“A Nation Still Divided: The Confederate Flag”, 2015). If the war was in fact waged to end the culture of slavery, a modern audience can remember the high casualties as justified, virtuous even. But was the war on slavery a war of opposing morals, or was it a war of opposing interests? This moral conundrum would seem easily enough cleared up by fact. However, historical fact on topics such as war are sometimes elusive. As historian Michael Ignatieff writes on the history of memory, “The past has none of the fixed and stable identity of a document. The past is an argument” (Budd, 2010). Like many war histories, fact is not what governs public opinion on the American Civil War. American opinions on the Civil War are governed by emotion and collective memory.

For the first author her first memory of classroom exposure to the Civil War was her middle grade Social Studies teacher bringing in the blanket of her slain Southern ancestors. Seething with animosity, the teacher explained to her students that it was the quilt of her ancestor that burnt to death in her home when Union Major General William T. Sherman burnt down the family home during his famous “March to the Sea”. Like for this teacher, the wounds of the Confederate loss are still present for some, their identities as much inherited collectively as manifested individually. More concretely, the amnesia of the Confederate defeat for some still lives on through Confederate symbolism; through Confederate flags flying until recently above statehouses, on the same pole as the flag of the United States of America and through Confederate statues cast in metal and stone across Southern public spaces and schools.

Since the statues’ construction during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, most have turned a blind eye to these lingering symbols of the Confederacy and the Antebellum South. However, events such as the white-supremacy-fueled Charleston Massacre changed this. In June of 2015 a white supremacist, Dylann Roof, shot and killed nine African Americans in their

church in Charleston, South Carolina. The massacre, fueled by Dylann's white-supremacist, pro-Confederacy ideologies, brought to light the still lingering ideology of the "Lost Cause" in American today; or the ideology that romanticized the Antebellum South way of life and justified the Confederate Cause (Wills, 2019).

## **The Lost Cause**

The Lost Cause narrative emerged following the Civil War--or "War of Northern Aggression"-- as proponents might describe it. This time period in the South-- Reconstruction-- was plagued by economic woes following the collapse of the southern economy and the devastation of the war waged primarily on Southern soil. This time of economic suffering later gave way to the Confederate "Myth of Reconstruction", or the idea that Reconstruction was a time in which newly freed slaves took over the governing of the South, but failed miserably, and therefore the Southern government was again taken over by whites (Loewen, 2007). Through narratives such as this, Lost Cause organizations such as the Daughters of the Confederacy justified the historical role of slavery and need for race-based social stratification (Janney, 2008).

In addition to narratives, Lost Cause proponents glorified the events of the Civil War and the Antebellum South through Confederate symbolism, monuments, and textbooks (Loewen, 2007; Bailey, 1991; Mills & Simpson, 2003). More radical groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan--an organization that notably operated closely with the Daughters of the Confederacy (Lewis & Serbu, 1998)-- executed acts of race-based terrorism.<sup>5</sup> In America today, The Lost Cause ideology still has lingering strongholds and believers such as Roof. Roof actively believed in the

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<sup>5</sup> Both organizations are still active.

Lost Cause Ideology, posing for pictures with the Confederate flag and writing in his manifesto that he had read “hundreds” of slave narratives that affirmed that slavery was positive. He also noted that he felt victimized as a white male and that “something had to be done” (Robles 2015).

The actions of Roof in the Charleston Massacre shook the nation and questioned the role of Confederate symbolism in justifying white supremacy. In delivering his nationally-televised eulogy to the Massacre victims’ families sitting president Barack Obama stated,

For too long, we were blind to the pain that the Confederate Flag stirred into many of our citizens. It’s true a flag did not cause these murders. But as people from all walks of life, Republicans and Democrats, now acknowledge... the flag has always represented more than just ancestral pride. For many, black and white, that flag was a reminder of systemic oppression..... and racial subjugation (Staff 2015).

Following the attack, South Carolina marchers protested the presence of the Confederate flag above the statehouse holding signs that read, “Take It Down” (Zucik, 2015).

In the wake of the Charleston shooting the validity of pro-Confederate symbolism in public spaces became a highly charged debate. This was especially true of statues of prominent Confederates, where--like the flag--personal interpretations of their symbolic meanings varied, though they were universal in the strength of their beliefs. This was especially true in Charlottesville, Virginia where the debate surrounding the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee from Lee Park has spanned the course of years, beginning in 2016 (Fortin, 2017). After over a year of inconclusive back and forth over the removal of the statue and renaming of the park, protests by white supremacists, including the KKK, and counter protests eventually culminated in the now infamous white nationalist “Unite the Right” rally in August of 2017. Among being highly armed and chanting anti-semitic words, the Washington Post (Heim, 2017) reported a protester jeered, “Dylan Roof is our hero!” Eventually, counter protestors overwhelmed the

Unite the Right members, leading the Virginia governor to declare a state of emergency and ordering for the protestors to disband. Shortly after, an enraged protestor--James Field Jr.--drove his car into a counter-protester crowd, killing one and injuring 19. James Field Jr.--who identified theoretically with neo-confederate and neo-nazi ideas--was also inspired by the white-supremacist, patriarchal ideas of the Lost Cause (Pilcher, 2017).

The highly-publicized event became representative of the alt-right movement in the United States and lingering white supremacist, neo-Confederate, racial ideologies. Despite the overwhelming numbers of counter protestors, the event confirmed the lingering legacy of white supremacy in the United States, and that while outnumbered, it is still very present.<sup>6</sup> From Roof and Fields' and actions, it is clear that the Lost Cause Ideology undeniably fueled recent neo-Confederate violence. However, there is still controversy over the removal of Confederate icons from government buildings, public spaces, and institutions of higher learning. In 2018, a year after the Charlottesville Attack, the removal of a statue on the UNC Chapel Hill campus was met with so much controversy it was eventually illegally toppled by angry protesters. And today, in the two cities that the violence took place--Charleston and Charlottesville-- the legality of either moving Confederate icons or removing them all together continues to be a battle (Stack, 2019). This lingering controversy begs the question, if these icons of the Lost Cause are being defended on college campuses and in public spaces, is the Lost Cause also being defended in public schools?

The interview of James Fields' history teacher was perhaps the first connection in the press of Fields' education and his actions. Former teachers of both Roof and Fields noted that

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<sup>6</sup> Following the events the statue was shrouded until February 2018. In September of 2019 it was ruled that removing the statue would violate a state historic preservation statute. It still stands today, unshrouded, in "Emancipation Park" (Sant 2019).

both students were known to sport the Confederate flag, which Fields' former teacher stated was as an "ongoing issue" (Pilcher, 2017). However, no source researched the education systems of the regions in which Roof or Fields were educated. No source analyzed the regional standards, textbooks, and the regional opinions of teachers' themselves. As historians we cannot deny the intrinsic influence of slavery, the Civil War, and the Lost Cause Ideology on America's race relations today. And as teachers we ask the question that was overlooked by the media: what influence does Lost Cause education play in the actions of white supremacists? What are students being taught regarding the Civil War, and, does it vary drastically by region? And what does this look like in the schools of our home state—and the first to secede from the Union—South Carolina?

There has not been extensive research on social studies teachers' perspectives on the American Civil War or Lost Cause ideology in the American South or nationwide. In surveying students, possible reasons for this could be the sensitivity of the subject and the difficulty of obtaining answers from students under the age of 18 about the classroom practices of their teachers on such controversial issues. There may also be a resistance of any teachers presenting a more Lost Cause ideology to participate in research that may be seen as critiquing this perspective. In surveying teachers, other possible reasons for this could be a concern for distorted participant responses. This could be the result of either apprehensiveness to answer honestly or lack of self-awareness.

### **Teacher Bias by Region**

The most obvious component when discussing the way that the Civil War is taught in classrooms is the regional bias that teachers might have towards the Civil War; i.e. southern

teachers preaching the Lost Cause ideology and northern teachers simplifying the war to good (abolitionists) vs. evil (slave owning Confederates). Research shows the regional divide on the cause of the Civil War in the general population is not as strong as one might think. An August 2015 poll found that while 49% of people from the South thought that slavery was the primary cause, only 1% more (50%) of people polled in the Northeast thought that slavery was the primary cause (“A Nation Still Divided: The Confederate Flag”, 2015). The same study found that only 55% of people nationwide think that slavery should be taught as the primary cause of the Civil War in schools.

Central to the topic of regional bias is the large amount of interstate migration that has taken place in the past century. While no data has focused on teacher interstate or regional immigration, data does show a high amount of Americans moving from the American North to South Carolina and other regions of the South East (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Southeastern states such as South Carolina saw their population grow extensively; South Carolina’s population grew by over 1 million (20%) in 2000-2020, increasing from slightly over 4 million to 5.1 million, the 2000-2020 boom being primarily from out of state residents (“Population Counts and Projections”). This migration has potential to skew regional bias divides.

A more significant divide on Civil War allegiances might be found down political lines. While in 2015 69% of Democrats believed the Confederate flag should be removed from government buildings, only 38% of Republicans agreed (“A Nation Still Divided: The Confederate Flag,” 2015). Author 2 (2018) in his nationwide study of teachers found that teachers from the South were the most politically conservative followed by those from the Midwest, West, and Northeast. Though he did not directly examine the issue of race, he did find



in regard to views towards rights for immigrant students those in the Midwest had the most exclusive attitudes followed by the South, Northeast, and West.

### **Textbook Bias, Convenience, and the Scaffolding of American Progress**

Two main sources were used in the analyzation of textbooks and standards. The first was a study conducted by the Southern Law and Poverty Center in 2016 that analyzed 10 national textbooks and surveyed 1700+ teachers and 1000+ high school students nationwide. The findings were published via Teaching Tolerance. Both organizations work to promote social justice through education and advocacy. The second was the book, “Lies My Teacher Told Me” by James Loewen (2007). In *Lies* Loewen describes the main problems he found in American history teaching after analyzing 12 national social studies textbooks.

The most relevant findings of these combined studies in regards to our survey was:

- 1) Textbooks are problematic for several reasons.
  - a) Social studies textbooks are strongly and blatantly biased. This is both regionally and chronologically.
  - b) Textbooks are “timid at best.” “Feel good” stories are prioritized, and dynamic figures and events are simplified into a more simplified manner, losing their complexity. In a word, they are made ‘convenient.’ This is especially true in regards to their coverage of the Civil War, slavery, and race relations.

- 2) Pedagogy is poorly suited to the topic. Teachers' tendency to rely exclusively on textbook lecture does not stimulate higher levels of critical thinking. On the other end of the spectrum, some teachers use problematic methods such as classroom simulations.<sup>7</sup>
- 3) Furthering the "feel good" aim of textbooks, textbooks 'scaffold' history; with narratives that typically subscribe to the "progress as usual" ideal and avoid the cyclical nature of history.
- 4) Civil War history rarely makes connections to the present; this includes a failure to connect slavery and the Civil War explicitly to modern-day white supremacy in the US. This is both a product of problematic textbooks and individual teachers.

### **Regional and Historiographical Bias**

Social studies textbooks are strongly biased historiographically on their coverage of the Civil War. In *Lies* Loewen demonstrates that shifting public opinion on the Civil War through time can be traced by textbook portrayal of John Brown and his raid on Harpers Ferry. Loewen chronicles how the portrayal of Brown in social studies textbooks had evolved in the past century and a half coinciding with American views on race and Civil Rights. He notes during times of Civil Rights reform Brown was deemed a martyr of the abolitionist cause, but during times of Civil Rights repression he was deemed mentally insane and treasonous. Only in very recent years has Brown been portrayed to that of a coherent abolitionist and social reformer.

Bias regionally and statewide can be demonstrated on a state-by-state basis. During Reconstruction the Lost Cause was openly promoted in Southern textbooks. For example, In the

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<sup>7</sup> Simulation examples noted by SLPC (2018) include a mock slave auction at a New Jersey school, students dressed in Civil War regalia at a Georgia school where a white student told a black student, "You are my slave", and a California teacher that staged the "unique learning experience" of a student simulation of a slave ship.

1920s, Florida and other Southern States passed laws requiring their textbooks to have a “True and Correct History of the Confederacy” and textbooks deemed the Civil War the, “War Between the States” (Loewen, 2007, 141). As recently as 2010, Texas adopted state social studies standards that minimize the central role of slavery and race in the outbreak of the Civil War, instead teaching that sectionalism and states’ rights were a more central cause (Brown, 2015).

In the attempt to make the material easier to teach, understand, and regurgitate, textbooks have flattened dynamic figures and events. “Feel good” stories are taught without context. For example, Harriet Tubman’s Underground Railroad and her heroism are sometimes taught as standards in grades that have not learned about slavery. Abraham Lincoln’s complicated feelings towards slavery--as his direct quotes can attest-- are narrowed to that of simply a an abolitionist and the “Great Emancipator”. Regarding textbooks’ absence of well-known Lincoln quotes supporting white supremacy, Loewen morbidly quips, “Most textbook authors protect us from a racist Lincoln... To be sure, textbook authors rarely quote anyone” (Loewen, 2007, 155).

The pedagogy of teachers on the subjects is also poor. Many social studies teachers tend to rely exclusively on the textbook, and textbooks arguably dominate American history courses more than they do any other subject (Loewen, 2007, 3). Others employ methods that problematic; The Southern Law and Poverty Center found teachers performing classroom simulations that were deemed “harmful” to students. Poor pedagogy corresponds to their own lack of knowledge on the subject and unpreparedness.

Most problematic to Loewen is the ‘scaffolding of history’ that takes place in social studies textbooks. He argues that textbooks present history--most notably ideas of social justice--exclusively in linear timelines instead of a more historically accurate cyclical timeline. He

writes, "...in race relations, as in everything, our society is constantly getting better. We used to have slavery, now we don't. We used to have lynchings, now we don't. " He notes the strong "progress as usual" narrative such as this in textbooks is destructive to students' opportunity to critically analyze. He writes, "...When textbooks make racism invisible in American history, they obstruct our already poor ability to see it in the present. The closest they come to analysis is to present a vague feeling of optimism.... "(2007, p. 171).

This hijacking of historical objectiveness in the name of positivity is best demonstrated by the rejection of a new set of proposed "National History Standards" in 1994; part of what would become known as the 1990s "history wars" (Popkin, 2016). The new standards were a collaborative effort of historians, schoolteachers, and politicians over the course of several years to introduce into the education curriculum the new scholarship of the historical field. At first morally and financially supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Endowment later loudly pulled their support claiming that the standards, "slighted the positive impacts of American history in the name of 'political correctness'" (Popkin, 2016, p.160). The standards were dismissed overwhelmingly. Historiographer Jeremy Popkin (2016) argues that this was only one of many attempts to introduce a more multicultural curriculum, which all ultimately failed due to the fear that teaching of oppressed minorities might challenge the coherence on which American society depended.

And finally, textbooks and social studies tend to fail to make connections to the present. In regards to slavery the subject fails to make connections from slavery to modern day white supremacy and the lingering legacy of slavery in the United States today. Loewen writes, "slavery comes across as an unfortunate but minor blemish, compared to the overall storyline of our textbooks" (2007, p.142).

It is also noted that even in scholarly literature the historiography of the Civil War tends to forget the direct consequences today of the Civil War. Sheehan-Deen (2011) notes that while the Civil War is one of the most written-about events in American history, its study is overwhelmingly centralized and fails to delve into the cascading events that affect American life today.

When whitewashed, the entire history of the United States becomes ‘feel good’, scaffolded, and ever-improving; a history painted as impenetrable to small pockets of radical resistance such as a Lost Cause. All authors argue that the social studies fail to inspire students to think critically and participate in advocacy for both themselves and others. Textbooks’ failure to provide quote-based texts, honestly portray ‘hard history’, and relate past events to modern times promotes a population educated on blind nationalism unequipped to confront anything but an American idealism.

## **Research Questions**

**There are two primary research questions that were central to our study.**

1. What are students’ perceptions of how issues regarding the Civil War were treated in the high school social studies classroom?
2. How did perceptions of teachers’ beliefs on the Civil War relate to the perceptions of teachers’ effectiveness, and their beliefs on other controversial issues such as racism, xenophobia, and nationalism?

## **Methods**

This study was based on a mixed-methods design, particularly a parallel convergent design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017) where both quantitative and qualitative questions were given simultaneously to a group of university students in an educational foundations course at a mid-sized public university in the American Southeast. The quantitative portion of the study was based on a correlation quantitative design (Braun, 2002) to understand the relationship between differing variables, rather than seeking to understand causation. The qualitative portion of the research was analyzed using thematic analysis, which entailed “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The students were asked open ended questions, which were later coded and analyzed. The instrument as a whole looked at the issues of students perceptions of their high school social studies classrooms in regard to nationalism, immigration, and topics such as the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. The study was conducted in the Spring of 2018 and had a final N of 56.

The student population at this institution is relatively representative of the previously discussed interstate immigration in the American South; 31% of the students at this institution are from out of state (“College of Charleston At a Glance”, 2009). The students of our study are less so; 75% of the students reported attending high school in South Carolina, 20% attended high schools in the North or Western states, and 5% attended schools in another southern state.

## **Analyses**

For the quantitative data, there was first a broad descriptive analysis conducted on specific items related to the way teachers dealt with the topics of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement (Question 1). The three items in this area were then combined into one construct and analyzed for correlation to the instruction of teachers towards modern day racial

issues, other contentious issues such as immigration and nationalism, and pedagogical practices (Question 2). The qualitative data was analyzed by examining the written responses of the students related to the Civil War and Civil Rights Movement and making notes on the broader ideas presented. These responses and notes were then further analyzed and placed into larger patterns that arose from the data.

### **Quantitative Findings**

The initial descriptive statistics showed that on the question related to teachers' perceptions on the morality of the Civil War, on a scale of 1-7 with 1 indicating the South being completely in the right and 7 indicating the North was completely in the right, the students leaned slightly towards the North being in the right with a mean of 4.55 (SD=1.17). On the question related to teachers' views about slavery being the cause of the war with 1 being that the war had nothing to do with slavery and 7 being that it was the absolute cause of the war, the students had a mean of 4.89 (SD=1.69). Another question regarded whether Civil Rights was something that was resolved in the 1960s (1) or something we continuously had to be struggling for (7) the participants had a mean of 4.26 (SD=1.53). When these three areas were combined into a scale, they had a Cronbach's Alpha of .508. In this scale 3 was the most conservative response that would be more associated with a Lost Cause/"post-racial" society perspective and 7 being the more progressive perspective that highlighted the racial struggle as center in American history and also in the modern world.

A correlation analysis then revealed the relationship between this construct and other factors related to nationalism, immigration, and diversity as well as views on the effectiveness of teachers and classroom practices. There was a strong correlation between teaching a more

progressive history and being willing to have discussions about race in the classroom in general ( $r=.332$ ,  $p=.017$ ). The analysis also revealed that there was a relationship between a more progressive score on this construct and more inclusive views on immigration ( $r=.332$ ,  $p=.015$ ). There was not a significant correlation with views on patriotism, nationalism, or views on undocumented immigration particularly.

In regard to classroom dynamics and pedagogy, the analysis showed that teachers with more progressive understandings of the Civil War and Civil Rights were more likely to encourage their students to stress active political engagement beyond just voting ( $r=.407$ ,  $p=.002$ ) and were more likely to engage with discussions on controversial issues ( $r=.410$ ,  $p=.003$ ). They were also more likely to bring in current event topics into the class ( $r=.378$ ,  $p=.005$ ), Additionally, were also more likely to bring in outside sources other than the textbook ( $r=.354$ ,  $p=.01$ ) and engage in more classroom discussion and debate ( $r=.359$ ,  $p=.009$ ).

### **Qualitative Findings**

Both researchers analyzed the qualitative data to look for certain themes that would emerge regarding students' perceptions of their social studies teachers' perspectives on the Civil War and current events that pertain to the Lost Cause Ideology. Three main themes emerged: the centrality of slavery in the discussion of the Civil War overall with small pockets of more Lost Cause ideologies, the importance of discussion of current racial issues in addition to the historical examples, and the importance of looking beyond the textbook for both historical and contemporary information.

### **Teacher Bias Across Regions: Southern States vs. Northern/Western States**



While there was a notable difference between students from different regions, the stereotypical Southern narrative of the Lost Cause Ideology and States' Rights was not a common qualitative response. Most notably, the students from *all* regions seemed *highly aware* of the potential for regional bias in their classrooms. The sole qualitative question regarding the Civil War merely open-endedly asked, "Describe what you remember about your social studies teachers discussion on the Civil War during high school?"

Students responses to this were vigilantly hyper-focused on bias. One student from South Carolina almost defensively wrote, "We were never taught that the Civil War was not about slavery." "Others noted that their teachers were "never biased" and "completely unbiased." One student from a Northeastern state mentioned the potential for regional bias they found present in their classrooms. One wrote,

"Growing up in New York, many of my social studies teachers had the opinion that the South was in the wrong completely. In middle school and high school I wondered if the schools in the south altered their lessons to make it seem as though they weren't in the wrong as much."

Another student schooled in an Northeastern classroom wrote,

"I grew up in the north, so it was always the South was wrong. However, we went through the facts that the Civil War was the was for slavery and we talked about how the North wasn't totally in the right for not having slaves, but we were more open to slaves being emancipated while the south disagreed."

Reminiscent of this statement, a South Carolina student noted that their teachers taught that the "South and North were 'equally racist.'" A fair amount of students wrote that their teachers discussed the Civil War as having complex causes, this included both students from South Carolina as well as Northern and Western states. They wrote, "He gave fundamental reasons for the cause of the war, listing slavery as a factor, but not the sole reason." and, "They did describe it as much more complicated than just slavery issues."

While the SLPC survey found that only 8% of students identify slavery as a central component of the Civil War, our survey found students to be highly likely to point to slavery as a central component if not sole reason for the Civil War. South Carolina students wrote, “I remember [my teachers] mostly discussed slavery when it came to the Civil War,” and “This is the first time I’ve heard the Civil War was fought over anything other than slavery.”

While it was not the norm, some students did note their teachers saying that the Civil War was fought predominantly over ‘states rights.’ A student from South Carolina wrote, “several teachers in my past [said] that the war was fought over “states rights” and [did not focus] on how big of an issue slavery was.” Another student wrote that while slavery was “blamed” overall, it was “always justified with the South’s economy at the time of the Civil War.”

The role that Abraham Lincoln played in the Civil War and in the abolition of slavery was taught with skepticism. One South Carolina student simply stated she learned that, “Lincoln didn’t actually free the slaves.” Some answers were more in depth such as, “Although Lincoln never chose to address [slavery] during his campaign he later stated that he was not unwilling to do something about it” and, “Lincoln was not actually so against slavery as he was thought to be throughout history. He actually was indifferent to ending slavery, but only did so as a means to save face.” The skepticism employed by students on the topic of Abraham Lincoln was at odds with the notion of him painted as a flat character in textbooks that Lowen (2019) argued in *Lies*, and demonstrates that some teachers are articulating the complexity of historical figures, even if textbooks are not.

While the trending theme was that teachers were relatively unbiased in their teaching, there was one example of resistance that was reminiscent of Lost Cause narratives. One African

American student from rural South Carolina wrote, “I remember my teachers saying slavery was not a cause of the war and the South was right.”

### **‘Effective’ Civil War Teaching and Relating to Present Controversial Topics**

When asked what made teachers ‘effective’ or ‘ineffective’ students most notably stated that teachers that related past events back to present events were the most effective. They praised teachers that were politically neutral in their presentation of material and criticized teachers that were openly biased. Pedagogically, students noted that teachers that allowed for well-mediated class discussion and debate verses textbook lecture were the most effective. They gave more clearly thought-out responses on this topic than any other, and the feeling was reiterated by almost every single student.

Unfortunately, most teachers did not relate past race history such as slavery and the Civil War to current racial issues in politics. Most only explicitly related the complex issues following slavery and the Civil War as far present as the Civil Rights Movement. Only two students noted that their teachers explicitly related slavery back to current race relations. A student commented that the teacher that did a “great job” was the one who related slavery to the “disproportionate amount of African Americans in the prison system today”. This broader failure to make the connection to past race politics is an example of the scaffolding of history that takes place in social studies classrooms, it is also an example of the null curriculum surrounding the Civil War and the lingering legacy of slavery on African Americans in the U.S. today.

On the other end of the spectrum, some students noted that their teachers explicitly shut down conversations on current race-related events. Sometimes this was more explicit than others such as, “I remember one of my teachers literally told the class to ‘shut up’ when we got into a

debate about race. She said that stuff was in the past.” Another wrote, “My high school social studies teachers completely avoided the topic of race...they were the typical southern teachers that said those conversations shouldn't be had in the classroom.” Other teachers would narrowly avoid discussing controversial issues, “...she would stop a conversation before we truly got into a debate on controversial issues. It almost blocked us from knowing different standpoints.” Two students wrote they didn't remember their teacher having to effectively lead a controversial topic in class, because it simply never came up. “I truly cannot remember a time when something controversial was brought up. If anything, I feel like my teachers did everything they could to try to avoid anything like that happening.” Another student wrote, “...we were not allowed to talk about it, no one tested the waters. It was like it was an unspoken pact.”

For these students, the learning of the Civil War and race relations was part of the Null Curriculum. Not only were their teachers avoiding discussing controversial issues such as race, they were actively ending discussion and debate. Teacher actions such as these keep students from an opportunity to learn how to think critically and debate. More dangerously, teacher actions such as these implicitly teach that critical thinking skills are not necessary in the classroom or life, and that they are even undesirable. Most troubling about this failure to discuss controversial issues is the emphasis with which students placed on the importance of teachers relating history back to modern day current events. A student wrote, “Effective social studies teachers incorporated debate and writing into the classroom, which allowed for students to think critically and understand history as an interconnected set of topics versus separate events on a timeline.” Another student wrote, “I think a social studies teacher should be open to learning about the world today, not just the past. Kids leave their high schools and are lost.” The pedagogical methods employed by the teachers in teaching the Civil War relied heavily on

lectures and textbooks. There was some examples of class discussion and the use of primary source material. There was no mention of other pedagogical methods.

Interestingly, when looking at the teaching of the Civil War compared to controversial 2016 presidential elections there was a huge divide in pedagogical methods. While one might assume that that the teachers who were willing to call out Trump or discuss the racial elements were the same ones willing to talk about past racial issues, that was not necessarily the case. Teachers that employed strong pedagogical methods in teaching the election-- such as well-mediated class discussion, debate, mock votes, and candidate tracking-- rarely also handled the teaching of the Civil War as thoroughly. Likewise, teachers that employed strong pedagogical methods for the Civil War tended to omit a thorough examination of the election. For example, the same student that described their teachers' handling of the election as,

Amazing! That was a gov/econ class and he let us watch it and take notes about it and we had an open discussion about the results afterwards. We also tracked the candidates through the whole thing which was cool.

They also described their teachers' handling of the Civil War as,

“They beat around the bush a lot. Didn't wanna mention the horrible things that the U.S did sometimes.”

Another student that had about the same experience wrote that they were definitely taught, “multiple times” by teachers, “that slavery was not the main cause of the war and always said it was over, ‘states rights’ which really gets to me.” However, the same student wrote that the teacher employed strong pedagogical methods in teaching the 2016 election such as mock votes and discussion.

On the other side of the spectrum, a student noted their teacher that had done a “great job” teaching the Civil War and that related slavery back to present issues in the “prison system and injustices” stated that the teacher poorly handled the discussion of the election in class. They wrote that the teacher, “Opened it up to class wide discussion and allowed people to bring forth both sides. It still was not very pretty and things got out of hand because of a group of radicals on either side of the spectrum.”

Some teachers that students described as “Very Open” to engaging in controversial topics kept their discussion of the Civil War to facts and textbooks, perhaps that the openness to controversy only extended to the political present. Students described some of the teachers “Very Open” to controversial topics taught the war as, “We mainly stuck to the book, and the facts that the book gave to us,” “She talked about who fought in the battle, what they were fighting for, and the numbers of people who died” and, “When we discussed the civil war we just focused on the north and south in which we didn't speak much of slavery. We knew it existed and this was the reasoning behind the civil war but we didn't talk about it much.”

This demonstrates that while these teachers were open to controversial topics being discussed in class, such as the 2016 election, this did not extend to past events. And while some teachers felt comfortable in handling the controversies of the Civil War, this was not the case in the election. This could be due to teacher apprehensiveness, a weak foundation on Civil War history and its legacy in the present, and/or being not fully engaged in how to critically examine historical events. The lack of teachers drawing parallels between racially-fueled events of the past and present events is a missed opportunity for teachers to make connections and have students examine the legacy of past politics on current ones. However, teachers' comfort zones were often either in one or the other; current controversial topics or past, but not both. In

approaching the much more current and ongoing racial controversies hinted to in the election, they avoided the century-old racial controversies that define Civil War history. It is noted that the one teacher that seemed to have taught both the Civil War and election pedagogically comprehensively and effectively also was noted to “Very Often” include discussion and debate in class and engage in controversial topics generally.

Discussion of the Civil War was not interactive: only three students specifically recalled their teachers facilitating class discussion on the topic of the Civil War, and only two students mentioned remembering their teachers moderating debates. Answering the question, “Describe what you remember about your social studies teachers discussion on the Civil War during high school?” a student wrote, “We didn't have a discussion. We just learned it.” Most answers were reminiscent of this, teachers, “Just stated the facts,” stuck to “Just the facts”, and “stuck to the book and the facts the book gave us.” A student wrote, “My teachers would usually read right out of the textbook. They never said their opinion on the subject just what the textbook and curriculum wanted them to teach.”

This detached, distant approach of teacher pedagogical methods in a time of a plethora of online materials, Civil War related media, and government-funded Civil War public spaces demonstrates teachers keeping the history of the Civil War in the past, and not connecting it with the modern-day implications of the legacy of the Civil War on American race relations, politics, and civil injustices. The reliance of the teachers on the textbook and standards, “just the facts,” stresses the importance of a comprehensive and engaging standards and textbooks.

## **Discussion**

### **Regional Bias, Waning but Present**

While there are definitely still lingering pockets of Lost Cause Ideology and strong Confederacy sentiment in the American South today, it is not as common in education as the stereotype may be. Only one student surveyed noted that their teacher had strong Confederate sympathies and did not believe that the war was fought over slavery. While the stereotype may be that racism in America is almost synonymous with the South--a lingering effect of the ideology of the Confederate Cause-- and is still alive and well today, most students educated in the South are very aware of regional bias they may have been subjected to in regards to the Civil War. This could be attributed to more progressive attitudes nationwide and the large amounts of intrastate immigration to the South in the past century. The once regionally-distinct American South is changing, with large numbers of domestic migration from other regions. While the studies' participants all study and reside in the American South, they have regionally diverse backgrounds. The assimilation of perspectives these students are experiencing-- from their professors, peers, and acquaintances-- demonstrates the emerging Southern perspectives that are countering traditional stereotypes of Southern thought. While the students at the College of Charleston are both representative of the American South, they are also arguably representative of its assimilation into American mainstream culture.

As the 2015 McClatchy-Marist Poll demonstrated, feelings towards the Civil War are less regionally divided than they are politically<sup>8</sup>. As social studies teachers tend to lean liberally in their politics, (Author 2, 2018) teachers' personal political beliefs could play more of a role in Social Studies education than that of regional bias. When acts of violence such as the Charleston Massacre happen it is easy to point to the South as a backwards region that is outside of the

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<sup>8</sup> While 69% of Democrats believe the Confederate flag should be removed from government buildings, only 38% of Republicans agree ("McClatchy-Marist Poll" 2015). The same study found that only 55% of people nationwide think that slavery should be taught as the primary cause of the Civil War in schools.



national status quo. However, this stereotype of common radical overt racism was not found to be present in this study.

### **Teacher Fear of Controversy**

A recurring theme of the qualitative answers was both a deliberate or unintentional absence of discussion of controversial topics; predominantly in this case discussion of race relations. This absence seemed to have strong undertones of fear of controversy in the classroom. Several potential reasons for this apprehension and well as the implications for student education are discussed in the following paragraphs.

**Race of Teachers.** Intrinsic to the teaching of the Civil War is the topic of race, a controversial topic<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup> that many teachers are afraid to broach for fear of controversy (Bachman, 2015) or general unpreparedness on how to teach such a complex subject (SLPC Report, 2018). Demographically, teachers are predominantly white females and classes are highly (and increasingly) mixed race. On a nationwide scale, 87% of teachers are white. Additionally, in secondary social studies education they defy the education gender skews as being composed predominantly of white males (63%). On a statewide scale, in 2017 The South Carolina Department of Education reported that South Carolina teachers were 75% white; only 25% of teachers in South Carolina are of minority backgrounds (2017). This overwhelming percentage of non-minority teachers could very well have an impact on what curriculum is taught and what is not; Howard (2003) argues that people of color are often expected to be the primary voices of

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<sup>9</sup> A study at the University of North Carolina Wilmington found that 91% of pre-service elementary teachers preservice teachers strongly agreed or agreed that race is a controversial topic. They also agreed that this was especially true in the classroom (Bachman, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> The SLPC study also noted that “while over 90% of teachers claim that they feel ‘comfortable’ discussing slavery in their classrooms, their responses to open-ended questions reveal profound unease around the topic.” These findings pose a troubling disconnect between teachers’ supposed comfort in teaching race and their actual comfort as well as capability.

interrogation of race and racism in both the classroom and in scholarship. Ladson-Billings (2003) argues that demographics are crucial in the curriculum covered in teacher education programs. She notes that not all teacher educators are as committed and capable of addressing equality as might be thought. It is noted the demographics of teacher educators also lack diversity, compounding the lack of focus dedicated to critical multicultural issues (Waters, 2015).

**Content Preparedness and Professional Development Opportunities.** Many teachers do not have strong backgrounds in history.<sup>11</sup> As demonstrated in both the literature review and the study, many teachers are not confident in their social studies content knowledge, and this acts a barrier in employing teaching methods more complex than lecture.<sup>12</sup> This is especially true in on topics such as the Civil War that are exceptionally complex to teach. For teachers that feel unprepared, there is a lack of professional development opportunities for teachers. The SLPC study also noted that 40% of teachers believe that their state offers insufficient support for teaching about slavery. The study notes,

No national consensus exists on how to teach about slavery, and there is little leadership. It's not for lack of resources; an abundance of online historical archives collect and make available original historical documents about slavery. But without structured help, teachers and curriculum planners are left to their own devices, with a patchwork of advice offered by interpretive centers, museums and professional organizations (2018).

**Teacher Protections.** Finally, compounding everything, there is a lack of support and protection for teachers when they do find themselves in controversial situations. In the South, teachers aren't protected by teacher unions, adding another element of fear.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This is especially true in elementary education courses. "Very, very, very few [elementary educators] either majored or minored in history...They tend to replicate what they were taught" (Swartz 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Hattie (2014) in his meta analysis of more than 1000 education studies notes that while teacher subject-matter knowledge is not as important as their pedagogical knowledge, it is a crucial element in teaching a deeper understanding of a topic through bridging student prior knowledge.

<sup>13</sup> A 2012 study by the Fordham Institute ranked the South Carolina 49th in the nation for union teacher protection.

Milner argues that administrative support on teaching hard history is especially critical. He argues

Teachers must feel supported [by administrators] to teach in ways that honor all students and that disrupt, challenge, and call out the perpetuation of goal to disrupt, challenge, and call out the perpetuation of racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic mindsets and discourses.... Depending on teachers alone to create changes is shortsighted and will not result in the real systemic, institutional, and enduring changes needed for sustainability (2017, p. 88-89).

Lack of protections for teachers be it by administration or Unions in a time of high political correctness and media sensationalism. Teachers that do not feel comfortable in their knowledge of the Civil War might either teach the subject in an overly-simplified, “progress as usual” manner-- as textbooks do-- or perhaps avoid it altogether. Because there seems to be no nationwide consensus or leadership on how to teach slavery, the way teachers go about it seems to fly under the radar-- until it does not. Teachers are rarely commended in the media for the way in which they teach the topic, but instead they are only condemned. In a time that is being deemed hyper politically-correct, and when the risk seems bigger than the reward, will teachers tackle a subject that they themselves do not feel comfortably educated in?

### **The Null Curriculum and Teaching Social Justice**

The implications for students and society of the absence of questioning the Civil War in classrooms can best be examined through the lens of the Null Curriculum. The theory of the Null Curriculum states that schools teach three curricula: the explicit, implicit, and the ‘null.’ The explicit curriculum includes overtly taught items such as standards. The implicit curriculum is what is expected to be learned, but not explicitly stated in the curriculum. The null curriculum is what students do not have the opportunity to learn. This extends from concrete subjects (i.e. auto shop) to less tangible subjects such as critical thinking. The Null Curriculum is defined as, “the

options students are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire.” (Eisner, 2015).

For example, if students are not taught and expected to question, critically examine, and call out sexist language in books, they are learning something—that it may not be essential for them to engage in this work of critique and exposure. In other words, what is absent or not included in the curriculum can actually be immensely present in what students are learning (Milner, 2017, p. 88-89).

While what textbooks, and standards, and educators are teaching are important, what they are leaving out might be equally or even more so important in regards to Civil War and social studies education. The presence of the null curriculum surrounding social studies educators seemed more rooted in fear, than part of a malicious agenda. The null curriculum could be addressed by more rigorous content-based initial teaching certification, more opportunities for professional development regarding Civil War education, as well as educators teaching Civil War history through a social justice and peace education lens. McCorkle (2018) argues that only through addressing the Civil War through the peace education lens can its brutality and the polarization of the politics of the Civil War time serve to positively influence the highly militarized and politically divided United States of today.

From a peace education lens, Author 2 (2018) argues that while the Civil War is taught as justified or even virtuous due to the eventual abolishment of slavery, in teaching students through the peace education lens it is critical to ask if there were alternative solutions could have had cost less lives for the same solution? These pedagogical methods are complex, and to be able to fully employ them teachers will have to have a firm content knowledge. For teachers lacking a strong background in history, this means it is critically important to improve pedagogical methods and offer opportunities for professional development in the area of history as well as peace education.

## **Resources for Educators**

From the ground up, social studies education can be changed by educators that remember that there are many ways to provide students with learning opportunities regarding controversial subjects. In teaching race, advocacy organizations such as Teaching Tolerance provide resources for making the presence of racial discussion less intimidating for teachers and students. Step by step guides provide strategies for effective teaching that aims to increase empowerment and provoke critical thinking, while also providing a comfortable and structured discussion environment for students and teachers alike (“Let’s talk!”) when discussing race, racism and other difficult topics with students.

In addition to Teaching Tolerance, organizations such as the Zinn Education Project also offer teaching materials for an incredibly broad range of subjects, most notably in relation to this study on the themes of race/racism and African American history (“Zinn Education Project”). In their lesson planning, teachers also can remember that they do not have to be experts on social studies topics such as the Civil War to guide critical thinking. Loewen (2007) advises fearful teachers, “teachers do not have know everything to facilitate independent student learning. Teachers can act as informed reference librarians, directing children to books, maps, and people who can answer their questions about history”. In teaching through the student-centered learning model of peace education, teachers present students with resources that lead them to come to their own solutions for past and present conflict resolution. McCorkle (2018) argues that through the peace education lens of allowing students to draw their own conclusions based on the presentation of primary sources, students will draw a stronger understanding of past and present conflict resolution as well as develop critical analysis skills through questioning the alternative

solutions, true motivations, and drawing parallels from the Civil War to current ideological conflicts.

## **Limitations**

The sample size and concentration of this study limited the results. All the students were college students at the same university and in mostly the same major. Because of their status as college students, the survey did not address the demographic of students that do not pursue higher education. Also because of the students' positionality as college students, there was a strong potential that the majority of our students were mainly educated in higher level or Advanced Placement high school courses. Teachers of AP courses usually have a higher level of education than teachers of regular courses,<sup>14</sup> and studies have shown that with greater education individuals tend to lean toward more progressive beliefs (Harris, 2018). There is also the possibility that more of our sample was educated in private schools than the average population. These are all questions that were not explicitly asked in the survey. The survey had a very small African American and minority population as well. Due to the sample being education students, the majority were also female. The survey also had a high percentage of students educated in suburban and urban areas, where the education funding can be higher and the political climate more progressive.

In the future, explicit questions that account for these limitations could be included as well as more explicit questions on the role of slavery in the Civil War. While we were able to draw a substantial amount of information on these topics, the questions were not as direct in

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<sup>14</sup> Nationwide, 67.9% of AP secondary teachers hold Masters and 6.2% hold a PhD (Milewski 2002). In the 2015-2016 school year, nationwide 59 percent of secondary school teachers held a post baccalaureate degree ("Fast Facts: Teacher Qualifications").

discussing the topic of the Civil War as and the relation of slavery as possible. In the future, additional questions regarding the correlation of the Civil War to current events, politics, and white supremacy in the United States could be zoned in on.

Possible themes for future research on this topic would be the role of the demographics mentioned above on the outcome of the studies. The experiences of rural, low-income, and non-college bound students would add interesting perspectives in the study of the lingering effects of the Civil War. These themes could be exclusive to teacher perspectives (as in this study) as well as students' perspectives. As student opinions are heavily shaped by both their education and their parents' ancestral perspectives on topics of cultural identity such as the Civil War, the intersection of the two could be enlightening to study, especially when it comes to issues such as white supremacy and radicalization in the United States.

## **Conclusion**

The legacy of slavery, the Civil War, and race relations in America are omnipresent in many aspects of American life. The acts of domestic terrorism inflicted by people such as Roof and Fields have made many Americans pause and question the current status quo of race, hate, and bigotry in modern day America. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of education systems in current racial tensions in America today, seeing if we could trace these acts of white supremacy back to lingering Lost Cause ideologies being perpetuated in schools.

This study does not confirm an active role of the United States'--or more particularly South Carolina's-- school system in perpetuating Lost Cause ideologies and therefore white supremacy. Instead it confirms a passive role. The commonness of students' experiences with the Null Curriculum in regards to the Civil War regardless of region demonstrates that the same

danger lurks in not standing up to hateful ideologies as in perpetuating them. When students are not taught to critically think about the Civil War, slavery, and lingering race implications, they are implicitly learning something powerful- that in both the classroom as well as their personal lives, they do not have to. While the education of Roof and Fields was not the simple culprit of their beliefs, its absence from media discourse implies that in the American consciousness it is not the responsibility of public schools to teach against past and present politics of hate.

However, as authors we believe that it is the education systems responsibility to teach against past and present hate ideologies. When teaching is completely apolitical, and when educators teach that students do not have critique or to stand up against discriminatory social conditions, they stop being community leaders and advocates for their students. From the literature review and study, there is definitely a *desire* for improvement; teachers want more access to professional development, and students want teachers that teach the ‘hard history’ and relate it to the present day. Students are hungry for an honest social studies education that can aid them in navigating the complexity of the politics of their modern lives. When teachers fail to connect the past with the present, students leave their schooling uncertain as to how address modern day issues; “lost” as one student put it. And when the next Charleston Massacre or Charlottesville occurs, America will continue to be shocked and confused, unable to understand the historical foundation that led to these actions. By scaffolding American progress under the premise of protection for students and the promotion of nationalistic pride, the social studies education system robs students of the agency they need to succeed as advocates for marginalized groups, themselves, and the future of society.



For radicals like the Roofs and Fields, their social studies educators might be the last hope between them and acts of white supremacy. As Fields Jr.'s high school social studies teacher stated in regards Fields' his infatuation with white supremacy groups,

[The infatuation] was something that was growing in him. I admit I failed. I tried my best. But this is definitely a teachable moment and something we need to be vigilant about, because this stuff is tearing up our country (Shapiro, 2017).

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