



**TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE  
IN SOCIAL STUDIES**  
(Working Paper)



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## Essential Questions:

*Why and how should we teach social studies to young learners?*

How and why might social studies educators affirm and value *all* learners - and their ancestors - by centering the voices, experiences, and perspectives of marginalized individuals, communities, and peoples who have been, and continue to be, marginalized in and through the dominant narratives of the major social studies disciplines?

Commonly conflated with history, and a very particular rendition of history, at that, social studies is more appropriately understood as an expansive collection of disciplines that draws from “anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences” (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994, p. vii). Social studies is a content area that alleges to prepare students for civic life in our pluralistic democracy (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), yet is rarely taught in ways that actually promote democracy, pluralism, or justice for all.

Moreover, since passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, social studies has become increasingly absent from early childhood and elementary spaces (Halvorsen, 2013), providing young learners with scant opportunities to learn about citizenship, history, or the value of (and precedence for) civic engagement that takes forms other than rule following and unquestioning patriotism. This working paper examines how social studies education might be reimaged to disrupt the exclusionary master narratives that permeate textbooks and popular culture to value and center the histories, experiences, and ways of knowing of Indigenous,<sup>1</sup> Black, and People of Color (IBPOC),<sup>2</sup> particularly at the early childhood and elementary levels.

While a growing movement now supports secondary social studies educators introducing controversial issues<sup>3</sup> and current events to better support their students’ understandings and growth as citizens, educators often argue that elementary students are “too young” to deal with complex issues and histories, despite the fact that experiences with racism, sexism, and classism (among other forms of oppression) are common features of early childhood (Earick, 2010; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Indeed, Hess (2009) notes that it is “a mistake for schools to wait until students are older to introduce [controversial issues] discussions” (p. 168), pointing

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms Indigenous, Native, and Native American interchangeably, in reference to Indigenous peoples broadly. Although individual nations and tribal affiliations are not mentioned in this paper, I acknowledge that specificity is of the utmost importance when describing identity (Sabzalian, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> In recognition that the term People of Color may erase histories of settler colonialism and anti-Blackness, while also racializing Native peoples in ways that ignore tribal sovereignty, I opt to explicitly name Indigenous and Black communities before my use of the broader People of Color umbrella.

<sup>3</sup> Educators, researchers, and public audiences continue to debate what makes a topic controversial or a specific historical occurrence or pattern difficult to teach and/or discuss (and whether/why/when it may be important and/or appropriate to do so anyway). As one example, while white teachers may consider racism a controversial topic, IBPOC and IBPOC teachers likely deal with racism every day and may not. Similarly, while genocides are often identified as examples of difficult history (Gross & Terra, 2019), Jewish and Native families commonly recount their kinfolks’ experiences with genocide and oppression.

out that students need to begin developing the skills and dispositions needed to engage in such discussions in elementary school.

That said, even educators willing to initiate such dialogue may have limited understandings that “American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it” (Baldwin, 1963, p. 11). Early childhood and elementary educators are typically trained to be generalists; few encounter much social studies coursework in traditional teacher preparation programs.<sup>4</sup> Any effort to transform social studies education for young learners thus requires ontological and epistemological shifts in teacher preparation *and* in early childhood and elementary classrooms.

Five disciplinary areas within social studies are commonly taught in early childhood and elementary education: civics, history, geography, economics, and sociology.<sup>5</sup> As approached and practiced in the United States, each of these disciplinary domains reifies nation-state master narratives that uphold white supremacy and Protestant, middle-class, cisgender, ableist, and heteropatriarchal norms; erase Indigenous sovereignty; champion meritocracy, individualism, and capitalism; depict the U.S. as a global leader of ever-increasing progress and equality; and minimize reflection on the opaqueness of power. This paper outlines the traditional approaches for each of these social studies disciplinary domains and explores how shifting toward a transformative justice approach in teacher preparation and classroom contexts might allow us to reimagine how these disciplines are framed and taught.

### **Civic Education for Young Learners**

Civics is the study of how people participate in governing society, and “encompasses participation in classrooms and schools, neighborhoods, groups, and organizations” (Swan et al., 2013, p. 31). However, civic education in (and beyond) the U.S. has historically focused on assimilation, with ideal citizenship presented as the ability and willingness to fit the Anglo-Saxon Protestant conceptualization of the “good citizen,” framing that has gone part and parcel with systemic efforts to eradicate languages and cultures deemed “un-American” (Banks, 2001). While related narratives and teachings suggest that conforming to white, middle-class, monolingual English norms would lead to the full rights of citizenship, Communities of Color and other historically-marginalized cohorts continue to experience structural exclusion and only limited participation in U.S. civic culture *because of* racial, ethnic, and linguistic markers (Banks, 2001).

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<sup>4</sup> Secondary educators, on the other hand, tend to hold degrees in specific content areas (Bolick et al., 2010; Hawkman et al., 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The College, Career and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards (Swan et al., 2013), created to complement the Common Core Standards, which neglected to attend to social studies, highlights four disciplines that should be introduced beginning in second grade: civics, history, geography, and economics. Because early childhood education tends to place significant focus on topics such as culture, family, and communities, sociology is also included here as a relevant key focus.

Civic education for young children remains relatedly centered on obedience, patriotism, and personal responsibility (Payne, 2018), concepts normed to the white middle class that result in the disproportionate discipline and punishment of Black and Brown children (Bryan, 2017; Meiners, 2017; Morris, 2016; Love, 2019). And while we know that American individualism and progress emerge through agency, and that agentic practices must be cultivated in young children (Adair, 2014), conditions in which only certain children are authorized to exhibit agency without discipline or punishment really clarify which citizens are included and valued, and whose voices and interests are deemed inconsequential and irrelevant.

### ***Civic Erasure***

Inherent to dominant classroom civic narratives is the notion of erasure. Sabzalian (2019) argues that “citizenship education is deeply implicated in the project of Indigenous erasure” (p. 327) through three key pathways. First, Indigeneity is often conflated with race such that Indigenous struggles are absorbed within a Civil Rights framework, an approach that “denies the central and critical difference of American Indians as tribal peoples of distinct nations with sovereign status and treaty rights” (Grande, 2000, p. 344). Second, citizenship education naturalizes the nation-state, ignoring Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood and leaving settler colonialism unquestioned. Third, examples of Indigenous civic action are overwhelmingly absent from the curriculum, as are contemporary examples of Indigenous existence and survivance, a term Vizenor (1999) defines as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name” (p. vii). While Sabzalian and other social studies scholars offer frameworks and transformational curricular possibilities for anticolonial civic education, such approaches are far from the norm, particularly for early schooling.

Civic education is problematic for Communities of Color, as well. Whereas Indigenous erasure begins before the founding of the nation-state and persists through the present, the teaching of citizenship in Black, Latinx, and Asian American communities assumes the dangerous guise of a modern-era equality narrative. The historical impacts of African enslavement and institutional disenfranchisement are interwoven with ongoing norms of dehumanization and injustice, yet civic and historical narratives are often merged in ways that misrepresent the significance of the Emancipation Proclamation and uphold the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s as a watershed event in which equality and justice were achieved and second-class citizenship became a thing of the past. Such misinterpretations belie the realities of ongoing voter suppression, increasing segregation in public schools, environmental racism, and the school-to-prison nexus, among many other systemic injustices. Additionally, very few early childhood or elementary classrooms attend to our broken immigration system, which offers increasingly fewer paths toward citizenship and residency for asylees, refugees, and those who are undocumented.

### ***Transformative Justice in Civics Education***

Intersectional approaches to civic education are one important entry point for intervention. For example, the women’s suffrage movement is commonly taught as a unified effort on the part of all women to earn rights, led by an all-white ensemble including Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott. This version of women’s suffrage fails to acknowledge that

Mott was inspired to fight for women's rights during her time spent with the Seneca Nation (Weber, 2019) and ignores the fact that Black women were deliberately excluded from suffrage clubs and marches (Vickery, 2017, 2018). Furthermore, some Women of Color did not attain full civic participation until decades after the passage of the 19th Amendment; widespread naturalization of Asian women was not permitted until 1952 and Native women were not allowed to vote in all fifty states until 1962.

School (de)segregation offers another opportunity for an intersectional lens. Whereas Ruby Bridges is typically the face of Black/white school segregation for young students, introducing the stories of Mexican American Sylvia Mendez (of the famed *Mendez v. Westminster* court case used as precedent for *Brown v. Board of Education*) and Chinese Americans Mamie Tape and Martha Lum adds greater nuance to this history and those who fought in court to change it (An, 2020; Berard, 2017). The story of Sarah Roberts, a Black girl whose family sued the city of Boston in 1847, also illustrates segregation as a nationwide tradition, situating it in the Northeast (a region perceived as more accepting of African Americans) over a century before *Brown v. Board*. Roberts' story is depicted in the picturebook *The First Step: How One Girl Put Segregation on Trial* (Goodman, 2016).

In addition to revisiting and complicating popular narratives, it is also necessary to present diverse examples of youth civic engagement. Fortunately, examples across ethnoracial groups, place, and time abound, from Mexican American teenage labor organizer Emma Tenayuca's work in the early 1900s in Texas to the Chicana high school student walkouts in Los Angeles in 1968 (Bernal, 1998) and in Crystal City, Texas (Trujillo, 2014). Also appropriate and important to introduce are the Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963; Marley Diaz's 2016 #1000BlackGirlBooks drive; climate change activist Xiuhtezcatl Roske-Martinez, who delivered a speech at the United Nations at age 15; the 2018 March for Our Lives; contemporary Indigenous and Native Hawaiian protests at Standing Rock and Mauna Kea, respectively; and the amazing work of globally-recognized youth activists such as Malala Yousufzai and Greta Thunberg. At age 5, Sophie Cruz presented a letter to Pope Francis in support of her undocumented parents, while 8-year-old Mari Copeny penned a letter to President Obama that resulted in his visit to Flint, Michigan to see firsthand the water crisis she described (Pimentel et al., 2018).

Youth of Color deserve and benefit from multiple opportunities to see reflections of themselves through varied examples of civic activism, agency, and resistance, with local examples whenever possible. Bishop (1990) explains,

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part (pp. ix-x).

However, such examples are necessary for white children as well, particularly those who live in racially homogenous communities, as they may otherwise not be exposed to ethnoracial

difference. Without such examples, children who are white and hold other dominant identities may "grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world - a dangerous ethnocentrism" (Bishop, 1990, p. x) that ultimately reinforces notions of white supremacy.

## History Education for Young Learners

### ***Plenitude & Scarcity in Historical Narratives***

Trouillot (1995) argues that "the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production" (p. xxiii). History is, indeed, the fruit of power. Yet, "power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility" (p. xxiii). Individuals from marginalized communities rarely see themselves in the curriculum or teaching force, and may assume these absences are the fault of their communities' members not contributing enough or being important enough.

This can be the assumption of those who hold dominant identities as well, reinforced by what author Viet Thanh Nguyen (2018) describes as "narrative plenitude," assurance of (hi)stories featuring protagonists similar to them abounding in schools, professional achievement, popular celebrations, media, and museums. In contrast, women, Indigenous peoples, People of Color, and other historically marginalized groups experience what Nguyen dubs narrative scarcity: the deprivation of authentic and accurate representation. Narrative scarcity includes rare appearances of historically marginalized populations in ways that dehumanize them, such as the racist and stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans in the beloved *Little House on the Prairie* series. This romanticized portrayal of settler colonialism on the so-called "frontier" avoids depicting the realities of genocide that resulted from western movement but remains a staple in elementary school libraries and classrooms.

### ***Master Narratives of United States History***

This is the stuff of master narratives: tales told and retold to preserve very specific representations of the nation-state. Traditional history education is designed to promote manifest destiny, American exceptionalism, and progress through heritage-based tales centered on the accomplishments of landed Anglo-Saxon men (Kammen, 1989; VanSledright, 2008). Whiteness is firmly at the center of this narrative arc of progress, with race minimally attended to and always presented as a resolved issue (Brown & Au, 2014). Importantly, too, these narratives are innocuously presented through an omniscient voice that "appears to be the voice from everywhere but nowhere simultaneously" (VanSledright, 2008, p. 115), rendering alternative or counternarratives impossible, or, at best, very questionably legitimate.

The tradition of U.S. history master narratives relegates the Civil Rights Movement to the 1950s and 1960s, rather than the much longer-term (lowercase) civil rights movement to gain political and social rights (Hall, 2007). Situated as the focal point of racial conflict in the U.S., Civil Rights Movement teachings in elementary curricula are followed by curricular focus in secondary

school on enslavement, an overall master narrative tapestry that presents racism and racial injustice as long-resolved problems of the past.

Consider, for example, popular portrayals of two famous Black historical figures often first introduced by educators at the elementary level. Even as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. serve as figureheads for American racial progress, these leaders are consistently highlighted for their individual acts – rather than their membership in collective struggles against oppression and injustice (Busey & Walker, 2017). Children’s literature and curricula that reference or focus on Parks and King also tend to describe segregation passively, such that whites’ investment and active participation in segregation and inequity is rendered obscure and inexplicable (Swalwell et al., 2015; Wills, 2001). In this inaccurate reframing, racial violence during the civil rights movement, and across the historical timeline more broadly, are presented as individual one-offs or highly-localized episodes of “bad men doing bad things” (Brown & Brown, 2010, p. 60) rather than systemic acts to preserve racist ideologies and institutions.

The containment of People of Color and Indigenous peoples in the master narrative of U.S. history is consistent in both its superficial attention and limited scope (Salinas & Blevins, 2014; Wills, 1996). Native peoples are most often presented as a problem to would-be settlers of the past, who cease to exist in the modern era (Sabzalian, 2019). Asian Americans briefly and only appear in regard to Chinese immigration in the 1800s and Japanese American incarceration during World War II (Rodríguez & Ip, 2018). Latinx peoples are solely represented by/as Mexican Americans, who may be briefly acknowledged with respect to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo or a spotlight on labor leader César Chávez (Noboa, 2012). Problematically, IBPOC and white learners alike are being taught through the lens of cultural difference largely focused on IBPOC as occasional sidebars to white actions or experiences (Cornbleth, 1997), rather than through meaningful representations that reveal complex interactions and relational dynamics (Wills, 2001).

### ***Revisionist Histories and Counternarratives***

Revisionist ontologies aim to reframe the ways personhood, and, in turn, subpersonhood, have been overtly and/or tacitly racially normed (Mills & Mills, 1998). Such ontologies can serve as counternarratives to the Eurocentrism found in social studies curricula (Busey & Walker, 2017; King et al., 2016). Several revisionist history books have recently been adapted for young readers, typically at the upper elementary and middle school levels, in recognition of the problematic historical narratives to which young learners are exposed (Delacroix, 2020).

Like Zinn’s (2015) landmark history book, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*, *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014), *A Different Mirror for Young People* (Takaki, 2012), and *A Queer History of the United States for Young People* (Bronski, 2019) emphasize voices and perspectives typically omitted from social studies curricula, serving as powerful tools to disrupt master historical narratives. Picturebooks also offer counternarratives for younger learners, and social media movements such as #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #OwnVoices have urged librarians, educators, and publishers to

provide readers with a broader array of ethnoracially diverse texts created by ethnoracially diverse authors. As one example of related process and outcomes, Rodríguez and Ip (2018) have detailed how in-depth study of Japanese American incarceration through picturebooks and the chapter book *Sylvia and Aki* led second graders to identify acts of racism and injustice perpetrated by the government, which they connected to previous readings about Native and Black histories.

While it is crucial that schooling spaces offer counternarratives, Vaught (2011) cautions that “(c)ounterstories delivered in the spirit of changing hearts and minds, and playing on good will, will more likely be absorbed into the masternarrative” (p. 19). Vaught references Delgado and Stefancic’s (2001) notion of false empathy, in which one believes they can change a dominant narrative simply by offering another – yet leaving intact the white supremacist framework that inevitably surrounds both. The addition of a single article or lesson about Black inventors, Latinx scientists, or the all-Japanese American 100th Infantry Battalion, for example, does little to disrupt an otherwise Anglocentric curriculum and continues the harmful pattern of relegating IBPOC histories to the margins while centering the conceptual master threads of American progress and exceptionalism. IBPOC must be centered across and throughout American history curricula, with greater critical emphasis on colonialism and imperialism. While it is important to teach the injustice and oppression faced historically and contemporarily by marginalized groups, educators and young learners must first explore the vast and valuable richness of culture, tradition, and agency these groups hold – rather than solely depicting them as victims.

### ***Transformative Justice in History Education***

While it may seem like a difficult task to engage young learners with emergent understandings of the past in these ways, it is possible. Pour-Khorshid (2020) provides lesson and book examples about self-love, loss, colonization, and solidarity from her work with kindergarteners to explore how educators can cultivate classrooms that engage in humanizing pedagogy. Pour-Khorshid’s elementary curriculum is shaped around Picower’s (2012) six elements of social justice: self love and knowledge, respect for others, issues of social injustice, social movements and social change, awareness raising, and social action. Together, these six elements support teachers in leading “students to value themselves, respect the diversity of the world around them, understand how diverse people have been treated differently and often unjustly, recognize that ordinary people have worked to address such injustice, and take action themselves” (Picower, 2012, p. 2). Picower’s framework is designed to support pre- and in-service teachers to go beyond superficial approaches to multicultural education and instead transform their curriculum to help students learn about oppression and how it impacts different communities, and also about social action projects rooted in justice, not charity. Youth can also be encouraged to critically analyze the existing narratives and resources around them to identify which voices and histories are constantly present and which are frequently missing (Earick, 2010).

## **Economics Education for Young Learners**

Often associated with the stock market and concepts such as the free market economy, economics is typically dismissed as irrelevant for or beyond the grasp of young learners. In fact, economic concepts such as scarcity, choices, and tradeoffs are foundational in the development of young children (Gallagher & Kelly, 2019). Yet when economics content is taught, the focus tends to be on wants versus needs and money, and, as occurs in and through the other disciplines described here, mainstream narratives reify white, middle-class, cisgender norms that render issues and systems of oppression invisible. The notions of individual persistence and meritocracy that abound in social studies curricula are particularly color-evasive with respect to socioeconomic status. When young students first learn about jobs and earning money, conversations about race- and gender-based wage disparities and other inequities are wholly disregarded.

While an exploration of neoclassical economics is beyond the scope of this paper, the dominant theory of color-evasive economics alleges “that racial and racist economic decisions are hindrances to the market economy, may prove to be too costly, and will likely falter based on market competition” (King & Finley, 2015, p. 196). The history of American racism proves this claim false, as white supremacist ideology and related, systemic racist economic policies and norms have led to the direct and indirect accrual of wealth for countless individuals and businesses, as well as the U.S. government (King & Finley, 2015; Vickery et al., 2015). And racist economic policies and inequities persist, taking the form of racially-discriminatory home loans, gentrification, and the widespread existence of food deserts in urban areas populated by Communities of Color. Even so, and in keeping with the omniscient character of historical master narratives, neoclassical economics dominates P-12 curriculum with a façade of neutrality regarding race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and dis/ability (Adams, 2019; Shanks, 2019).

### ***Transformative Justice in Economics Education***

In stark contrast to a neoclassical paradigm, a transformative justice model of economics must be “compatible with the goals of eliminating unearned privileges and unjust power distributions, and de-racializing privilege and power in this society” (Pouncy, 2002, p. 843), problematizing the idealization of capitalism within a democracy. As starting points, educators can offer examples of alternative economic models, such as cooperatives and mutual aid societies.

Introducing mutual aid societies as part of the curriculum highlights how community members have found creative ways to uphold each other in the face of economic injustice. The Free African Society of Philadelphia, founded in 1787, became the model for banks in the African American community, acquired land for burial ground, and developed a food program for the poor and widowed (Dickerson, 2020). Mutualistas were developed by Mexican immigrants in the late 19th century and functioned to provide members with cultural activities, education, health care, insurance, legal protection, and anti-defamation advocacy (Tatum, 2001). The Comité de Vecinos de Lemon Grove (Lemon Grove Neighbors Committee) was a mutualista that filed a

successful desegregation suit against the Lemon Grove School District in 1931, a story recounted in the picturebook *Todos Iguales/All Equal: Un Corrido de Lemon Grove/A Ballad of Lemon Grove* (Hale, 2019). Similar organizations have also emerged in Asian American communities, particularly in the wake of Japanese American incarceration and the Chinese Confession program, events that led to government distrust and prompted increased self-reliance within Asian immigrant communities.

Human need can initiate economic reasoning, and this starting point allows students to consider how “to cultivate ideals for the distribution of resources so that they can change or create new economic systems to better meet their ideals” (Gallagher, 2020, p. 3). Swalwell and colleagues (2019) describe elementary teachers who engaged in professional development to learn about social class and economic inequality, and then developed and taught a kindergarten activity on social class and a first-grade unit on food justice. This study reveals how schools reproduce and exacerbate classism through practices and policies related to behavior, school supplies, events, and questions for classroom conversation. In particular, the authors recognize that hoping students feel grateful for their material possessions and avoid negatively stereotyping people in poverty is not justice-oriented, and students are capable of much more sophisticated thinking and learning. These are common pitfalls faced by educators who attempt to engage students in critical conversations without placing direct attention on power, oppression, and the potential for change. Transformative justice in economics must disrupt the deeply-embedded meritocratic myth that those who work hard will achieve financial success and that those who do not work hard do not deserve to have their basic human needs fulfilled.

### **Geography Education for Young Learners**

The National Geography Standards, developed in 1994 by the National Council for Geographic Education and Association of American Geographers, identify five fundamental themes of geography: location, place, human–environment interaction, movement, and regions. Yet, young children’s geographic learning often focuses narrowly on maps, abandoning opportunities to look deeply and critically at how the five themes might be woven into common elementary-level learning about family, transportation, and immigration. Moreover, the focus given to maps tends to be superficial, at best, limited to the physical distance between objects and places rather than consideration of various dynamics of power and oppression that have resulted in the location and characteristics of various communities, and the businesses, amenities, and access to transportation and recreation found therein.

For example, Sweeney’s (1996/2018) *Me on the Map* (illustrated by Cable) is an outdated, problematic text that social studies scholars continue to uphold as a useful resource for introducing maps to young children (Fantozzi et al., 2013; Fertig & Silverman, 2007; Kenyon et al., 2016). The book features a white girl who exhibits dominance and control of a range of maps but is notably absent on pages where the world beyond North America and Europe are represented. The other continents instead feature stereotypical images of exotic Brown and Black children. Doornbos (2014) argues that a critical stance centered on positions of power,

identity, and interaction can be used to reveal the way *Me on the Map* reifies Eurocentrism, whiteness, and American exceptionalism, though such critiques are often delayed until secondary education (if they occur at all). The example of *Me on the Map* thus illustrates subtle ways in which geography, too, is taught as master narrative.

### ***Transformative Justice in Geography Education***

Like Doornbos' (2014) critique of *Me on the Map*, a transformative justice approach to geography calls on educators to interrogate and teach how maps reinforce power and U.S./Eurocentrism to maintain the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. While conversation about redlining and housing segregation might be confusing for our youngest learners, children can certainly understand the displacement of Native peoples and how such displacement impacts every aspect of life. Children also have acute understandings about the spaces and places in which they feel welcome and safe, and spaces associated with fear and harm. Children know when areas of recreation and play are proximal and when they are distant, and where they are allowed and forbidden. Educators can build off the geographic knowledge young learners already possess to guide investigations of space and place as laden with meaning and sometimes competing interests; such foundational understandings can then develop into explorations of racism and classism in housing and other areas, leading to the emergence of critical geography.

Critical geography (Harvey, 2001) tends "to focus primarily on people and their relationships to one another, the ways in which they create spaces and places both physical and imagined, and the interactions between people and the ecological" (Gershon, 2017 p. 126). Massey (2005) defines place as constantly in flux, "an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories," (p. 151) both natural and cultural. These notions center power and possibility in geography, rather than understanding and presenting the discipline as static and neutral. Consider, for example, how the space of a classroom is regulated differently from a playground space, both by children and by adults; then contrast the regulation of a playground during school hours to the deregulation that may occur in the evening and on weekends, and how various rules applied in both cases are dependent on who is present and what is taking place.

Noting that the spatial dimension has traditionally been treated as a fixed background external to the social world, Soja (2010) contends that "everything that is social (justice included) is simultaneously and inherently spatial, just as everything spatial, at least with regard to the human world, is simultaneously and inherently socialized" (pp. 5-6). It is in this vein that efforts toward spatial justice aim to enhance working understandings of justice in all societies. Coupled with critical geography, spatial justice offers all students, but IBPOC students in particular, important ways to understand the places and spaces they move through. Such lenses can dynamically change youths' understandings of the context and conditions of their schools, neighborhoods, and communities. Unfortunately, these perspectives are sorely lacking in teacher preparation programs. Teacher educators should engage prospective teachers in map work that expose distortions, bias, and the ideological influence of cartographers (Doornbos,

2014; McCall, 2011), while also attending to larger issues of spatial justice that are deeply intertwined with other social studies disciplines such as economics and history.

Despite the fact that most educators of young children present a narrow concept of borders as fixed and neutral geographic and political boundary demarcations, borders exist all around us. Anzaldúa (1987) explains that borders “are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (n.p.). Borders also define which places are rendered safe or unsafe, and distinguish *us* from *them* (Anzaldúa, 1987). These concepts, which children experience constantly, are often felt most acutely by those on the margins. Menon and Saleh (2018) maintain that “any discussion about borders is ultimately a discussion of self/selves” (p. 53), reminding educators of the ongoing existence of “constructed borders that story certain lives as less valuable and/or worthy of care” (p. 62). Consequently, a transformative justice vision of geography for young learners must recognize borderlands as both a liminal space of pain and a site of promise and redemption, and educators should work to invite spaces for border-crossing and reimagining (Anzaldúa, 1987; Menon & Saleh, 2018).

### **Sociology Education for Young Learners**

The sociological approach to social studies most often manifests through individual and cultural differences in early childhood and elementary classrooms. Common instructional themes throughout these early years include “All About Me,” families, neighborhoods, and communities. Each of these themes is typically taught through white, middle class, Christian, abled, cisgender, and heterosexual norms (Tschida & Buchanan, 2017; Van Horn & Hawkman, 2018). Social studies standards often evade explicit mention of race or racial groups, using coded language such as “culture” or “human characteristics” rather than naming specific ethnoracial minorities (Vickery et al., 2015).

Culture thus frequently emerges through the latter part of the “heroes and holidays” thread that dominates elementary social studies (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017), emphasizing food, fun, and flags in ways that contrast cultural distinctiveness against what is commonly perceived as “American”: whiteness (Pass et al., 2006; Rodríguez & Kim, 2018). In many schools, Black History Month “represents a time to cram everything ‘Black’ in the curriculum” (King & Brown, 2014, p. 25), a pattern that can result in decontextualized narratives, stereotypical constructs, and superficial attention to a small assortment of Black heroes and heroines. Ultimately, groups who are historically left out of the master narrative of U.S. history are thus situated both in isolation and as isolated, most often in ways that emphasize otherness, all of which serves to maintain the schema of white superiority (King & Brown, 2014).

### ***Transformative Justice in Sociology Education***

A multitude of scholarship, particularly in the fields of bilingual education and ethnic studies, has revealed the importance of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), and the application of these pedagogies needs additional attention in social studies education, particularly in regard to the sociological themes taught to young learners. While many preservice teachers consider the sociological aspects of social studies education easy to teach, justice-focused educators must commit to critically examining how these foundational topics are normed and work to actively shift how they will present and discuss them.

Turtle Island Social Studies Collective (2019) recently took an intersectional approach to such an undertaking, developing an inquiry about contemporary Indigenous women leaders that engages issues of land, colonization, tribal sovereignty, and culture in ways that are notably distinct from mainstream lessons about community helpers and leaders. This inquiry attends to multiple sociological challenges in social studies, disrupting traditional representations of men as leaders, presenting Native peoples as alive and agentic in the present, interrogating settler colonialism, and including land as an essential part of life.

Many common early childhood and elementary school activities are problematically embedded with white, middle-class norms. Templeton (2020) raises the point that, for minoritized populations, family often extends to communal care networks that have little to do with biological structures, yet, this reality does not fit into the typical framing of family photo-sharing projects. Family tree creation can pose challenges to families for whom histories of enslavement or genocide make generational tracing and specificity impossible, while also failing to create or allow space for same-sex parents or adoption by presuming heteronormativity and narrowly conceptualizing family relations as (only) biological.

A final example arises through the common practice of teaching young learners about community helpers such as medical professionals, firefighters, and police officers with directives to rely on and obey these individuals. Such lessons fail to attend to the realities of racial profiling and police brutality, or acknowledge how these patterns disproportionately impact communities of color (Love & Bradley, 2015). Rather than centering notions of compliance, a transformative justice approach would instead begin with recognition that racial biases directly impact the ways Black and Brown children are disciplined and emphasize community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), identifying the contributions of a broader range of community members (beyond public servants) and highlighting how marginalized communities and community members can and do support, uplift, and show solidarity with each other.

### **Moving Forward: Toward Transformative Justice Social Studies**

While social studies curricular frameworks purport to develop citizens who strive to contribute to democratic ideals, they rarely acknowledge ways in which the nation has “systematically violated people’s rights, enslaved or expropriated people of color, or legally considered women

to be second class citizens” (Epstein, 2009, p. 8). A turn toward transformative justice in social studies education requires ongoing commitment to five pedagogical stances (Winn, 2018, in press) that interrogate and disrupt the dominant narratives of each social studies discipline.

### ***History Matters***

The *History Matters* pedagogical stance (Winn, 2018) is a commitment to examine the history of the social studies disciplines, with the overview of dominant pedagogical approaches in the five major disciplines presented in this paper a starting point that is far from comprehensive. Educators must critically examine social studies curricula to identify voices, perspectives, and historical occurrences that are emphasized, distorted, and suppressed. With young children, it is particularly important to make local connections to the lived experiences of youth while simultaneously recognizing how transnationalism impacts many students. The “expanding communities” approach to social studies education, in which young children first learned about families, schools, and neighborhoods, was introduced in the 1940s by Paul Robert Hanna. As they grew older, children’s social studies learning expanded to their city, state, and nation, and finally, the world. Nearly a century later, elementary educational standards in many states still adhere to this approach, despite dramatic technological innovations in communication and transportation (Halvorsen, 2013). As educators reimagine what social studies for *all* learners might look like, they must consider appropriate disciplinary content shifts with local, national, and global lenses to more authentically and accurately reflect a broader range of histories at each of these levels; providing constant, complex reflections of self that complement similarly constant and complex examples of others.

### ***Race Matters***

In the introduction to *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* (2020), Kendi states that “(t)he first step to building an antiracist America is acknowledging America’s racist past. By acknowledging America’s racist past, we can acknowledge America’s racist present” (p. xv). In the final pages, Reynolds reminds the reader, “We can’t attack a thing we don’t know.” The fields of social studies education, early childhood, and elementary education remain overwhelmingly white (Sleeter, 2001), and nearly all prospective and current early childhood and elementary teachers likely learned white supremacist master narratives in their own schooling. Moreover, white teachers often resist discussions of race or racism with students and reify nationalist narratives that emphasize the positive role of whites while erasing or distorting the involvement of People of Color. Teacher education programs and in-service teachers cannot engage students in the process of unlearning master narratives without directly attending to race, which has fundamentally shaped U.S. history and citizenship – and continues to do so.

*Race Matters* (Winn, 2018) is a pedagogical stance grounded in the conviction that simplistic conversations about racial categorization are not enough, as “(t)here has always been racism in the United States, but it has not always been the same racism. Racism has changed over time, taking on different forms and serving different social purposes in each time period” (Lipsitz, 2006, p. 4). While disciplines such as economics and geography are frequently framed as neutral, histories of unionizing and housing segregation are among the many examples of focal content that quickly reveal the extent to which racism is deeply embedded in what is valued and

taught. Obfuscation of race and racism in the social studies disciplines unquestionably upholds harmful white supremacist master narratives and the illusion of meritocracy in the U.S. In contrast, deliberate teachings that contextualize and connect racist oppression and violence in the past to contemporary policies and practices support learners with the intellectual tools and awareness needed to disrupt and dismantle white supremacist systems and structures that stand in the way of a more inclusive, just, and equitable society.

### ***Justice Matters***

Almost all disciplines that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries are rooted in colonialism and white supremacy (Tuck & Yang, 2018). This paper has begun to reveal how colonialism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness manifest in the major social studies disciplines, and a *Justice Matters* pedagogical stance (Winn, 2018) must be central to ontological and epistemological shifts away from these insidious disciplinary foundations toward persons and groups who have been relegated to the margins of civics, history, economics, geography, and sociology. In her 2004 Sydney Peace Prize lecture, author Arundhati Roy stated, “We know of course there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” Transformative justice in the social studies requires the active disruption of master narratives coupled with the simultaneous embrace of non-dominant voices and truths that have been deliberately silenced. This is a call and an opportunity to honor and learn from the legacies, stories, current contributions, and valuable ways of knowing of groups and communities who have much to teach us all.

### ***Language Matters***

It is impossible to read any text without reading the context of the text, as well; discourse must be considered within the reality that shapes it (Freire, 1985). The master narratives in U.S. social studies education are notorious for their use of omniscient and passive voice, language use patterns that present injustice without recognizing those who perpetrate it or the present-day systems that uphold it (Jordan, 2002; Rodríguez & Kim, 2018). In their earliest years of schooling, children are typically taught about Pilgrims and Indians. Whereas Pilgrim is a name that describes a small and specific cohort of English settlers, Indian is a generic misnomer ascribed by colonizers that encompasses the members of hundreds of different nations – all with self-determined names and distinct characteristics and histories that are rarely mentioned at all, much less with any accuracy.

Older children then learn about slavery, not enslavement – this horrific history presented as a long-ago era that simply was, rather than an economic system deliberately built on racist subjugation. Even the pervasive term “slave” is a nonhuman naming convention that reflects an enslaved person’s condition as a commodity rather than emphasizing personhood in the way “enslaved person” might begin to do (Waldman, 2015). Justice-seeking educators who adopt the *Language Matters* pedagogical stance (Winn, 2018) know that linguistic decisions are rarely neutral, pervade every discipline in the social studies, and present opportunities for change that can have powerful transformative effects that center the humanity in us all.

### ***Futures Matter***

Social studies education today faces a dilemma: how to teach core values such as freedom, liberty, and justice *for all* in a country with a continuing legacy of oppression and intimidation (Rains, 2003). Johnson (2019) urges preservice elementary teachers to “enact truth-telling pedagogies” (p. 390) that disrupt sanitized and whitewashed narratives of social studies. This course of action is essential within every social studies discipline if we are to establish and maintain anti-colonial and anti-racist educational spaces and places in which all children see themselves and their communities recognized and valued. Such work requires intense reckoning with settler colonialism, the master narratives of the social studies disciplines, and how these master narratives can and should be disrupted. A *Futures Matter* pedagogical stance (Winn, in press) invites educators to ensure that woven throughout this process is a focus on envisioning the more expansive, inclusive, equitable, and just futures that might become possible as a result of practices of teaching and learning that reflect important – and long-overdue – ontological and epistemological shifts toward these goals.

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