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Brian Gibbs

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, bcgibbs@email.unc.edu

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Between the Visceral and the Lie: Lessons on Teaching Violence

Brian Gibbs, *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Abstract

Drawing from two qualitative case studies, one researching how teachers teach about war to the children of soldiers and the other examining how teachers teach lynching near historic lynching sites, this critical phenomenological study weighs how much horror and how much hope should be taught if the aim of the instruction is a liberating education. The author argues that a balance of both is necessary. Students cannot be left in the hopelessness of knowledge alone but must also be taught how to engage their world with the possibility of making change.

Keywords: *liberatory education, critical pedagogy, hard history*

Introduction

Although it wasn't much of a window, the students continued to glance at it and through it. The classroom was on the ground floor and was covered with fencing and mesh to prevent break-ins. The students were riveted to the narrative the teacher was telling, but they were also absently tapping their pens or notebooks. The teacher, Mr. Jones, was talking about the escalation of nuclear war from the first atomic bombs up to the thermo-nuclear warheads in the current United States arsenal. He conveyed the information through lecture and notes on the board. Purposefully not referring to any photographs, Mr. Jones was concerned about the emotions the content might provoke in his students, the children of soldiers. Realizing the students' discomfort and fear, Mr. Jones ended his lecture earlier than anticipated. His lecture had included the blast and burn patterns of the first atomic bombs dropped on Japan, the escalation of missile types, how nuclear missiles were able to fly farther and faster, and what cities were targeted by the Soviet Union. Mr. Jones explained his teaching this way:

I knew students were getting nervous. Many of them heard about what happened on 9/11. The base was closed, [and] everyone assumed it would get hit by whatever was attacking the United States.... [S]tudents need to know this. The students can't understand current foreign policy without understanding nuclear missiles. Otherwise, the Iran Peace Agreement makes no sense, and our ongoing negotiations with North Korea, make no sense.

Mr. Jones, a white teacher who served in the military during the first Gulf War and the father of a recently deployed soldier, understood his students and their families. He and his family had experienced the emotional pressure that the students felt from family members' multiple deployments overseas. He was fully aware of the stress that students

were under, but he also knew something else. Students needed to know this information, not only to be informed citizens and voters aware of national policy (Flanagan, 2013; Ross, 2016), but also because their families and community were directly affected by it. When the history of war was taught, students told him they wanted to know more. “We don’t talk about this at home” was a common refrain Mr. Jones heard from students, but he also knew that what students want, was not always good for them. So “I walk a razor thin line,” he explained, “between the truth and the horror of war. I mean, I can’t lie to them...but the history of war is terrifying.”

“The history of the United States, when told honestly, is a horror story” (Gibbs, 2019b, p. 2). It is rarely taught this way. Typically taught as a gradual unfolding of greatness (Epstein, 2009; Leahey, 2010), history too often disregards the more difficult, horrible and violent narrative of the United States that is closer to reality. Seeking to determine how teachers can use difficult history as part of a liberating education, this research is driven by the question: *How can teaching history through a lens of horror and hope lead to student liberation?*

Theoretical Framework

A pedagogy for liberation was used as the theoretical framework for this project. A liberatory education might best be described as both learning to read the world and the word (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This means that schools do not just prepare students with academics, plying them with reading, mathematics, and science (reading the word) but helping students understand the context of their world (reading the world). Learning is a political act, as is teaching. What and how information is organized and taught reveals the politics of the teacher and impacts the politics of students. For it to be a liberatory education, reading the world and the word must be “both together in dialectical solidarity” (Freire, 1994, p. 105). Rather than only preparing students for college or the workplace, a liberatory education aims to make students aware of the world and their place in it. School and learning is constructed in such a way that students learn content that is connected to their own lives so that they use the knowledge gained to better understand the realities of their world. Through a liberatory education, students learn who has power and who does not (McLaren, 1993), what the levers of power are (Anyon, 1981, 2005; Apple, 2004), and how students can advocate for themselves and others (Gillen, 2015). A liberatory education is an abolitionist education (Love, 2018), an education for freedom, for escape, and for shifting future possibilities.

Paulo Freire (1970) indicated that conscientization, or the development of a critical consciousness (Duncan-Andrade, 2007, 2010), involves an awareness of who the student is and what place they hold in society, and the use of a praxis (Freire, 1970) or gaining new information and ideas, reflecting upon them and then taking action to correct past wrongs. To know only the racism, sexism, and classism of the world is a recipe for personal disaster. A truthful understanding of the world can lead to self-destructive and self-sabotaging behavior. For a liberating education, students not only need to understand content and how to read the world; they also need to be taught intentional skills of resistance (Gillen, 2015; Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Sondel et al., 2018).

Methodology

Critical and phenomenological in nature (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009), this study borrows data from two qualitative case studies (Stake, 1989). The phenomenon under examination is the use of horror and hope in the teaching of difficult knowledge; it is critical because it examines what balance between horror and hope is needed for a

liberating education. One study focused on the teaching of war to the children of soldiers and involved nine teachers at three schools. The second study involved eight teachers teaching about lynching in schools near historic lynching sites.

Data for both studies came from two 90-150 minute, semi-structured, and audio-recorded interviews per teacher (Stake, 1989), one of these an elicitation device (Barton; 2010; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). All teachers were presented with four descriptions of teaching, including teaching war for the war study and teaching lynching for the lynching study. I observed each teacher teaching either war or lynching from three to eight days. During these observations, I used a running record to note as much of classroom discourse and activity as possible (Wright-Maley, 2015).

Data Analysis

I transcribed, printed, and coded all field notes, observation guides, and interviews twice. The first time I open coded the data by hand (Saldaña, 2015). For the second round of data analysis I coded using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to store the axial codes (Saldaña, 2015). Initial codes included fear of content, confusion over how to teach this, and community pressure. These were expanded upon with the second round of coding with axial codes. Some of these codes included teaching horror, teaching hope, pedagogical choice, use of content, and reasoning for decisions. I wrote analytic memos as I began to see patterns emerging during the first round of coding and continued throughout the coding process to reflect upon my analysis and gain deeper insights.

Participants

All teachers involved in these studies are deeply connected to their school communities and have taught high school social studies for between eight and 28 years in rural schools in the American South. Of the nine teachers involved in the study of war three identified as Black, one as Latinx, and five as white. Four of these teachers identified as female and five male. Of the eight teachers involved in the study of lynching three identified as Black and four white. Five of these teachers identified as female and three, male. All schools were ethnically mixed to varying degrees, but white maintains the majority in each school site.

Context of Studies

I collected the data for both studies after the presidential election of 2016. The anger surrounding that election impacted the teaching described, as well as the decisions made. Recent studies have indicated (Costello, 2017; Rogers et al., 2017; Sondel et al., 2018) that verbal and physical attacks against students of color, particularly those who are recent immigrants or of the Muslim faith, as well as women, have escalated (Costello, 2017). Sondel et al. (2018) advocate for a pedagogy of trauma (Sondel et al., 2018) to help students counteract this rise in threat. Meanwhile, Hadley-Dunn, et al. (2019) found that, under national pressure to avoid controversial issues, teachers were intentionally not teaching complicated content nor were they choosing to teach content via a social justice lens.

The rural communities in which these two studies took place responded to the election by becoming hypervigilant to teaching that could be perceived as unpatriotic or anti-American. Teachers were dismissed or pressured out of positions for teaching controversial lessons (Grubb, 2017; Hawkins, 2016). These incidents have had a chilling effect. Teachers who want to teach critically and through a justice-oriented lens must reconsider this choice, as they feel intense scrutiny and pressure from the larger school community to avoid complex content.

Within this context, the teachers of these studies were teaching children of soldiers about war, and teaching about the history of U.S. lynching in classrooms located near historic lynching sites. This teaching was complicated. Teachers in both studies reported feeling pressure to not teach the histories of war and lynching critically (Gibbs, 2019a; 2020a; 2020b). Critical teaching calls for a deep analysis of historical instances, examining the racial, gendered, and homophobic aspects of them and weighing the justness and morality of choices made by historical actors. To teach war and lynching uncritically means to avoid or omit particular details or to paint the content in a nationalist narrative that frames the United States as having progressed since the time of the incidents (Epstein, 2009). Students demonstrated a desire to speak about both war and lynching, as well as an awareness of the outside pressure placed upon teachers and schools to not discuss these topics.

Positionality

I was a social studies teacher in East Los Angeles, California for 16 years. I taught through a critical and justice-oriented lens asking students to examine structural inequities such as racism, misogyny, homophobia and to investigate acts of resistance and change. I hoped my students would develop a critical consciousness, a habit of critiquing content and looking for the power at work behind the history (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Freire, 1970). I also worked at having my students develop a sense of critical civic agency, or ways that they as students could engage in acts of advocacy for themselves, their community and others (DeVitis, 2011; Ross, 2017). Currently, a researcher and teacher educator of teachers who will educate children in the American South, I research how to teach critically in school communities where this approach is deemed problematic—in other words, how to teach critically and for justice in school communities that are ideologically or politically conservative or more interested in an unfettered and uncluttered history of their geographic area and the country. I am an outsider to rural Southern communities, have never served in the military, am white, male, heterosexual, and cis-gendered.

Findings

The main argument of this paper is that teachers are forced to walk a fine line while teaching difficult topics—particularly, if teachers want to teach critically. In terms of teaching about the history of war, a critical pedagogy entails an examination of how the war started, how it was fought, the violence involved, resistance to war, as well as examinations of the racial, sexual, and gendered dynamics of it. Teaching the history of lynching critically includes investigating white supremacy, racism, segregation, racial violence, and the sexual aspects of lynching, as well as Black resistance to lynching and the history of the Black freedom struggle (Dray, 2001; Pinar, 2001; Theoharis, 2018). Teachers encounter fierce resistance to engaging students in critical inquiry. They encounter community pressure, school-based pressure, standards and testing pressure, student resistance, and their own lack of content and pedagogical knowledge in teaching about the histories of war and lynching in context. To teach both of these topics well to their student populations—children of soldiers and possible inheritors of historic lynching—a balance between horror and hope is necessary. The proper balance can reveal the systemic oppression that is present during warfare and lynching, while providing examples of resistance. Students can gain not only a critical consciousness but direction on actions to take to remedy current manifestations of violence. Ironically, several participants in this study indicated that real hope cannot be taught without an analysis of the horror; to teach otherwise is to convey a false hope, a hope that is thin, anemic, and inaccurate.

This, then, is the balancing act: teaching both the horror and the hope, but not leaning too much to one side. To teach the horror means to help students look directly at and come to understand the terrifying violence and complexity of war. Too often, wars are couched in defensive (we were attacked) or righteous (we are going to help) frames that offer simplistic explanations, avoiding the imperialistic, xenophobic, capitalistic drives that often influence foreign policy decisions, particularly as they pertain to war. As I have written elsewhere, history, when told honestly, is a horror story (Gibbs, 2019b). To teach the histories of lynching and war with hope is to include the counter narrative—that is, that there has always been and will always be resistance to both racial violence (lynching) and war. The stories of resistance, both historic and current, both national and local, need to be included in the narrative. The hope of this history lies in other choices that have been made: Soldiers, civilians, students, organizations, children, activists, mothers, and fathers have resisted. They refused to go quietly and fought for something better, a world without war, or at least without *this* war, and a world without lynching, or at least not *this* lynching.

This study reveals that teachers taught the violence of war and lynching differently. Teachers were more likely to teach the horror in their lessons concerning lynching than they were in their instruction on war. The reason seems to be, as one participant indicated, “I have to look them in the face, while I’m teaching this.” In other words, it is too close; the teachers worry about the socio-emotional stress this instruction could cause to students. In the teaching of war, there was a selective teaching that avoided historic moments of controversy that portrayed the United States and American soldiers in a negative light. In the teaching of lynching, most teachers used all content at their disposal, including specific and detailed writing describing the events and graphically violent photographs to depict the horror. They typically leaned into the horror, sometimes forgetting to teach hope specifically. To teach these topics as a liberatory education (Freire, 1970) a combination of both the horror and the hope is needed. Both must be analyzed and understood, and the hope, as one teacher indicated, needs to be “put into action.” That is, students need to engage, within the classroom at least, but also outside the classroom if possible, a dangerous citizenship (Vinson & Ross, 2010) where they understand how to enact hope for self and community growth.

Teaching the horror

When taught accurately, history is a horror show (Gibbs, 2019a). It is filled with resistance, struggle, sacrifice, and movements for justice, yes, but these are often in response or reaction to war, conflict, murder, oppression or injustice. To understand the reaction, often the hope, students need to understand the complex story of the historical horror. The teaching of horror can look differently depending upon the individual teacher, the students, and the school, and community context.

Teaching war. The teachers who taught war to the children of soldiers were all connected to the military. That is, they were either married to, divorced from, the child of, a family member of the military, a veteran themselves or a combination of these. The teachers were deeply embedded in the community and impacted by the heritage history (Levy, 2014; Lowenthal, 1998) of the school and larger community surrounding the military base. This emerged in classrooms as teachers often protected individual soldiers, typically portraying them as victims of circumstance when bad acts were committed. As one teacher, Mr. Green, indicated:

It’s hard. I want to show students a critique of not only military strategy and the choice to go to war, but also how it’s fought, how soldiers experience it, and what they do under the stress of combat. But it’s hard for me. My old man did three

tours in Vietnam. He didn't drive a truck, he was a Ranger¹, so I know he was engaged in some nasty, difficult combat. He never told me, but I know. I know mostly because of the alcoholism, depression and likely PTSD he experienced when I was in high school. So, every time I go to teach about the horror of combat I think of my old man and feel like I'm disrespecting him. If that's how I feel now, I can't imagine what some of these kids might feel. It's too close, too connected. So, I dance around it, offering up critiques of policy and generals, rather than the grunts, the individual soldiers and units.

Like most of the teachers, Mr. Green taught the history of war as distant events so that the actions and experiences of individual soldiers become blurry, both in terms of the horror they likely experienced and the horror they likely inflicted. Such teaching becomes more about the facts, such as when the war began, how it started, general descriptions of major battles, the leaders involved, and how the war ended. This typically allowed for an avoidance of much of the horror of combat. However, as the teaching of nuclear war described in the introduction indicates, even a general description of some military-related items can lead to either students feeling traumatized or stressed, since they connect the content to their lives, or teachers interpreting or assuming that students are experiencing an emotional reaction to the content. This was particularly true for more recent wars. As one teacher indicated:

I don't worry about teaching war until the uniforms begin to look like their father's. I mean, nobody's going to look at a musket or a tri-quarter hat and think of their dad. World War II and beyond is when I tread carefully.

The concern of causing students trauma or awakening a hidden trauma (Carello & Butler, 2015; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016; Venet, 2018; Zakszeski, Bentresco & Jaffe, 2017) was strong amongst teachers and connected directly to teachers and their shared heritage history (Levy, 2014) with students. This deepened their weariness to engage students in an understanding of the horror of war, particularly in regard to individual soldiers. Teachers did not shy away from discussing elements of the Holocaust during their teaching of World War II or of certain bombings in other wars, but these moments were framed as acts that evil members of particular groups engaged in, rather than as acts of war and combat done by "our" soldiers.

One teacher, Ms. Smith, described her pedagogy as teaching critical social studies (Epstein, 2009; Leahey, 2010; Parkhouse, 2017) and intentionally taught moments where "American soldiers committed bad acts" as she described them to students. These bad acts included teaching how American soldiers stacked the heads of enemy soldiers like cannonballs and took photographs of them during the Philippines portion of the Spanish American War. This teacher also described the Ameri-Cal battalion's action in the My Lai Massacre (Hersh, 1970). Both descriptions of "misdeeds" were told through lecture, the typical format of teachers involved in the war study. While she told the stories vividly, she also told them quickly. Ms. Smith felt lecture was the best way. "I have control during lecture," she explained. "The lesson can't go sideways as easily, because I'm in control. If we have open discussion, it can get chaotic [and] students can get hurt." The lecture can educate students on what happened, but not have them sit with it and "stew" as Ms. Smith says. The stewing, as she refers to it, can cause emotional damage to her students. Ms. Smith wants students to know fully about the complexities and horrors of war, but not for too long. She fields questions during these lectures that sometimes end up in quick discussions, but she never plans for a deliberation or discussion based on evaluation or

¹ Rangers are members of the United States Army who qualify for and receive special training in weapons and tactics. They are members of elite units focused on combat and often insurgency qualifying them for more difficult duty and intense combat.

explanation of the horrors of war. Ms. Smith feels that would be inappropriate. As she says, “Why would I do that? Why would I possibly inflict damage on them? This way they get the information, I give it to them, the truth, they know about it, then we move on.” Although still relatively early in her career as a teacher (seven years), she thinks much about her students, who they are, where they are from, how they are military connected, and what is best for them. She watches out for students’ mental and emotional health throughout the year. While she does not, as she says, “pull back” from teaching the horror of war, she does “cover it quickly.” It is a compromise of sorts. Students learn the information but do not stay long enough near it to cause trauma or emotional damage. Although the information was taught, the complexity and horror of the content was not emphasized. The horror was largely removed from the teaching of war.

Teachers who were connected to the community and who feared causing or awaking trauma in their students largely avoided an examination of the darker issues of war. Even when a more critical (Parkhouse, 2017) and more complicated narrative of war was given or attempted inadvertently, the horror had little impact or was not recognized because of the pedagogical construct the teacher used. Students were instead left with a nationalist narrative of war being “bad” but often a “necessary bad,” as one student commented. This thin narrative avoids the more complicated reality of war and the difficulties and horror which are a central part of conflict, even when a country wins. As one teacher commented during an interview:

Every soldier sacrifices their life even if they come home alive from war; they’re just never the same. I don’t know how to teach that even in wars that are historic. It’s just too horrible of an idea.

Teaching lynching. Unlike the teaching of war where teachers largely avoided teaching the horror, in the teaching of the history of lynching, the teachers leaned into it. The horror, these teachers argued, was the point. It was necessary for students to understand. As several teachers indicated, it was not possible to teach lynching without describing it in gruesome detail. “It’s the third rail,” as one teacher described the teaching of lynching. “It’s everything you are warned not to teach. It’s racial violence, extra-judicial group murder with police involvement, it has accusations of rape, and often consensual cross-racial sexual relationships.” In short, lynching forces teachers to teach a series of complicated topics all at once.

Unlike the teaching of the history of war, when teachers taught the history of lynching, they considered their students fairly removed from the topic, even when their communities were located near historic lynching sites. With the exception of one teacher who knew he had a student directly related through family to a local lynching, most teachers did not take into consideration such connections until asked in the interview. Most records of lynching were hidden history—historical facts that were not readily known and discussed. It was not surprising, then, that teachers had not considered this. In response one white teacher, Mr. Louise, argued that direct connection to historic violence did not matter: “All students are the inheritors of this violence. Black students particularly, but all students really. All students in this area are connected to this history whether they know about it or not.” Mr. Louise indicated that he would not teach lynching any differently if he knew there were students directly connected to it in his class. Most teachers citing fears of traumatizing or emotionally damaging students indicated that they would approach the teaching differently with much less focus on the horror.

Typically choosing a teacher-centered pedagogy, the teachers usually taught the history of lynching using PowerPoint presentations in two or three day mini-units or as part of a unit focused on the Black Freedom Struggle (Theoharis, 2018). A few teachers threaded the topic of lynching throughout a longer strain of history, such as introducing

the concept of lynching in a unit on Southern Reconstruction, revisiting the phenomenon of lynching again during the 1920s, and then again during the 1950s and 1960s. Lynching became a theme that ran consistently through the course. This teacher-centered pedagogy resulted in teachers presenting the history of lynching through dramatic storytelling. One teacher, Mr. James, a Black teacher with 18 years of teaching experience teaching a mixed ethnic class, began the mini-unit on lynching with a detailed narrative of what he called a “typical lynching.” By this he meant how lynching typically happened in the American South. He described in general terms how a Black man—likely new to the community or in town for work, and possibly engaged in a consensual relationship with a white woman—would either be accused of an attempted rape, or arrested and then held in the local jail.

“Next,” the teacher explained, “a lynch mob would form either breaking into the jail or with the help of the police [and] would take the accused out of jail and hang him by the neck from a tree in the woods.” He described the community celebrating the death, leaving the murdered man dangling from his neck as children, women, and men ate, drank, and visited. He explained that perpetrators often kept souvenirs—describing how pieces or parts of the murdered man would be cut off—and took photographs. Mr. James wanted students to understand that there was a historical pattern. He wanted students to understand that these events were not unique, but ordinary.

After his vivid description, which had brought silence to the classroom, he assigned students to read selections of Philip Dray’s *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (2001) that described the history of lynching from Judge Lynch’s law into the 1920s. The following day, Mr. James turned his attention to a lynching that had occurred in the school community. He deftly described what was known about the murder, describing with precision the places the victim visited, the location of the historic police station where he was held, and approximately where he was lynched. Although some of the names were familiar to students as landmarks and local businesses, none were attached to current students.

Mr. James, like most teachers in this study, referred to photographs of lynching. To anyone with Internet technology they exist only a few keystrokes away. Teachers used these photographs to instill the horror of lynching. As one white teacher argued, “I have to use the lynching photographs. Students need to understand the depravity and just the sheer horror that humans can stoop to. Photographs do that. They are raw, they are truth.” This was common sentiment amongst teachers. To present the students with the horror of lynching, they needed to see it. Very few teachers chose not to use lynching photographs. These few argued that using photographs of the lynched men only continued the cycle of desecration started by the lynching itself. Several teachers argued that using the photographs could also marginalize students, particularly students of color who were unprepared to see the images. Choosing not to share lynching photographs came with complications, too, however. Students indicated that they sought out the photographs of lynched bodies on their own. With just a few key strokes on a computer, students were confronted with uncensored photographs of violence. Without a thoughtful teacher to help them navigate and better understand what they were seeing, the students revealed that they were unprepared for what they found.

Teachers who referred to photographs of lynching used them to support the general narrative of lynching that was part of a lecture; they did not provide students with particular details of the people murdered. The images therefore became disengaged from any individual narrative—a blur of unknown and unnamed Black men. Simon (2014) argued that images presented in this way can further the desecration of the murdered individuals. Images used in classrooms should instill knowledge indicative of the horror and violence done and propel the viewer to act on the problems depicted (Simon, 2014).

Most teachers used images as a backdrop to their general narrative of lynching. The teachers who chose not to provide more precise information on individual images and victims caused a general conflation—that all victims and all perpetrators were the same. The victims became an amalgamation. All Black men who were murdered were the same and all white murderers were likewise the same. Few teachers taught students how to examine the photographs and how to understand them. Instead, they were used as evidence of the macabre only.

Teaching the hope

Although there is much horror in the history of the world, there are also moments of stark beauty. These can be captured in stories of resistance, sacrifice, and struggles for justice. To avoid cynicism while teaching difficult history (Bigelow, 1985) students must also learn about the struggles for justice and many acts of resistance. The hope that is taught needs to be truthful and unvarnished; otherwise, it diminishes the horror and tragedy and can lead to complacency. It is a difficult balance for teachers to make when teaching the histories of war and lynching, as the horror far outweighs the hope.

Teaching war. Teachers teaching the history of war to the children of soldiers largely avoided the horror of war. This was often the result of teachers' own connection to the military, soldiers, and the larger school community and their concern that their teaching would inflict or awaken trauma or emotional damage. It was also caused by community pressure to teach to the test and not offer critiques of the current foreign policy of President Trump. In the absence of a critical examination of the horror and damage inflicted by war, the framing of U.S. history as a story of unfolding goodness and nobility (Epstein, 2009) remains undisturbed. The condensed story of this nationalist narrative is that, while mistakes were made, the United States is progressing and changing. In terms of war, this means that the United States enters war regretfully, but for the "right reasons" and on the "right side."

This conveys a false narrative of hope that is similar to that of an average war film (Stoddard, 2010): The United States does not *want* to go to war; instead, we sacrifice, through the death and wounding of many soldiers, to make the world a better place. By maintaining this narrative, some teachers engaged a pedagogy of patriotism (Gibbs, 2020). This pedagogy intentionally confirms and deepens the largely hopeful narrative that the United States' choice to engage in war has been positive. As Ms. Jones explained:

I teach Memorial Day and Veterans Day.... Well, all the days (she laughs), but I teach the history of where these came from, why we celebrate them...that it's not just a day off that it's like church on Sunday; we don't have school to honor what was done. Where else are they going to learn this if not here?

Ms. Jones and other teachers frame these events in patriotic terms that highlight sacrifice and devotion to country, rather than as solemn moments to reflect on the loss of life and tragic choice of war. Instead of engaging students in dialogue about the meaning and significance of these days, some teachers engage students in an authoritarian (Westheimer, 2010) or blind (Kahne & Middaugh, 2010) patriotism. Both promote a patriotism that encourages blanket support for the choices and decisions of the United States rather than fostering a critical examination of history and individual student decision making. This, in turn, pushes the larger narrative of the hopefulness of U.S. history connected to war: The United States did the right thing, and its citizens should support that. This was evidenced by how some teachers handled the saying of the Pledge of Allegiance. In the school districts where data were collected, students and faculty recited the Pledge every morning over the public address system, but all students, faculty, and staff had the option to stand and recite it or not. Many teachers took pains to encourage their students to stand. One teacher shared:

I spend a large amount of time on the first day of school around the Pledge. I tell stories of the sacrifices made by soldiers I know in the community and that students might know. I stay away from the direct parents or family of kids in the room, but soldiers that they might have heard of. I share their stories, and tell them that they [the soldiers] didn't have to do what they did but they did it for us. For you. For me. We can show our appreciation for what they did...for risking their lives very easily every day. All we have to do is stand up and say the Pledge.

This teacher made a direct outreach and argument for why students should stand for the Pledge. His narrative was that standing for the Pledge supports soldiers past and present who are sacrificing for the safety of the country. He did not explain the words and language of the Pledge, where it was developed, how it was developed, or how it changed over time or how different thoughtful people interpret its words and meaning differently (Parker, 2010). His narrow narrative was that, by standing, we honor and celebrate soldiers. Another teacher, Mr. Jess, took a more direct approach. He said:

I tell my students directly, "you get to choose whether you stand for the Pledge of Allegiance or not. It's a county rule and I can't do anything about that. But, I checked with the county and see, I own these chairs in this classroom. So during the Pledge you are not allowed to sit in them. They're mine," that's what I tell them. So, yeah, I make them stand for the Pledge. It's a lesson in capitalism and patriotism, I guess.

Even though students were allowed by country and district guidelines to sit during the pledge and not participate, this teacher made students stand. Mr. Jess argued that it was the first step to having students develop a love and understanding for the United States and that the purpose of social studies was to instill this love and admiration. "It's the greatest country ever," he explained, "not perfect, but greatest." He argued that the United States was an exceptional country and its citizens, as well as those whom, as he said, "reside within its borders," ought to treat it as the amazing country that it is. "We win wars and students need to know this," he added. "Not all of them, but almost all of them and even the ones we lost, we won." Mr. Jess argued that in the complicated, difficult world of today, knowing and understanding the sacrifices of soldiers and having a core understanding that the soldiers and the country did the right thing offers students hope in an otherwise dark world.

Even teachers not teaching with a pedagogy of patriotism generally taught war as hopeful. The United States was typically framed as the victor: *The Americans won the Spanish-American War and spread democracy to parts of the world, freeing many from the yoke of colonialism. World War I ended when the United States got involved. World War II ended because of American sacrifice and know-how against the Axis powers.* These were some of the untroubled, simple narratives observed during classroom instruction. By not troubling the typical narrative of history—whether due to the fear that trauma could be inflicted, or pressure to steer clear of controversial topics and prepare students for tests—teachers conveyed the information to students quickly rather than allowing time to discuss, investigate, and critique.

This narrative of hope was a largely narrow, thin, and uncomplicated description of what occurred. Students were typically taught neither the skills to critique, explore, question, and examine nor presented with questions, content, or a larger narrative that would stimulate students to engage in a more robust exploration of war. The history of war is central to all social studies, particularly war curriculum and teaching (Noddings, 2012). War is the central organizing point of standards, textbooks, and curriculum; students encounter it in elementary school through high school. A thorough and strong examination of war could lead to a stronger understanding and a narrative that is hopeful.

Students could learn about resistance movements throughout history, develop an understanding of how to engage in change, and come to an understanding of when the United States should engage in war and when historically, the United States did engage in justified military conflict.

Teaching lynching. Teachers who taught the history of lynching typically used the horror of lynching and photographs of lynching to help students better understand and respect the impetus for the larger Black Freedom Struggle (Theoharis, 2018) and Civil Rights Movement. Although a few teachers shared hopeful stories of victims who escaped, fought back or of others who struggled to free them, the narrative of lynching was focused on the horror. As one white teacher indicated:

.... I know there were struggles before and during lynching, but I focus on how terrifying and just how horribly awful lynching was. It wasn't that there wasn't struggle; I assume there was. I just focus on the harshness of the violence. It makes the violence faced during the struggle, the dogs, and water hoses, the nights in jail, so much easier to take.

One white teacher who struggled outwardly with how to frame lynching feared that focusing on just lynching as horror could have unanticipated consequences. His concern was that students might catch the incorrect narrative that Blacks were continual victims who did not resist in the moment of lynching but waited till decades later for the Civil Rights Movement. He explained:

I teach in a multi-ethnic school and have a mixture of ethnicities in my classroom. If I let the narrative stand that Blacks were lynched over and over and over again and they allowed themselves to be lynched without fighting back...that just sets up disaster.

This teacher works to help students understand the racial psychology and groupthink that occurs during acts of lynching; he shares specific stories and names of those killed, as well as moments of resistance he has discovered in the historical record. As he explained,

It can't just be Ida B. Wells and that's it till Dr. King... Students need to know in the moment that you teach lynching that Black people did not go down without fighting...without struggle...that's a hopeless dangerous narrative. I need to be very careful of how to leave the history.

Regardless of whether teachers embedded the history of Black resistance within the narrative of lynching or used the lynching narrative as a propellant in the story of the Civil Rights Movement, they knew that the horror of lynching could not stand unchecked. Students needed to understand that Black Americans in particular, but others as well, fought and struggled against lynching to secure rights for all. As one Black teacher indicated:

If I left the story there, I mean, that's just a recipe for suicide. I mean, that's being bombastic, but it's kind of true. Students need to hear the narratives of resistance, how communities and individuals fought back. I mean, learning how to create change is the point of history class, isn't it? I'm just not doing my job if students don't learn more than the horror.

The history of lynching can be one link in the long chain that led to the struggle and push for change. Interestingly, teachers used the narrative of racial violence to propel the Civil Rights Movement but did not pursue racial justice movements past the year of Dr. King's death, 1968. The teachers purposefully maintained a distance between lynching and current incidents of racial violence, so that lynching was presented as a past historical event. Asked if lynching could or should be connected to present moments of racial

violence, specifically the killing of Black men by police officers and the resulting Black Lives Matter movement, teachers universally indicated that, while those connections could be made, they chose not to. Teachers also questioned whether the Black Lives Matter movement was a movement similar to the Black Freedom Struggle or just a civil rights organization. They saw a difference between the historic violence of lynching, a community act of violence that involved the police, and the institutional racism of police in contemporary acts of violence against Blacks. They also shared that what allowed them to teach the racial violence of lynching was that they conveyed it as historic or past event. As one white teacher argued:

If we bring that to the present, that's where there'll be static. It's where there will be trouble. Right now, my students understand lynching, wrestle with its complexities. I can't jeopardize that.

The hope in the teaching of lynching was that by understanding it—fully looking at the horror that it inflicted upon the Black community—students could then better comprehend how the community fought back. The Civil Rights Movement was birthed out of the continuation of violence perpetrated on Black communities. The darkness propelled the light.

Additionally, while only a few teachers intentionally taught students how to analyze photographs and other visual images, the students in those classes learned how to better grapple with their emotion responses and critique the photographs, learning not just to see the horror of lynching but to understand how visual media is made, why it is distributed, and what impact it can have. From this, students were taught how to develop visual media to advocate for themselves and others. Although a dark and complicated topic, if teachers demonstrate how to critically examine photographs, while drawing attention to civil rights' reactions and narratives of resistance, the horror of lynching can lead to hope. This begins with a better understanding of what happened and how it happened, and culminates in the knowledge of the connection between the phenomenon of lynching and the larger Black Freedom Struggle. Drawing a connection to something truthful but larger is important for hope to flourish in this incredibly dark time in history.

Discussion

Teachers revealed that it was possible to teach both the horror and hope of war and lynching, but it was difficult to strike a balance. Teachers taught these topics in a manner that was either too “hard” or too “soft.” That is, they either taught war or lynching with too much focus on having students know and understand the absolute terror of the events described or avoided horror by teaching it quickly and providing little or no opportunity for reflection. The focus on the hope was often part of teaching the topic too “softly” maintaining an undisturbed, uncritical narrative of the events or reinforcing a counterfactual patriotic rendering of the material. Additionally, teachers presented hope as merely a narrative of past, historical resistance rather than connecting it to the struggle for racial justice in our present moment.

This study provides evidence that one of the difficulties of engaging students in a truly liberating education has much to do with our present moment. Contemporary politics and ideology, as well as aggressive critiques of teachers, reinforces the notion that a critical teaching of history be reserved for the past and detached from current events (Gibbs, 2019a). Both war and lynching become tamed and robbed of their power. If brought to the present, both could be used as lenses to better and more deeply understand our current circumstance. Why we fight, how we fight, and how we resist or comply can be better

understood. The racial violence continually perpetrated against Black and people of color, as well as the resistance to this from the Black Lives Matter movement and others, can be better understood. Teachers' decisions to portray U.S. lynching, particularly the resistance surrounding it, as a past, historic event avoids the constancy of Black struggle (Davis, 2016), which could provide students with the opportunity to learn from and be inspired by resistance in its present form. Scholars and researchers need to continue to research how to engage in critical teaching in communities that are resistant to this teaching. This research needs to be embedded in teaching education programs—how to teach through a justice-oriented and critical lens, as well as what political and social moves teachers need to engage in order to do this teaching. Teachers also need to be willing to take risks in their teaching, to build within their students a critical consciousness regardless of community mores. This teaching is necessary for true student awareness and understanding, the development of engaged youth and adults, and the only way to change the world. Ways to bring this knowledge and understanding to the present in communities which resist this teaching needs to be further studied and solutions developed.

Based on teacher commentaries, it is clear that there are disputes as to what constitutes teaching the horror and the hope, but most teachers insisted both were necessary. Teaching the horror did not necessarily mean raising student critical consciousness (Duncan-Andrade, 2007), nor did teaching the hope focus on resistance and moments when the horror was corrected (Ross, 2016). Much of both war and lynching was considered a controversial issue to be avoided rather than engaged (Hess, 2009). In the teaching of lynching, this has had much to do with white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). As long as it is kept in the past—something which has been overcome, and the country has grown beyond—it is fine to teach. To bring racial violence into our present, to have students understand the long chain of oppression and resistance, makes the knowledge far too dangerous for many in the broad school community. Also evident is the role of critical whiteness studies—specifically, how whiteness impacts the teaching of racial violence even by white teachers seeking to teach it with a critical lens (Applebaum, 2016). How does whiteness influence white teachers' teaching and their connection to the content, as well as their connection to students of color and students who are white? By presenting the concept of whiteness as a tool to understand the past and the present, teachers could lead students not only to a deep understanding how the past informs and creates our present, but to a greater awareness of the need to disrupt idealized narratives of U.S. history. If this is not known to students or shared with them, students will not understand the broader notion of whiteness as a colonizing force within the curriculum that silences both the horror and the hope in the narratives of people of color (Matias & Mackey, 2016; McKnight & Chandler, 2012; Chandler, 2009).

The study presented evidence of a consistent worry shared by these teachers, that by teaching about war and lynching more authentically, they would inflict trauma or emotionally wound students. In the teaching of war and lynching, it meant either avoiding the topic altogether or telling a narrative quickly, and then moving on to avoid trauma (Gibbs, 2019a; Gibbs, 2020). Teaching these topics quickly or generally led to non-specific stories, blending all Black victims together as one trope, and all wars and soldiers together. This concern of trauma also shaped the ways teachers presented hope. Rather than taking a more critical lens, teachers taught war locked within a nationalist and patriotic narrative focusing on parables of heroics (Gibbs, 2019b) that lessens a deeper examination (Epstein, 2009) and avoids the difficulty of a more truthful narrative (Zembylas, 2014). The hope of teaching lynching rested on historic acts of resistance, mainly Ida B. Wells-Barnett, but also other typically unnamed white and Black resisters.

To teach the horror and the hope. War is horror, it is terror, and it is destruction. It must be taught this way. Students must have time to marinate in the complexity and horror that is war. They must be given time to discuss, analyze, and consider war. This can be done by developing a more democratic and thematic approach to instruction (Gibbs, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Apple & Beane, 2007; Hess, 2009; Hursh & Ross, 2000). Teachers can provide students with guiding questions—for example, what constitutes a just war? What causes a war to lose its justness? How should wars be fought? How do we end war?—that lead to a more thorough examination rather than simply an acceptance of content. Likewise, including the rich history of the anti-war movements during instruction of war can be useful (Gibbs, 2020; Hochschild, 2011; Kazin, 2017; Sokowler, 2013; Walzer, 1977; Zak, 2017). Students must also be taught the stories and skills of resistance, dangerous citizenship (Ross, 2016), and how they can act against war (Gillen, 2015). This can be done by examining modes of resistance in the historic and present anti-war movements. Similarly, students must learn the authentic history of lynching in all its horror and all its hope. Despite relentless racial oppression, even in the darkest, most horrific moments, there was always Black resistance. This is a testament to beauty that must not be denied and must be taught throughout history and directly connected to today. This will allow for a liberating education—one in which students continue to grow a critical consciousness, learn how to engage in acts of transformative resistance, and reflect upon history and future possibilities. Students must learn how to read the *word*, our past, and the *world*, our present and times yet to come. A liberating education is one that is truthful in all its horror and hopeful in embracing all the possibilities of justice. This can be most easily done by teachers who teach through a thematic approach. Rather than teaching the Black Freedom Struggle (Theoharis, 2018) as contained to the 1950s and 1960s, it can instead be taught from 1619 forward or from slavery or Reconstruction forward. This approach allows students to see the whole course of the Black experience in the United States, seeing and understanding repeated forms of oppression and the many acts and organizations of resistance. Combining both, the oppression and the resistance of war and lynching, offers both the horror and the hope and can lead to a truly liberating education.

Conclusion

History must be presented viscerally or it is a lie. How much misery, horror, and terror depends on context, students, the teacher, and the specific content, but the intent must be the same. There must be a balance between the complexity of content and a larger understanding of what was done to prevent it, resist it, and grow from it. Students need to see the horror to understand the hope. Teachers must, however, be mindful of not revealing horror to students for horror's sake, but presenting it in direct conjunction with hope. In a unit on Apartheid South Africa (Bigelow, 1985) the author admitted that the content could be depressing for students and leave them feeling cynical. Bigelow argued "I wanted to leave my students with the sense that change was possible; perhaps the unit could even offer them an opportunity to play a small part in creating change" (Bigelow, 1985, p. vii). The cynicism can be lessened, perhaps made momentary, when coupled with the hope of resistance, of change, of the possibilities of something else. Teachers must strike this balance in the teaching of hard, complex, dark, and horrific history. It is the best way to provide a liberating education.

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Author

Brian Gibbs, Ph.D., taught social studies in East Los Angeles, California for 16 years. He is currently Assistant Professor in the department of education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He studies the limits and possibilities of critical pedagogy in complex social contexts and its implications for teacher education.