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Black History in the Early Childhood and Elementary Classrooms: Teacher Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

Educators across the United States have struggled with meaningfully yet appropriately addressing race within History and Social Studies lessons at the Early Childhood and Elementary level. Previous research has revealed the importance of these conversations and the benefits that learning accurate history has for students of all racial backgrounds. The literature has also revealed the discomfort and apprehensiveness that educators may feel while confronting and teaching about our nation’s complex and often grim history. The purpose of this research was to analyze teachers’ beliefs and comfortability regarding addressing race in the classroom and how that translates to their teaching practices. It was hypothesized that despite believing in the importance of incorporating race-related discussions in their lessons, educators will not frequently do so due to the lack of comfort, confidence, and support in the area. The participants in this study consisted of eight primarily White, female Elementary and Early Childhood educators currently employed in a public school in Southeastern Massachusetts. The data was gathered through a survey that was administered via email. The results revealed that while the majority of participants generally agreed with incorporating diverse perspectives and race-related conversations within their lessons, they did not always do so. Although indicating feeling supported, some educators felt a lack of comfort and confidence in teaching the full scope of Black History in their classrooms. These results provide insight into the potential discrepancy between teachers’ attitudes and their practices, revealing how it may be targeted through professional development to build confidence in instruction.
Black History in the Early Childhood and Elementary Classrooms: Teacher Beliefs and Practices

Historical events have shaped the experiences of Black individuals in America, leading to inequality that has become engrained in United States systems. Slavery and segregation, for example, have resulted in systemic inequities in areas such as housing policies, criminal justice, politics, healthcare, media representation, and education (Hammond et al., 2020). These inequities have had lasting implications on Black individuals in the United States, resulting in disparities in factors such as the opportunity gap related to public K-12 education.

Due to the severity and complexity of historical events, teachers and administrations across the country have struggled with how to go about teaching the full scope of Black history in the Elementary classroom. To maintain comfort and harmony, sometimes important topics and conversations regarding race have been censored or avoided. To accurately teach United States History, these events and truths must be explicitly and effectively addressed in the classroom. Within the field of education, conflicting views have arisen regarding accurately teaching about the Black experience in America while maintaining an age-appropriate lens. There are numerous approaches to examining Black history that can inform effective pedagogical practices. Discussing and embracing racial differences, highlighting diverse perspectives, and accurately portraying historical events in elementary lessons will foster critical thinking, growth, and unity in the classroom and beyond.

A Look into Higher Education

There are various frameworks for analyzing race as it pertains to Black history in the United States. Critical Race Theory and White Privilege Pedagogy are frameworks that can be studied at the collegiate level. In contrast, Multiculturalist frameworks are studied and
implemented effectively at all grade levels. These approaches have been both commended and critiqued for the perspectives they offer.

**What is Critical Race Theory?**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a model for higher education that embraces the systemic view of racism by emphasizing the importance of examining how it exists in our systems (Leonardo, 2004; Mackenzie, 2021). This framework is not taught at the elementary level but highlights important perspectives for teacher candidates to consider. There is pushback by Critical Race Theorists on past and current curricula that are implemented throughout the United States which relay history through a Eurocentric lens. CRT emphasizes the importance of amplifying Black perspectives and the real truth of Black history in America.

Counter-storytelling is a CRT method used to shed light on the real experiences of Black individuals in the U.S. from their perspective, straying away from traditional narratives (Mensah, 2019). This method emphasizes hearing the accounts of those who directly experienced it, rather than putting it through a Eurocentric filter. In the classroom, this could involve reading primary sources and looking at Black history from the accounts of Black individuals. However, CRT as a framework has faced great opposition and some states have even banned it in the classroom, arguing that acknowledging racism creates unnecessary division (Mackenzie, 2021). Even where it is not explicitly banned, like in Massachusetts, CRT is still not taught or embedded within the curriculum at the Elementary level (Hedrick, 2021). Harrison et al. (2021) argue that these current bans are less about CRT and more about banning any discussions of race as it pertains to class material. Although not explicitly taught in the classroom, CRT can be beneficial in providing educators themselves with the necessary tools and perspectives to teach the current curriculum in an antiracist manner (Blaisdell, 2005). With this lens, educators can think critically...
about how to teach their Social Studies lessons in a way that accurately and appropriately reflects our nation’s complex history. Where there is effort, there is the opportunity to promote unity in the classroom while also teaching real history and amplifying the voices of Black individuals.

**White Privilege Pedagogy**

White Privilege Pedagogy (WPP) is another higher education antiracist teaching effort that specifically highlights how privilege plays a role in racial inequity (Crowley & Smith, 2020). This approach allows learners to examine race relations and U.S. History through the lens of privilege versus oppression. WPP is often criticized because while it starts the conversation, it does not provide real ways for White students to use their privilege for good (Crowley & Smith, 2020). There has also been backlash from White students in examining their privilege, as well as critiques from scholars who argue that lessening privilege should not take priority over concrete activism (Lensmire et al., 2013). For instance, Margolin (2015) argues that solely learning about White privilege provokes feelings of acceptance that inhibit change, ignore systemic racism, and further center the White experience in the classroom. The WPP perspective can allow White teachers and teacher candidates to further analyze their role in the classroom and use their position to facilitate important conversations.

**Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism and multiculturalist practices use different features of culture—such as song and food—to honor racial and cultural differences to promote unity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Multiculturalism is reflected by the sentiments of Lyiscott (2019) who explains, “a truly diverse society is not about simply being included in dominant culture” (p. 82). Multiculturalism is most apparent in schools and least rejected, as it does not outwardly address tensions between groups, but instead emphasizes tolerance (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The
issue with this approach is that change is less likely if difficult issues are not addressed. For example, Bery (2014) found that with this lens, White educators tend to teach slavery as an issue of morality, ignoring the systems that allowed it to carry on. In addition, Multiculturalism often isolates conversations of race to be had on certain days of the year, such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day and during Black History Month. Although it is important to recognize these important dates, research by Bolgatz (2005) supports the idea that conversations about race should be effectively woven into the curriculum rather than isolated. To that end, McCarthy (1993) argues that educators should stray away from multiculturalist approaches that solely rely on abandoning individual prejudice itself.

Teacher Beliefs, Approaches, and Resources

Teachers and administrations across the United States face decisions regarding the most effective, appropriate, and accurate ways to teach Black history at the Elementary level. Coles-Ritchie & Smith (2017) found that regardless of their own race, teachers expressed uncertainty about how to address race in the classroom. Lyiscott (2019) explains that in her work, she has found apprehension from U.S. educators rooted in anxiety, guilt, and/or indifference regarding racism. Ramsay-Jordan (2020) found that White teacher candidates can acknowledge their privilege, however, have difficulty expressing full understanding or sensitivity when it comes to issues of race in the classroom. Even with the best intentions, there are some problematic approaches to addressing – or ignoring – race within the classroom.

Colorblindness

Colorblindness is the effort to ignore race as a defining characteristic in an attempt to combat racism, while inadvertently erasing the complex histories of racial groups (Boutte et al., 2011). Among many issues, the colorblind perspective does not allow for the acknowledgment of
how race is often related to the measurement of student success in the United States (Blaisdell 2005; Lyiscott 2019). The colorblind approach gives White individuals the opportunity to remain comfortable with their privilege. Professional development efforts and uncomfortable conversations about race can be met with resistance from White teachers, primarily because it forces them to put the colorblind lens aside (Sleeter, 1993). Blaisdell (2005) found that although White teachers may recognize race and disparities, colorblindness can still exist within their teaching practices.

Editing

Due to the complex and troublesome history of the United States, the realities are often edited in an effort to make them more digestible at the Elementary level. Censoring history with Eurocentric narratives is damaging to all students as it perpetuates stereotypes and misinformation. In fact, the first Black history lessons taught in K-12 schools in the U.S. were built on Eurocentric narratives that depicted Black individuals in a negative light and rewrote their experiences from the White perspective (King, 2017).

Being that the very foundation of K-12 Black history has flaws, it has become difficult to unlearn and accurately teach these lessons. History textbooks, a primary resource given to teachers to guide their lessons, can be to blame for the censorship and revision of United States History. A study conducted by Keenan (2019) found that in an attempt to limit the portrayal of violence at the Elementary level, Indigenous peoples were inaccurately deemed as the perpetrators of the most violence. These findings align with the tendency of history textbooks in the United States to frame history with a Eurocentric approach, demonizing the “other.” For example, Christopher Columbus is typically illustrated as a heroic figure at the Elementary level, masking the dark truths behind the genocide of Native American peoples. Additionally, King
(2017) cites the McGraw-Hill textbook error in which enslaved peoples were inaccurately defined as “immigrants” and “workers,” which implies choice and erases the Black experience within the Transatlantic slave trade. Although improvements have been made, the way that Black history has been taught in the United States often revolves around encounters with White people through a one-sided lens that ignores other perspectives (King, 2020).

**Avoiding**

Due to the discomfort of addressing the problematic history of the United States, conversations about race are often ignored in the classroom. Martell (2017) found that pre-service teachers believed it to be essential to explicitly address race in the classroom, however, when using an approach that taught against individual prejudice, participants often used avoidant techniques. In pre-service teachers’ approaches that highlighted systemic racism in their lessons, techniques that embraced race were used the most. Despite their intentions, in his 16 observations of preservice teachers, conversations regarding race were explicitly avoided or redirected 5 times during teaching. Bolgatz (2005) found that when teachers explicitly address race relations throughout their teachings on U.S. History, it normalized the discussion of these topics and gave students the power to think critically. However, these conversations must be meaningful, as Ramsay-Jordan (2020) found a lack of change resulting from race-related discussions led by White preservice teachers. Research by McFarlane (2015) found that in expressing their discomfort in teaching Black history, teachers cited the lack of resources and support in this area. Coles-Ritchie & Smith (2017) found that when teachers felt supported by the administration through professional development, they were more apt to engage in worthwhile dialogue regarding race in the classroom. These strategies of avoiding are a result of the discomfort of teachers in addressing race in the classroom. However, avoiding conversations
about race and racism in the classroom does not eliminate curiosity among students but leads them to seek (mis)information elsewhere (Harrison et al., 2021).

Method

Participants

The sample used in this study consisted of PK-2 Early and Elementary educators from a public Elementary school located in Southeastern Massachusetts. Of the 53 faculty members invited to participate, a total of 8 respondents participated in the study. The final sample consisted of 8 (100%) females; 7 (87.5%) of which identified as European American (White, Non-Hispanic) and 1 (12.5%) who identified as African American (Black, Non-Hispanic). The participants indicated currently teaching a range of subjects: 5 (62.5%) teaching History and Social Science, 6 (75%) teaching Mathematics, 7 (87.5%) teaching English Language Arts, 5 (62.5%) teaching Science and Technology/Engineering, and 2 (25%) respondents indicating “Other”. Of the participants who selected “Other”, 1 (12.5%) indicated teaching Special Education, and 1 (12.5%) indicated teaching ELL (English Language Learners).

Procedure

The survey was given to teachers with the permission of the elementary school principal. A list of staff and service providers’ email addresses was attained, and recruitment took place via email. The email invited Elementary and Early Childhood teachers and educators to participate in the survey and described the survey and its purpose. A survey link was attached to the email, indicating the deadline for the participation of one week. The deadline was then extended by 5 days in a follow-up email as a result of low participation.

Measures
The items included in the survey were adapted from Guyton & Wesche (2005), Buchanan (2015), and Hawley et al. (n.d.). In addition to gathering demographic data, the questions sought to elicit responses indicating the teachers’ attitudes and practices regarding addressing race in their lessons. The initial purpose of the study was to identify whether there was a relationship between educator race and comfortability addressing race in the classroom. Additionally, to find whether an educator’s attitudes correlated with their practices. Due to an unexpected low participation rate of 15%, correlational conclusions could not be drawn. However, the survey questions still elicited meaningful responses that indicated a range of practices and attitudes among the 8 participants.

**Teaching Philosophies**

A teaching philosophy outlines an educator’s approach to teaching. An educator’s philosophy often reveals their core beliefs and what they prioritize as they navigate teaching. This survey identified three common approaches, as revealed by the literature, to teaching a diverse group of students. Participants were instructed to identify which teaching philosophy they most identified with. Item 4A stated, “In order to effectively serve a diverse group of students, educators should engage in appropriate, meaningful race-related discussions and promote equity.” Item 4B stated, “Students bring their own unique racial identities to the classroom and educators should work to honor those differences in their lessons.” Item 4C stated, “Educators should work to promote unity in the classroom, regardless of student differences.” Participants selected which philosophy they aligned with, revealing an equity-based (4A), multiculturalist (4B), or colorblind approach (4C). The categorization of these approaches was adapted from Martell (2017).

**Inclusion of Diverse Perspectives**
Educators have varying attitudes and approaches to including diverse perspectives when it comes to their lessons. Diverse perspectives reflect the experiences of a variety of racial and ethnic groups when it comes to complex histories, rather than the traditional Eurocentric narratives. Item 5 states, “Early childhood and Elementary school teachers should incorporate perspectives and accounts of diverse groups in their History/Social Studies lessons” (Guyton & Wesche, 2005, p. 28). The participant indicated their attitude by selecting Strongly Agree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Somewhat Disagree (3), or Strongly Disagree (4). In later questioning, the participant was asked to indicate their practices regarding the inclusion of diverse perspectives. Item 15, adapted from Guyton & Wesche (2005), stated, “Perspectives and accounts of diverse groups are incorporated in my History/Social Studies lessons.” The participant responded with (1) Always, (2) Sometimes, (3) Rarely, or (4) Never. These items sought to offer insight into the attitudes compared to the practices of these educators concerning diverse portrayals of History.  

**Teacher Attitudes to Addressing Race**

The perception of race as a controversial and divisive topic can stand in the way of educators effectively incorporating it into their discussions and lessons. Item 6 states, “In the Early childhood and Elementary classrooms, addressing race in History/Social studies can lead to division.” The participant was prompted to respond with Strongly Agree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Somewhat Disagree (3), or Strongly Disagree (4). This item sought to shed light on these educators’ attitudes towards race as a divisive or unifying topic in the classroom. Item 7 states, “Early childhood and Elementary school teachers should explicitly address race in their History/Social Studies lessons.” The participant responded with Strongly Agree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Somewhat Disagree (3), or Strongly Disagree (4). Item 8 states, “Early childhood and Elementary school teachers should only address race if prompted by students.” Participants were
prompted to respond along the same scale: Strongly Agree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Somewhat Disagree (3), or Strongly Disagree (4). These items sought to reveal these educators’ attitudes regarding the method with which to address race in History lessons, if at all. Item 9 states, “It can be difficult to navigate meaningful discussions about race at the Early childhood and Elementary level.” The participant responded along the same scale, with Strongly Agree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Somewhat Disagree (3), or Strongly Disagree (4). This item sought to reveal these educators’ feelings about the ease with which they can discuss meaningful race-related discussions in their classrooms.

**Teacher Practices of Addressing Race**

 Regardless of an educator’s intentions or attitudes, when it comes to addressing race in the classroom, many factors can get in the way of effectively executing that practice. Item 13 states, “Race-related discussions are incorporated into my History/Social Studies lessons.” The participant was prompted to respond with (1) Always, (2) Sometimes, (3) Rarely, or (4) Never. Item 14 states, “In my lessons, race is explicitly addressed in relation to class content.” The participant responded along the same scale, with (1) Always, (2) Sometimes, (3) Rarely, or (4) Never. These items sought to reveal the actual practices of educators regarding incorporating race into their lessons, despite their beliefs or intentions. Item 16 states, “Race-related questions and discussions are prompted by students during History/Social Studies lessons.” The participants could respond with (1) Always, (2) Sometimes, (3) Rarely, or (4) Never, revealing the frequency of student questioning of race concerning class content.

**Censorship of Complex Histories**

 Due to the complex history of race relations, educators may intentionally or unintentionally censor our nation’s past at the elementary or early childhood level. Item 17 asks
about whether educators partake in editing certain histories by stating, “The full scope of Black history is edited within my History/Social Studies lessons to make it more digestible for the Early childhood and Elementary level.” The participant responded with (1) Always, (2) Sometimes, (3) Rarely, or (4) Never. Item 18 asks about avoiding certain histories by stating, “Certain topics regarding race are avoided within my History/Social Studies lessons.” The participant responded along the same scale: (1) Always, (2) Sometimes, (3) Rarely, or (4) Never. These items sought to reveal the practices of these educators regarding their censorship of Black history through strategies of editing or avoiding difficult topics.

**Comfort, Confidence, and Support**

Educators can often feel uncomfortable or unsure when addressing race in their lessons. While this apprehensiveness can be a result of a variety of complex factors, support from parents and administration can help to build comfort and confidence in educators. Regarding the educators’ comfort, item 10 stated, “I feel comfortable addressing race in my History/Social Studies lessons.” The participant responded by selecting Strongly Agree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Somewhat Disagree (3), or Strongly Disagree (4). Regarding the educators’ confidence, item 11 stated, “I feel confident in teaching the full scope of Black History in my classroom.” The participant responded by selecting Strongly Agree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Somewhat Disagree (3), or Strongly Disagree (4). Concerning their perceived support, item 12 stated, “I feel supported in teaching the full scope of Black History in my classroom.” The participant responded along the same scale of Strongly Agree (1), Somewhat Agree (2), Somewhat Disagree (3), or Strongly Disagree (4). These items sought to reveal these educators’ comfort, confidence, and perceived support in addressing complex racial histories, as these factors can stand in the way of doing so.
Results

The results of the survey indicated a range of varying attitudes and practices among the 8 participants about addressing race in their classrooms. When it came to their teaching philosophies, 3 (37.5%) of participants identified with an equity-based approach when it came to instruction. These participants believed that promoting equity through leading explicit, race-related class discussions would best assist them in effectively serving a diverse group of students. The 2 (25%) participants that identified with a multiculturalist approach, indicated their belief that differences among their students should be embraced within their lessons. In contrast, 3 (37.5%) of participants believed in a unity-based approach, prioritizing classroom unity over the emphasis on student differences. These varying responses indicate the differing perspectives on how teachers believe they can best serve their students through instruction.

When it came to the inclusion of diverse perspectives in their lessons, teachers’ attitudes differed from their practices. The majority, 6 participants (75%), indicated that they strongly agreed with incorporating diverse accounts of History in their lessons. In contrast, 1 (12.5%) participant somewhat disagreed with this idea, and another participant (12.5%) strongly disagreed. However, when it came to their practices, 2 (25%) indicated that they always incorporate accounts of diverse groups into their lessons, while 4 (50%) indicated that they sometimes do. The remaining 2 (25%) participants did not respond to this item. While 75% of the participants strongly agreed with the importance of including these perspectives in their History and Social Studies instruction, only 25% of participants indicated always doing so. These results demonstrate how educators’ beliefs and intentions may not always align with their practices.
Concerning addressing race in their History and Social Studies lessons, educators’ beliefs also differ in comparison to their practices. Among the 8 participants, 3 (37.5%) strongly agreed and 2 (25%) somewhat agreed with explicitly addressing race in their instruction. Of the remaining 3 participants, 2 (25%) somewhat disagreed, and 1 (12.5%) strongly disagreed. These results demonstrate the varying levels of agreement regarding explicitly addressing race in Elementary and Early Childhood classroom lessons. When it came to these educators’ practices, 4 (50%) indicated that they sometimes explicitly address race while 1 (12.5%) rarely did. Another participant indicated that they never explicitly address race (12.5%) and two (25%) participants did not provide a response. When it came to incorporating race-related discussions in their History and Social Studies lessons, 1 (12.5%) participant indicated always including them, 4 (50%) participants indicated sometimes including them, and 1 (12.5%) participant indicated rarely including them. Of the remaining 2 (25%) participants, neither responded to this item. Although the majority of participants agreed with addressing race within their lessons, only half of the participants indicated sometimes doing so. These results further demonstrate how an educator’s beliefs and intentions, especially in addressing complex topics such as race, are not always reflected in their teaching practices.

There are varying reasons for which an Elementary or Early Childhood educator may not address race in their lessons, from the lack of confidence to the complexity of some topics. Of the 8 participants, only 1 (12.5%) strongly agreed with feeling comfortable addressing race in their History and Social Studies lessons. Of the remaining participants, 5 (62.5%) somewhat agreed with feeling comfortable and 2 (25%) somewhat disagreed. Similarly, only 1 (12.5%) participant strongly agreed with feeling confident in teaching Black History, while 4 (50%) somewhat agreed. Of the remaining 3 (37.5%) participants, they somewhat disagreed with
feeling confident in their instruction of Black History. Despite some lack of comfort and confidence among participants, all 7 of the participants who responded indicated feeling supported to some level in teaching the full scope of Black History. Two (25%) participants strongly agreed and 5 (62.5%) somewhat agreed with feeling supported in teaching Black History, while one respondent (12.5%) did not provide an answer. These results suggest that the lack of comfortability and confidence may play a role in some educators’ apprehensiveness in addressing race in their classrooms, rather than the lack of support. Some educators may also believe that confronting race-related topics can lead to classroom division rather than unity. Of the participants, 2 (25%) somewhat agreed with the idea that addressing race in History and Social Studies lessons could lead to classroom division. The remaining majority of participants disagreed with this notion; 3 (37.5%) somewhat disagreed and 3 (37.5%) strongly disagreed. These results reveal that there were no participants who strongly identified with the belief that race-related discussions could be divisive. However, a majority of participants found leading these discussions to be difficult overall, especially at the Elementary and Early childhood level. Three (37.5%) participants strongly agreed and 2 (25%) somewhat agreed that it was difficult for them to lead meaningful discussions about race at these early grade levels. In contrast, 2 (25%) participants somewhat disagreed, and another (12.5%) strongly disagreed. These results reveal that struggling to navigate these conversations intentionally may affect teachers’ ability to do so. 

Due to the complexity of some topics related to History and Social Studies, educators may feel the need to censor their lessons at the elementary and early childhood levels. Of the participants, 1 (12.5%) indicated that they always edit their Black History and Social Studies lessons to best fit the Elementary and Early Childhood classroom. Another participant (12.5%) indicated that they sometimes edit, 1 (12.5%) indicated that they rarely edit, and the remaining 3
(37.5%) respondents indicated never editing the scope of Black History in their lessons. Two (25%) of the participants did not respond to this item. Sometimes, rather than editing complex histories, some topics regarding race are avoided altogether. Two (25%) of the respondents indicated that they sometimes avoid certain race-related topics in their History and Social Studies lessons. One (12.5%) of the participants indicated rarely avoiding these topics, while 3 (37.5%) indicated that they never avoid discussing topics of race. The remaining 2 (25%) participants did not respond to this item.

Young children’s curiosity and innate desire to question may result in teachers having to confront these complex topics regarding race and racial histories without intending to. One (12.5%) of the participants strongly agreed and another (12.5%) somewhat agreed that race should only be brought up if prompted by students. The remaining majority of participants disagreed to some level; 2 (25%) somewhat disagreed and 4 (50%) strongly disagreed. The majority of participants revealed their belief that race should be addressed in some way by the classroom teacher regardless of student prompting. Of the participants, 4 (50%) indicated that sometimes students do prompt race-related discussions, while one participant (12.5%) indicated that students rarely do. The remaining 3 (37.5%) participants did not respond to this item. These results reveal that with or without teacher prompting, questions regarding race may come up during classroom lessons and educators must be prepared to respond in a meaningful manner.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to compare educators’ beliefs with their practices concerning effectively addressing race in Elementary and Early Childhood History and Social Studies lessons. The results aligned with the hypothesis in that the participants’ beliefs did not always align with their practices. Although a majority of teachers agreed with incorporating
diverse accounts of history and engaging in explicit instruction regarding racial histories, those beliefs were not always illustrated in their self-reported teaching practices. In addition, the participants demonstrated varying levels of willingness to address race in their classrooms, with a minority of participants feeling strong in their confidence and comfortability.

Regarding their teaching philosophies, the participants aligned with common teaching philosophies presented by previous literature when it came to addressing race in the classroom. The educators identified with an equity-based approach that centered on discussions of race, a multiculturalist approach honoring student diversity, or a unity-based approach that ignored student differences. When it came to the equity-based approach, Boutte et al (2011) found that young children do acknowledge race and as educators, it is appropriate to open these types of race-based conversations to combat racism and stereotyping. The results of my research suggested that less than half of the participants’ teaching philosophy revolved around including meaningful race-related discussions. When it came to the other approaches, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that a multiculturalist teaching strategy does not effectively address the racial tensions, through conversation, that have contributed to our nation’s history or the inequities that have resulted from them. However, my research demonstrated that one-fourth of the respondents identify with the teaching philosophy that represents student differences in lessons, which is a strategy typical of the multiculturalist approach. In contrast to multiculturalism, the colorblind approach or ignoring student differences is a practice that researchers have argued is inequitable (Blaisdell, 2005; Boutte et al., 2011). The results suggested that despite its critique, the same percentage of educators (37.5%) who used an equity-based approach identified with prioritizing unity despite student diversity. As previous research has suggested, there are numerous approaches to teaching History and Social Studies, however, prioritizing race-related and
equitable discussions at any age level has been argued to be the most beneficial despite not being as widely used.

Previous research suggests that the traditional Elementary and Early Childhood curriculum teaches History from the White point of view rather than including diverse stories and voices (Keenan, 2019; King, 2017; King, 2020). Research by Mensah (2019) also suggests that this Eurocentrism is also prevalent in teacher preparation programs, which further exacerbates the lack of inclusion of diverse historical accounts. The results of my research suggest that a majority of educators strongly agreed that these diverse perspectives should be woven into their History and Social Studies lessons. A majority of participants also indicated that they include these accounts in their lessons with varying frequency. A minority of participants self-reported always including diverse perspectives, indicating that there is still some work to do in challenging Eurocentric narratives in the classroom.

The literature also suggests that the apprehensiveness regarding addressing race in the classroom could be a result of teachers’ fear of unintentionally further dividing their students (Bolgatz, 2005; Mackenzie, 2021). The results of my research did not support this idea in that a majority of participants generally disagreed with the notion that addressing race could lead to classroom division. However, a minimal percentage (25%) of participants somewhat agreed that incorporating discussions of race could create divisiveness in the classroom, indicating that this idea may still play a role even if it is small.

Previous research has shown that despite common misconceptions, children are fully capable of engaging in race-related conversations and it encourages them to explore their innate curiosities about complex historical issues (Boutte et al., 2011; Harrison et al., 2021). Boutte et al. (2011) further argue that topics of racial injustice and historical inequities cannot be ignored
in the classroom as they tend to come up in lessons and class discussions. My research supports these findings in that half of the participants indicated that students sometimes bring up questions or conversations regarding race concerning class content. There were no participants that reported never having a student question about these topics, further suggesting that these discussions do come up in the classroom from time to time regardless of the teacher’s role. However, a majority of participants disagreed to an extent that race should only be addressed if students bring it up, indicating that teachers are attempting to engage in these conversations regardless. Bolgatz (2005) argues that although navigating these conversations can be hard for educators, leading these meaningful and explicit conversations allows them to amplify student voices and combat racist ideas. My research supported the idea that educators may find it difficult to lead race-based discussions as a majority of participants agreed to some extent – either strongly or somewhat. However, the educators did not let this difficulty stand in the way as a majority of participants agreed to some extent with the importance of addressing race and also indicated including race-related discussions in their lessons – either always or sometimes. These findings demonstrate that despite acknowledging the challenge, these educators are still attempting to bring about these much-needed discussions where they see fit.

As found by previous research, when it comes to the challenge of addressing race within History and Social Studies lessons, teachers’ discomfort, lack of confidence, and lack of support may play a role (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; MacFarlane, 2015; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020). My research challenges these findings in that a majority of teachers agreed (either strongly or somewhat) that they feel comfortable and confident addressing race and teaching the scope of Black History in their classrooms. However, this may be a result of self-report in that participants’ responses may not translate into their actual feelings or performance. In addition,
some participants did somewhat disagree with feeling confident and comfortable. However, all of the participants who responded either strongly or somewhat agreed with feeling supported in their instruction. These findings challenge the previous research that highlights lack of support as a reason for educators’ apprehensiveness in engaging in race-based discussion.

Previous research has found that due to the difficulty of acknowledging racial inequality in History, educators and their resources tend to edit or avoid these topics overall (Bolgatz, 2005; Keenan, 2019; King, 2017; Martell, 2017). My results challenged these findings in that the participants generally indicated confronting issues of race rather than editing or avoiding certain topics. However, not all of the participants responded to these items, leaving a response rate of 75%. Of the participants who responded, half indicated that they never edited the scope of Black History in their classrooms. In addition, half of the participants who responded indicated that they never avoided any topics in their lessons. However, Martell (2017) found that even when teachers deemed it important to address race, they were observed using avoidant strategies in their instruction. This reveals the advantage of observational measures and the disadvantage of self-report, as there is potential that my participants’ statements may not be reflected in their everyday practices.

Although this research illuminated compelling findings, there were limitations of this study that prevented drawing certain conclusions. The sample size was inadequate in allowing for correlations to be conducted as only 8 of the 53 potential participants responded to the survey. This small sample resulted in the presentation and analysis of results in a more qualitative manner rather than conducting a correlational analysis as previously intended. In addition to the size of the sample, the sample was also not diverse enough – as it consisted of a majority of White women – to accurately reflect the views of Southeastern Massachusetts
educators. To increase participation in future studies, the deadline for participants’ responses should be extended and participants could be incentivized to further motivate participation. This study could also be conducted on a larger scale by accessing educators across the United States, however, this would require time and additional resources that surpassed the scope of this project. It would also be beneficial to consider the timing in which recruitment for this particular project takes place. The minimal participation rate could be a result of the controversy regarding addressing race within the education system and in politics currently. Educators may wish to refrain from controversy as there is strong opposition to discussing race in the classroom from conservatives and others. Although lawmakers have not explicitly tried to ban discussions of race in Massachusetts classrooms, teachers may feel that their job security could be at risk if they engage in certain discussions or practices.

In addition to insufficient sample size, there are limitations in the mechanism used to gather data. Although surveys are a convenient way of eliciting interesting data, there are inherent flaws to this approach to data collection. This survey required participants to provide an accurate representation of their beliefs and practices regarding the serious topic of racial equity in education. In analyzing their own beliefs as compared to their practices, an individual’s biases may lead them to provide inaccurate responses intentionally or unintentionally. Due to the wide-ranging, yet strong beliefs regarding this topic, educators may feel apt to respond in a way that may not accurately reflect their teaching practices.

The implications of these findings will allow educators and school administrations to reflect on their beliefs and approaches regarding teaching Black History. Although educators generally believed in the importance of addressing race and incorporating diverse historical perspectives, these ideas were not always reflected in their self-reported practices. The results of
this research can allow educators to consider the factors that may be contributing to the potential editing and avoiding of meaningful race-based discussions in the classroom. In acknowledging and confronting potential feelings of discomfort or biases and challenging the Eurocentric perspectives that have too long taken priority in the classroom, Elementary and Early Childhood educators can enhance their History and Social Studies lessons. These findings can also be used to create professional development plans, as they reveal the areas in which educators need support in the classroom. Professional development plans and school administrations should prioritize building teachers’ confidence and willingness to incorporate race-based conversations and teach the full scope of Black History. In supporting and encouraging our educators, we can create meaningful and equitable change starting within the walls of the classroom.
References


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