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**Creating Inclusive and Equitable High School History Classrooms  
through Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Democracy**

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**Abstract:**

The field of history education is undergoing revisions and decolonization, creating a space for diverse perspectives within the curriculum. These changes are an ongoing topic of debate, although teachers who embrace social justice contend that the diverse approach to history provides students with the opportunity to see themselves represented and valued in the curriculum while also promoting inquiry and dialogue. This self-study seeks to explore how cultural democracy and critical pedagogy can be integrated into a high school history classroom. Cultural democracy emphasizes the intersection of culture and power, particularly in how narratives are formed. Similarly, critical pedagogy is a teaching approach that provides students with the tools and supports to challenge dominant narratives and inequitable systems. Participating in this self-study were 10th-grade students who engaged in a US History class throughout the course of a semester. Their experiences were documented in field observations and reflections, anecdotal records, and student work. Drawing upon the frameworks of teaching for social justice and Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which established critical pedagogy, this self-study research analyzes how students interact with diverse history through formal and informal work and daily conversations.

*Keywords:* cultural democracy, critical pedagogy, high school, history, historical empathy, case study, teaching for social justice

## Introduction

The field of history education has long been contentious, as deciding what to teach has been underpinned by deeper debates about politics and societal values. In recent days, political factions have sought to promote their own narratives of the country's past, with controversies over the teaching of critical race theory, the 1619 Project or the 1776 Project, and countless other debates (Bartelds, Savenije, & van Boxtel, 2020). This comes in the context of a longstanding debate over the purpose of history education in the United States. From the early days of the country, there have been questions about how to teach the nation's history and what aspects of that history to emphasize. At the core of these debates is a fundamental disagreement over the purpose of history education. Some argue that it should promote a flattering view of the United States, emphasizing its triumphs and exceptionalism, while others argue that it should encourage critical examination of the nation's past and present, acknowledging its failures and injustices while celebrating its achievements and progress (Giroux, 2004).

This ongoing debate makes an exploration of teaching methods related to diversity in perspectives all the more crucial. The curriculum and methods used in classrooms have long been used to reinforce dominant narratives and perspectives, often at the expense of marginalized groups (Banks, 1989; Morris, 2016). As such, promoting diversity in perspectives and encouraging critical thinking are essential components of creating a more just society. It is important to center social justice in the history classroom by recognizing the role that power and privilege play in shaping narratives and histories (Darder, 2012). By integrating cultural democracy and critical pedagogy into high school history classrooms, teachers can promote equity and empower students to challenge dominant narratives and systems (Polleck & Shabdin, 2013). This approach enables students to critically examine the past, interrogate present-day injustices, and advocate for a more equitable future. By providing opportunities for students to see themselves represented and valued in the curriculum, teachers can also contribute to building a more just and inclusive society.

The purpose of this research is to explore the integration of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in a high school history classroom while considering the effects on the classroom environment. Cultural democracy, the idea that the heritages and cultural experiences of all groups are worthwhile and deserving of equitable focus, in the history classroom is essential for creating rounded students (). Critical pedagogy, which promotes the critical examination of systems of power, promotes student growth and civic awareness (). Together, these elements can provide a framework for students to challenge dominant narratives and explore multiple perspectives in history. This research includes the practical implementation of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in a 10th-grade US History class and monitors student engagement with the diverse perspectives included in lessons. By documenting the experiences of the students in field observations, reflections, anecdotal records, and student work, this research aims to shed light on how teachers can implement these frameworks to create an inclusive and empowering classroom culture in history education.

The research questions addressed are: *What do cultural democracy and critical pedagogy look like in a high school classroom, and how does my practice of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy affect the classroom community?* The discussion that follows examines published literature on the topics of critical pedagogy, cultural democracy, and historical empathy. The methodology section outlines the procedures and strategies employed to collect and analyze data. A research data analysis section includes three sub-sections that expand upon

the effects of school and community dynamics, the usage of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in the self-study, and student engagement with diverse perspectives in history. This self-study emphasizes the importance of exposing students to the historical experiences of diverse populations and promotes social justice in the classroom.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Critical Pedagogy***

Teaching with social justice in mind centers around problem-solving and encouraging students to critically explore the world around them, as well as the history they are faced with. In education, the practice of *critical pedagogy* promotes social justice and democracy while providing students with the tools to empower themselves and create positive change. Originally, the concept of critical pedagogy was created by the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire (2005), who insisted that the issues of social justice and democracy are intrinsically connected to teaching and learning. Freire's concept, which he termed "the pedagogy of the oppressed," has since spread to the United States and has been further developed and incorporated into the American educational field and individual classrooms.

Seltzer-Kelly (2009) revisits her years in the US History classroom through self-study research, considering how her understanding of critical pedagogy had changed in the eight years between her first year in the classroom. She recounts and analyzes the experience of incorporating critical pedagogy into the public school setting. Seltzer-Kelly's (2009) article highlights the challenge of implementing critical pedagogy in a performance-oriented educational system. She notes the difficulty of reconciling her desire to have a liberatory practice that challenges dominant narratives and systems of oppression with the pressure to conform to standardized testing and other performance metrics. In her reflection on her teaching in the US History classroom, Seltzer-Kelly linked her approach to the work of Henry Giroux (2008), stating that she sought to include students in the process of history-making, allowing her 153 juniors to explore multiple perspectives. This focus on empowering students and promoting critical thinking is contrasted against the more traditional tendency of the education system to promote "forcible domestication" and discourage critical interaction with education, a primary concern of both Seltzer-Kelly (2009) and Freire (2005) (p. 159). Seltzer-Kelly's (2009) emphasis on the importance of challenging dominant narratives and creating a safe space for critical discussions is essential for students to develop a critical consciousness and engage in transformative learning experiences.

While Seltzer-Kelly's work focuses primarily on her own experiences in the classroom, educator-scholars Bolton and Elmore (2013) utilize the theory of critical pedagogy in their consideration of how assessment empowers and disempowers students in the classroom. In their literature review, which considers the West Chester University education program and teaching education as a whole, Bolton and Elmore consider one way to address the disempowerment of students via assessment. Utilizing Anderman et. Al's (2010) goal-orientation theory, Bolton and Elmore (2013) explain that critical pedagogy and questioning encourage students to have a mastery orientation and focus on learning, rather than a performance-oriented approach, which centers on grades. They describe the necessity of prioritizing the primary focus of learning and how it can be achieved by referencing theories and generalizations. Bolton & Elmore (2013) maintain the importance of retaining formative assessments for practice and providing students

with the opportunity to engage with summative assessments, highlighting especially the need for effective rubrics that draw students' attention to the most important elements. In this way, assessments in the critical pedagogy classroom empower students to engage with the content in-depth for the sake of learning rather than being performance- or grade-oriented.

Further considering the gap between praxis and the theory of critical pedagogy are several teachers who reflect upon *critical consciousness*, which refers to the ability to recognize and analyze inequalities and associated power dynamics. The concept of critical consciousness, while created by Freire, is further emphasized by Styslinger, Stowe, Walker, and Hyatt Hostetler (2019), who consider the development of critical consciousness to be central to the core of social justice teaching. Styslinger et al.'s (2019) prioritization of critical consciousness in their curriculum is in agreement with Freire's original belief in this concept being tightly connected to realizing and transforming unjust systems. Their self-study examines the practice in their high school classrooms, which focuses on providing students with a heightened awareness of the world and the power structures that shape it by utilizing multiple perspectives. Styslinger et al. (2019) highlight the importance of encouraging student choice and creating space for dialogue in the classroom, which aligns with Seltzer-Kelly's encouragement of critical pedagogy in the modern classroom and the recommendations related to assessments made by Bolton and Elmore. Styslinger et al. (2019) expand upon the role of educators in the classroom, seeking to "blur the line between teaching and activism" while they encourage readers of their article to "re-imagine" the roles of those involved in education and the curriculum itself (p. 10). By prioritizing critical consciousness, Styslinger et al. (2019) demonstrate how students can produce positive change in their communities by utilizing the knowledge they acquire, which aligns with critical pedagogy's broader goals of prioritizing student agency and activism in the classroom.

Sharing a similar focus on critical pedagogy to Styslinger et al. (2019), Banks (1989) explores the topic of multicultural education and curriculum reform. Banks' (1989) theoretical research examines approaches to cultural democracy and considers curriculums found in both schools and public locations by examining the research articles, books, and reports that are relied upon. He reveals that the mainstream curriculum had negatively influenced minority students, particularly students of color, by marginalizing or tokenizing their experiences. Banks (1989) bases his examination on a critical pedagogy framework, emphasizing the importance of challenging dominant power structures and promoting social justice through education in a way that mirrors Seltzer-Kelly's (2009) classroom. Using critical pedagogy as a guide, Banks (1989) calls for a transformation of education that recognizes and affirms diversity, promotes critical thinking, and empowers students to challenge and alter oppressive social structures. Banks (1989) discusses the challenges of implementing multicultural curriculum reform, including the resistance of educators to change and the difficulty of finding resources that appropriately and equitably represent diversity. Despite this, he urges educators to reflect upon their content and practices continually, noting that the reduction of prejudice allows for a more empowering school culture and a positive learning environment. Content interrogation in the way Banks (1989) recommends involves reflective diversity in all aspects of the curriculum, resulting in the institutionalization of multicultural curriculum and critical pedagogy.

Banks's (1989) suggestion of altering the curriculum as a solution to the lack of critical pedagogy and diversity in education pairs with Giroux's (2004) more theoretical exploration of the connection between critical pedagogy and the postmodern/modern divide. The modernist paradigm has much to do with the way knowledge is produced and disseminated. While modernist education is typically hierarchical, with teachers being seen as the sole bearers of

knowledge and students as passive recipients, postmodernism recognizes the role of power in shaping knowledge and encourages the co-construction of knowledge and engaging in dialogue. Giroux (2004) argues that critical pedagogy can bridge the postmodern-modern divide by embracing both the limitations of objective knowledge as well as the diversity of perspectives and experiences. Critical pedagogy should recognize the importance of rational inquiry and the need to challenge dominant assumptions as Seltzer-Kelly (2009) and Styslinger et al. (2019) urge. Giroux (2004) additionally notes that a teacher's authority should be used to intervene and shape the space of teaching and learning to have students engage critically with the material in a manner similar to the way Bolton and Elmore (2013) utilize goal-orientation theory when designing assessments.

Critical pedagogy goes beyond assessments and curriculum, extending into how classrooms can be structured to be culturally responsive. Polleck and Shabdin (2013) explore this aspect of critical pedagogy, which discusses the importance of creating an inclusive environment that recognizes and values their students' diverse cultures and backgrounds. As Banks (1989) urges reflection and active involvement from the entirety of the school community, Polleck and Shabdin (2013) argue that a culturally responsive community requires an intentional effort on the part of every stakeholder in the school to create a space where students feel their identities are valued and included. Polleck and Shabdin (2013) highlight the need for educators to acknowledge and address their own biases, beliefs, and assumptions in addition to suggesting the creation of a diverse curriculum akin to the recommendations of Banks (1989) and Styslinger et al. (2019). Polleck and Shabdin (2013) note that asking students about their identities, learning styles, and educational experience allows teachers to connect with students and adjust lessons to meet the needs of the students, resulting in stronger relationships and more effective learning.

Critical pedagogy is essential for creating a just and democratic society by empowering students to recognize and challenge oppressive systems. The concept goes beyond simply designing a lesson but rather is inherent in every aspect of the educational process as the educator guides students through becoming more aware of both historical and contemporary systemic inequality. Critical pedagogy emphasizes the importance of prioritizing student agency and activism in the classroom while also encouraging reflection, performance-oriented approaches, and re-imagining the roles of stakeholders. Regardless of possible resistance to the implementation and institutionalization of critical pedagogy, the concept is central to raising students' critical consciousness and encouraging good citizenship.

### ***Cultural Democracy***

Centering social justice in the curriculum is critical, but it is also important to examine the individual classrooms. Whereas critical pedagogy emphasizes questioning power structures, *cultural democracy* stresses the importance of valuing and recognizing diverse cultural perspectives. Activists and educators work to evolve the concept of cultural democracy in education, recognizing the importance of representing diversity in educational settings as the United States becomes more diverse.

Darder (2011) provides an overview of cultural democracy, its philosophical foundations, and its implications for education in his essay. Darder (2011) situates cultural democracy within the broader context of critical pedagogy, arguing that cultural democracy is a necessary component as it recognizes the importance of diversity and challenging dominant norms and practices, and inequities that students face in their daily lives. Darder (2011) provides a

framework for cultural democracy based on three components: recognizing cultural perspectives, participating in cultural life and practices, and becoming critically aware of dominant and oppressive narratives. This is not a linear or determined process, but rather a complex and individualized one for educators and students. Educators must utilize the curriculum and interactions with students to support them as they develop, as “every child has the right to maintain” their identities (Darder, 2011 p 30). By critically examining and altering curriculum and individual lessons, instructors become more aware of the experiences of minority students and can create conditions for genuine engagement in the classroom. Encouraging students to question the norm in a safe environment while acknowledging personal limitations is key to cultural democracy (Darder 2011).

While Darder’s essay provided a theoretical framework, her 2012 article is more focused on practical strategies for promoting cultural democracy in the classroom. Shifting her scope, focus, and level of detail, Darder includes a framework and suggestions that center on practical implementation rather than the theoretical understanding of the concept. Darder (2012) asserts that distorted views of power and authority inform classroom practice, making it necessary to closely examine classroom materials as well as self-reflecting on behavior and possible biases in instruction. Rather than simply describing the concept of cultural democracy, Darder (2012) argues that creating a culturally democratic classroom requires educators to address curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. The curriculum should be rooted in the lived experience of students and their communities (Darder, 2012). Instead of perpetuating the Eurocentric view, developing a curriculum that encourages participation and dialogue allows for lessons to be relevant to students. Regarding pedagogy, Darder (2012) emphasizes the importance of creating a learning environment that promotes the development of voice, participation, social responsibility, and solidarity. Through instructional approaches, teachers can empower students to take an active role in their learning while critically reflecting upon their knowledge and experiences. The role of assessment in promoting cultural democracy should be focused on student growth and development lends itself toward the usage of alternative assessment (Darder 2012). Emphasizing the importance of curriculum pedagogy, and assessment allows Darder to guide educators through creating conditions for a more culturally inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Darder (2011, 2012) deals largely with generalities, citing a theoretical understanding of cultural democracy and providing a guide for the inclusion of the concept in a classroom setting, while Moorhead (2018) similarly examines the concept of cultural democracy, but narrows the theory to apply it to the representation of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, known hereafter and more colloquially as the LGBTQ+ community, in the education system. Despite this, Moorhead (2018) and Darder (2011, 2012) both contend that an increased representation of marginalized perspectives through the incorporation of a culturally democratic education system can help to increase a more inclusive and accepting school environment. Moorhead (2018) provides a review of the contemporaneous state of representation, highlighting a lack of attention given to the issue or casual discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, known more commonly as homophobia, featured in popular textbooks. This suppression and discrimination is an example of the traditional pedagogy that Darder (2011) deems harmful by upholding dominant cultural norms and suppressing the experiences of students. In the classroom, Moorhead (2018) provides several successful examples of efforts to increase LGBTQ+ representation in their curriculum including the development of resources and the creation of a course that centers queer history. Students enrolled in the course noted that it helped them to “reconsider their perspectives on both current events and long-standing historical tropes,” closely



resembling the tenets of inquiry and self-reflection that cultural democracy and critical pedagogy promote (Moorhead, 2018, p. 24).

Moorhead (2018) and Darder (2011, 2012) center their personal experiences or theoretical framework while promoting cultural democracy. Okoye-Johnson (2011), on the other hand, conducted a metaanalysis to examine the effects of cultural democracy's effectiveness of promoting diversity and affecting students' attitudes towards race and racial identities. Okoye-Johnson (2011) examined over 800 students aged 3-9 and 9-16 and found that culturally democratic programs had a positive impact on individual students' attitudes toward diversity and appreciation of cultural differences. The data in the study concurs with the experiences described by Moorhead (2018) and Darder (2011, 2012), suggesting that culturally democratic programs are perceived as effective by both the instructors, as indicated by the previous literature, and students, who self-reported the data Okoye-Johnson (2011) relies upon. Okoye-Johnson (2011) notes that due to the diversity of the population of the United States increasing, and therefore that of the student body, the education system and its content must also be diversified to continue to support students and provide equitable representation. For this reason, Okoye-Johnson (2011) urges the institutionalization of cultural democracy or a similar system, which aligns with the recommendations of Darder (2011, 2012) and Moorhead (2018).

The importance of institutionalizing cultural democracy is further expanded upon by Morris (2016) who delves into the concept of multiculturalism in education in her literature review of various theoretical frameworks. Morris (2016) suggests five frameworks scholars use while considering multicultural issues, ranging from conservative monoculturalism which is limited to Anglocentric perspectives to critical multiculturalism which studies issues of power and politics while promoting resistance to oppressive structures. Morris' (2016) framework of critical multiculturalism requires a commitment to cultural democracy and addressing the underlying inequalities in society, making his suggestions in line with those of Darder (2011, 2012). Whereas Darder (2011, 2012) takes a critical approach, Morris (2016) focuses on the practical implementation of a multicultural curriculum that promotes cultural democracy, noting the way larger societal forces affect what is taught in schools, allowing those with power and privilege to determine who or what is included and excluded from curriculums. This is an issue similarly noted by Okoye-Johnson (2011), who quantitatively measured how such exclusions or the inclusion of diversity in the curriculum affect students' attitudes toward race and racial identities. The challenge of implementing cultural democracy in an educational setting that is characterized by deep-rooted power imbalances and inequalities is similarly acknowledged by both Okoye-Johnson (2011) and Morris (2016), the latter of whom notes that cultural democracy is a long-term commitment rather than an easy solution and thus requires resilience and dedication in the face of opposition.

Morris (2016) asserts that cultural democracy is the most effective way to promote social justice and equity in the classroom, a view shared by Yilmaz (2008), who narrows the discussion to focus specifically on how secondary history education can be utilized to promote cultural democracy. Employing a theoretical framework and conceptualizing his thoughts regarding history education, Yilmaz (2008) suggests ways to improve history education to better represent "accounts of multilayered and multifaceted human experiences across time and space" (38). Yilmaz (2008) contends that to best prepare students for being citizens, the history curriculum should provide knowledge of history, procedures regarding examining claims, and skills such as utilizing multiple perspectives, all of which are central to cultural democracy as described by Darder (2011, 2012), Okoye-Johnson (2011), and Morris (2016). By providing students with a

critical understanding of the past and encouraging them to engage with diverse perspectives, history education assists students in challenging dominant narratives and promoting marginalized voices. Similar to Moorhead's (2018) laments about the lack of inclusive teaching materials, Yilmaz (2008) suggests that further research and reflection are necessary to redesign the history curriculum and the pedagogical approaches used to ensure that history education is culturally inclusive, sensitive to diversity, and connected to the lives of students.

Cultural democracy in the education system highlights the importance of a more inclusive and equitable approach that recognizes and values the diversity of students and the larger community of our country. Implementation of a culturally democratic curriculum can help to promote a sense of belonging and community among students while also beginning to address some of the issues of inequality and discrimination in the education system. Further development and research of cultural democracy in individual schools and the education system at large can ensure that each classroom can recognize and include students' experiences. Cultural democracy in education is not only a matter of academic rigor, but essential to ensuring that students who come from underrepresented communities are allowed to learn and thrive in a welcoming and respectful environment.

### *Historical Empathy*

Critical pedagogy and cultural democracy are important frameworks for promoting social justice in education. These approaches emphasize the need to understand and challenge power structures in the educational system, with a focus on empowering marginalized groups and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. *Historical empathy* empowers learners to recognize social inequalities and injustices, though it focuses on understanding multiple perspectives and understanding historical contexts. Although historical empathy specifically focuses on the history classroom, it shares many of the same goals as critical pedagogy and cultural democracy. The skill of historical empathy then encourages students to understand the root causes of social issues and understand the experiences of historical groups while challenging their own biases.

Yilmaz (2007) examines history education and historical empathy, seeking to demonstrate the conceptual issues and how the theory of historical empathy can be translated into practice. Historical empathy is a critical skill that history teachers should aim to develop as it allows students to understand the experiences of people in the past and develop a comprehensive understanding of historical events. Yilmaz (2007) through a literature synthesis acknowledges that scholars have not come to terms with a singular definition of the term and that various classrooms incorporate the practice in a variety of ways. Despite this, there is a common understanding that historical empathy can be developed through using primary sources, interactive classroom activities, encouraging critical questions, and creating a supportive classroom environment.

Efforts from both instructors and students can allow for an understanding of the past to take place, allowing students to consider various perspectives in the past without a present-day bias. Such a bias, known as presentism, refers to the tendency to judge historical events, people, and contexts based on present-day norms, values, and knowledge. Yilmaz (2007) notes that presentism greatly affects historical empathy, as it creates a barrier to understanding and empathizing with individuals in the past and their actions and can create a distorted view of the past. The development of historical empathy and its associated inquiry skills allows learners to

consider and appreciate complex historical contexts and the pressures individuals face while avoiding a simplistic or biased interpretation of events.

Bartelds, Savenije, and van Boxtel (2020) similarly discuss the dangers of presentism, examining how teachers and students utilize historical empathy in their individual classrooms. Bartelds et al. (2020) interviewed 15 history teachers with over 5 years of experience and 36 secondary school students to explore their beliefs regarding historical empathy in secondary history education using ranking tasks. The interviews revealed that presentism can manifest in many different ways, but can be counteracted by engaging learners in frequent critical and reflective questioning. Data also indicated that teachers and their students have similar rankings regarding historical empathy and its elements, although discrepancies did occur between the rankings of teachers and students. Bartelds et al. (2020) implied that this may be due to a lack of explicit teaching, noting that approximately 70% of teachers reported not explicitly naming historical empathy, and stressed the importance of providing students with a strong understanding of historical empathy. Providing students with the explicit teaching of historical empathy and utilizing various methods to teach historical empathy can support the further development of the skill in students.

Whereas Bartelds et al. (2020) interviewed multiple teachers and students, Brooks' (2011) case study focused on a singular secondary social studies classroom and how historical empathy was implemented in the space. Instead of considering an abstract understanding of historical empathy as Bartelds et al. (2020) had, Brooks (2011) utilized observations, instructional artifacts, and interviews to qualitatively analyze how the teacher and students developed and implemented historical empathy in daily classroom use. This allowed Brooks' (2011) case study to delve deeper into specific strategies used by a teacher to promote historical empathy in their students. Brooks (2011) found that the teachers' use of various teaching methods such as lectures, secondary sources, primary sources, and interactive student-led discussions allows students to grasp the multiplicity of historical perspectives. This understanding, however, was not universal, as student development of historical empathy is not a linear progression. Brooks (2011) observed instances of student failures to exhibit historical empathy. When students were able to successfully display historical empathy, Brooks (2011) noted that students underwent a process of perspective recognition and emotional engagement with the struggles and achievements of historical people.

By developing historical empathy, students can avoid projecting present-day biases and assumptions on the past while developing a more nuanced understanding of historical events and the individuals involved. Teachers can promote the development of historical empathy by creating engaging lessons centered around sources and discussions that include multiple perspectives and push students to question their assumptions and conclusions. The incorporation of historical empathy into teaching practices supports students to become more empathetic, critical, and socially responsible citizens in a way that aligns with the social justice focus of critical pedagogy and cultural democracy.

## **Methodology**

To develop my skills as a history teacher, I conducted a self-study in a high school classroom. Considering the work done by other scholars to include diverse perspectives in the history curriculum, I intended to develop my personal understanding of what teaching for social justice looks like in my own classroom. Social justice in education, as conjectured by Hytten and

Bettex (2011), centers around problem-posing and providing students with the tools to perceive issues of inequality and take action to right oppressive systems. Hytten and Bettez stress the importance of dialogue surrounding social justice in education, one I hope to contribute to with my personal inquiry. I focused on two main questions: *What do cultural democracy and critical pedagogy look like in a high school classroom, and how does my practice of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy affect the classroom community?*

For the purposes of the self-study, I rely upon other scholars to guide my understanding of what cultural democracy and critical pedagogy are and how each concept functions within the context of a high school history classroom. *Cultural democracy* as defined here is a practice to gain a better understanding of culture, power, and the intersection of the two, particularly in how it leads to the construction of the predominant narrative (Darder, 2011). Critical pedagogy, as defined by Giroux (2004), is the act of utilizing education to promote social change by providing students with tools to recognize and combat systemic inequities and injustices. Together, these two terms encourage teachers to use their positions to raise awareness of how power and culture interrelate, particularly with both historical and contemporary systems of oppression. In my self-study, I utilized these concepts both formally, in instruction, and informally, in conversations with students, in order to consistently empower students and provide them with the tools to critically examine the narratives and perspectives discussed in the history classroom.

During student teaching, I worked with 36 students in a high school in the Central Illinois area. The school demographics were predominantly White, with about 70.9% of students identifying as White, 12.6% as Black, and 8.1% as Hispanic (Illinois Report Card, 2022). Amongst three Sophomore United States History classes, there were 36 participants in my study aged 15-16, with the majority being 15. Of these 36 students, 24 identified as White, 3 as Black, and 8 as Hispanic, with 1 additional student identifying as mixed. 7 of these students were in a co-taught class that had a co-teacher and student-teacher in the room. The co-taught class provides students with IEPs further support, though lessons did not need to be modified in a significant way. The school website notes the district's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, which aligns with the ideals of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy.

During my self-study research, my co-operating teachers and I collaborated to ensure my lessons and units aligned with the goals and requirements of the district's history courses. I focused my lessons on providing the students with content that fit the defined curriculum while also including diverse perspectives and inviting students to engage with the material. I drew information from field observations and reflections, which document classroom activities, student participation or remarks, and the district's professional development sessions. I kept anecdotal records of how students engaged with the lessons as well as with each other during conversations. This allowed me to keep track of how individual students participated in the classroom community as they engaged in lessons planned with critical pedagogy at the forefront. Throughout the semester, I administered four different assessments aligned with the curriculum and content covered and collected the student work from the 29 participants in my self-study who were not in the co-taught class. The assessments at large allowed me to see how students engaged with my practice and the content, particularly for specific assessments that allowed students the freedom to choose what historical perspective to analyze or assume. The data from these three sources that I collected shows students responded positively to my practices both through more formalized assessments and activities as well as less formal conversation and daily classroom interactions, leading to a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment.

To draw conclusions from my study, I analyzed the field observation and reflections, anecdotal records, and student work. I utilized a qualitative approach to identify patterns and themes across the various data sources according to thematic similarities and differences (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). This included coding the field observations and reflections, examining the anecdotal records for recurring themes, and analyzing student work for evidence of critical thinking and engagement with course material. Through this process, I sorted data according to the following categories: Cultural Democracy and Critical Pedagogy (in the classroom), Student Engagement and Participation, Historical Empathy (in the classroom), Student Responses to representation and inclusion, School/Community Dynamics affecting CDCP, and Community Building.

Using these codes, I was able to identify several key findings. Firstly, the School and Community Dynamics affecting CDCP were found to play a crucial role in the success of the implementation, both positively and negatively. Positive community and school dynamics supported the implementation of CDCP practices and contributed to the success of the program, while negative dynamics hindered its success. Secondly, the implementation of Cultural Democracy and Critical Pedagogy (in the classroom) resulted in a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, which was reflected in increased Student Engagement and Participation. Students reported feeling more comfortable sharing their perspectives and engaging in discussions about sensitive topics. Additionally, the integration of diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum helped to broaden students' understanding of the world around them, displaying their Historical Empathy and including CDCP elements in their summative assessments. Data collected provided insights into what cultural democracy and critical pedagogy look like in the high school classroom, as well as how the practices affected my classroom community as a whole. Further details are below regarding the results and data analysis.

## **Results of Study**

### ***Effects of School and Community Dynamics***

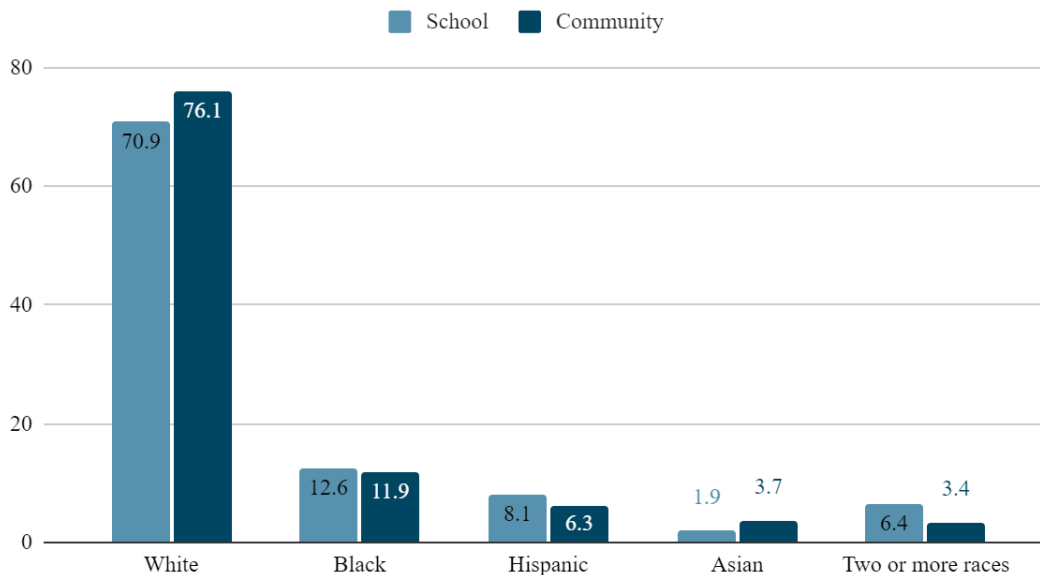
I kept observational field notes as well as anecdotal records during my student teaching semester. These field notes span from the end of September through the beginning of December and covers both instances of events with students as well as teacher improvement days. The anecdotal records were taken sporadically throughout the semester, focusing on when students had engaged with the diverse perspectives presented or noted how their community affected their worldview. Upon analysis, it became apparent that the school and surrounding community affected how both students and staff members engaged with the concepts of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy. Both groups exhibited either positive or resistance to the concepts. These findings suggest that school and community dynamics are critical factors that impact the effectiveness of implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in classrooms.

The dynamic of schools and communities can either hinder or support the goal of creating a more inclusive curriculum for students to engage with. Analysis of the demographic data collected by the Illinois State Board of Education reveals that the school had a majority white population, with 70.9% of students identifying as white. Additional portions of the population identified as Black (12.6%), Hispanic (8.1%), Asian (1.9%), or two or more races (6.4). Notably, the demographics of the school are quite similar to the surrounding community in which the

school is located, the comparison of which is shown in Figure 1. This finding implies that the school and community dynamics have a symbiotic relationship, where the community shapes the school culture and curriculum design, while the school culture and curriculum design influence the community's values and beliefs. Understanding the dynamics of both school and community is essential in creating an inclusive curriculum that promotes equity and social justice for all students.

**Figure 1**

*Percentage of Race and Hispanic Origin in School and Community*



In my observations and anecdotal records, I discovered that the school and community dynamics influenced how the curriculum was formed, but especially so how the students engaged with cultural democracy and critical pedagogy elements in the curriculum (Banks, 1989). Some families valued the curriculum's diverse perspectives, especially as the self-study incorporated more lessons per unit on these topics. The students who were not equitably represented in the curriculum were particularly eager to learn and engage with diverse perspectives (Yilmaz, 2008). During the course of the self-study, there were instances such as one student who pursued a research topic relating to the Black Panther movement, which he said wasn't mentioned in his previous classes, or another group of students who asked if lesbians existed in the 1940s around WWII and then excitedly asked questions about the LGBTQ community in that era (anecdotal records, 3-SA, 10/26; 8-GVM, 9/8). Anecdotal records and field notes of these instances record the positive impact of an inclusive curriculum on students' engagement and interest.

However, it was clear that the school and community dynamics could also pose a significant challenge to creating an inclusive curriculum for all students. Other students were a bit more hesitant to engage with such perspectives, but mostly were inquisitive, particularly regarding connections to present-day events, such as during a lesson on Sundown Towns when students asked: "How is this still allowed to happen?," "Do people know or is this hidden?" "Why is this still happening?," and made disapproving comments, such as one student saying, "That's so [expletive] up, sorry, messed up" (field notes, November 2). Utilizing various teaching

methods, as suggested by Brooks (2011), assisted in the development of students' historical empathy and encourage them to engage with historical contexts, even when uncertain. By incorporating more diverse perspectives in the curriculum and addressing any hesitations, it is possible to create a more inclusive education where students feel comfortable and confident enough to engage in lessons involving cultural democracy or critical pedagogy (Banks, 1989).

From a broader perspective, school personnel similarly had a mixed response to the incorporation of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy at the institutional level. In the history department, the department head frequently urged in department meetings the incorporation of minority perspectives in history and reminded staff members of the importance of the students being engaged in citizenship and aware of their community. Yet other staff members were not just hesitant, but resistant to the incorporation of diversity in the curriculum or challenging the status quo. Some teachers expressed concerns that including diverse perspectives was too political or irrelevant to students' lives and shouldn't be considered in teaching. These criticisms were voiced both individually by some staff members, as well as during equity conversations and training during professional development (field notes, September 30). It is important to address such hesitations and resistance to the inclusion of diverse perspectives and equitable pedagogy in school environments.

Professional development sessions offered an opportunity for administrators to explore such attitudes of the school staff. The varying attitudes of staff members were periodically reflected in their remarks while attempting to create a school culture that values diversity, equity, and inclusion. Equity discussions in these sessions often included analyzing data collected by the school and the steps needed to remedy instances of injustice. In a professional development session about a month into the school year, administrative personnel made it a point to inform instructive staff members of worrying risk ratios, inviting staff to reflect upon their personal biases (field notes, September 30). Later in the semester, an equity discussion included statistics revealing that Hispanic and Black students are underrepresented in Advanced Placement, dual credit, and honor classes. As the assistant principal presented on this point, they had hurriedly added that "[the school] should give more effort to students of color [to support their academic future], though it doesn't mean that we should ignore the white students" (field notes, December 5). This conversation underscores the need to address disparities in educational opportunities for all students while recognizing the complexities of promoting equity and inclusion in education.

The gap between theory and praxis is evident in the concept of critical consciousness, which calls for educators to embrace activism and reimagine the roles of those involved in education and the curriculum (Styslinger et al., 2019). Resistance from some members of the school community to changes in the curriculum or practices that prioritize equity can make it challenging to implement critical pedagogy effectively. Moreover, despite departmental efforts to include diversity in the curriculums and encourage student agency, biases, and prejudices can undermine such commitments.

The educational experiences of students are deeply intertwined with the larger community and school dynamics, impacting both the implementation of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy. While the commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion is present at the institutional level, my observational field notes and anecdotal records noted suggest that there are disparities in some students' educational experiences. Efforts are being made at both the department and individual classroom levels to fill these gaps and create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students. The larger community surrounding the school affects both students and staff members, creating either willingness or resistance to engage with

cultural democracy and critical pedagogy. This creates a challenging dynamic in which some students receive a more inclusive and diverse education, depending on their teachers and their individual backgrounds. Despite the gaps in institutional support, there is a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion at the school. Adopting a student-centered approach that incorporates students' interests and perspectives, as well as cultural democracy and critical pedagogy elements into the curriculum, enabling the formulation of lessons that engaged students. There is still much work to be done to ensure that all students receive a diverse and inclusive education. Efforts at the department and individual classroom levels are a step in the right direction, but it is crucial to address the larger community and institutional dynamics to achieve lasting change.

### ***Cultural Democracy and Critical Pedagogy in Self-Study***

The area of history education has recently gained national prominence as school districts and families question the content and delivery present in the classroom. Despite some hesitations towards the inclusion of diversity in history education, as opposed to the Eurocentric canon, the need for education that promotes cultural democracy and critical pedagogy has never been more urgent. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of systemic racism, social inequality, and political polarization in the United States, which has led to widespread calls for reform and social justice. Educators have an important role to play in this movement, as they are responsible for preparing the next generation of citizens to navigate and contribute to a rapidly changing society. As someone entering the field, I sought to embrace the concepts of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in my self-study practice, hoping to encourage students to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to promote change.

In my practice, I considered both formal and informal uses of these concepts with students, incorporating cultural democracy and critical pedagogy into both my lesson plans as well as casual conversations with students. This allowed me to collect data from various sources, including field observations and reflections, anecdotal records, and student work in addition to the lesson plans I created during the course of the study. The data analysis revealed several key findings. An initial review found that students were engaged with lessons that provided information about diverse cultural identities and experiences, resulting in students making connections to their personal lives and displaying historical empathy. Secondly, incorporating critical pedagogy and cultural democracy elements into more lessons per unit also resulted in students reflecting on these perspectives in their summative assessments, which students used to challenge dominant narratives and perspectives while indicating an understanding of minority experiences in America's history. Finally, there is an indication that the use of these concepts in informal conversations with students helped to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for both teacher-to-student relationships and peer-to-peer relationships. When taken together, these findings suggest that incorporating cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in classroom instruction can lead to positive outcomes for both educators and students in addition to having the potential to transform the way students engage with history in the United States.



When making lesson plans that incorporate cultural democracy and critical pedagogy, I often relied upon the lessons previously created or the larger curriculum guide of the school I was student teaching at. Using my cooperating teachers as well as scholars in the field of history education as my guide, I worked to create lesson plans in each of my classrooms, most notably in US History and the Civics classroom, where I had the opportunity to take over full-time teaching for about 8 weeks. For each lesson, I incorporated the idea that social justice and democracy are inherently linked to teaching and learning and sought to provide students with the tools to critically analyze the information I was presenting (Freire, 2005). Especially important to my content was the history of the United States and how choices were made by both average people and the government that privileged some groups, but periodically resulted in the oppression of minority groups (Darder, 2012). I was able to include multiple primary and secondary sources, that, together, exposed students to the diverse perspectives of American history and prompted discussion.

In order to teach lessons with cultural democracy and critical pedagogy elements, I wanted to ensure that students felt the classroom was a safe space for critical discussions that analyzed the narratives presented by different historical participants on the same event (Seltzer-Kelly, 2009). To achieve this, I established classroom norms with students that encouraged respectful and open dialogue and reminded students that conversations should be constructive. My cooperating teachers and I modeled this behavior for students at the beginning of the semester, showing students how to analyze primary sources and consider the biases that their creators may have had. As students became more comfortable with the foundational skills of examining primary sources, I encouraged them to challenge historical narratives they were familiar with to consider how narratives may have resulted in the inclusion or exclusion of identities. By creating a space where students were encouraged to interrogate their sources, students felt empowered to share their ideas and engage in meaningful discussions about historical topics, which ultimately helped them develop their critical thinking and analysis skills.

In addition to using these themes in formal lesson planning and norm-setting, I found that incorporating cultural democracy and critical pedagogy into informal conversations provided a way for students to connect their personal experiences to the concepts and themes discussed in class. After creating an environment through formalized usage of the theories, many of my students felt more comfortable discussing their personal experiences and perspectives within the classroom community during informal conversations. Such conversations with students allowed them to ask questions that they may not feel comfortable asking in a formal lesson. This allowed me to give students additional information that led to a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity and the experience of individuals historically. Incorporating the informal use of these theories allowed students to further contextualize the concepts they were learning and to critically consider the resources shared during instruction.

Engaging in informal conversations with students can provide an opportunity for them to share aspects of their identity or their experiences that may not be apparent in the classroom setting such as a student belonging to the LGBTQ+ community or sharing their struggles as a

person of color in the local community (anecdotal records, 8-GVM, 9/8; 8-SGE, 10/5; 3-SA, 10/26; 8-JZA). By creating a safe and inclusive environment, students may feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives. Through these conversations, students can gain a deeper understanding of their own identity and the experiences of others, thereby fostering a sense of empathy and understanding.

These conversations supported students in developing their ability to analyze and reflect on their own experiences as well as those of others. By exploring the historical context of different situations through lessons that encouraged role-playing or simulated real-life events, students displayed their growing understanding of how events and circumstances impacted people differently based on demographic factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability. While the formalized lesson planning and norm-setting created the environment for students to explore these ideas, it was the informal usage and displays of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in informal conversations with students that displayed the way the learning environment became more dynamic, promoting understanding, empathy, and critical thinking in participants.

An example of the presence of both the informal and formal usage of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy came during the end of the 1950s unit and the start of the 1960s unit where students participated in a mock Red Scare. Students were told that there were two students roleplaying as communists in their class. Through a week of classes, there would be short activities at the start of class that encouraged students to work as a team to complete a task such as building a house of cards or successfully completing an assembly line before the other teams. The short activities that students engaged in at the start of each class encouraged collaboration and teamwork while also helping to build a sense of community within the classroom, mirroring how Americans banded together during the Cold War. At the end of each activity, students were able to anonymously report their classmates for communism through a Google Form. In examining the reports made by students, it was revealed that about half of the students were reported at least once for suspicious acts.

At the end of the week, students participated in a mock hearing of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), where they were required to play the roles of the accused, HUAC members, and attorneys. By simulating a historical event, students were given the opportunity to engage in active learning that fostered critical thinking and historical empathy. Students were variably accused of communism, able to convince someone to act as their attorney, and were either successfully able to clear themselves of the charges or were convicted (Someone Here is a Communist, lesson plan). As students assumed different roles, they were able to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the political climate of the time and to better appreciate the perspectives of different historical participants.

The formalized structure of the simulation provided a framework for students to engage in informal conversations with their peers and instructors about the material and the experience of being in a Red Scare. The accused were able to articulate their positions and challenge the accusations, while other students were able to probe and question their fellow classmates

(anecdotal records, 8-GVM, 10/21; 4-ZSL, 10/21; 4-MST, 10/21). The simulation allowed for a safe space for students to explore sensitive and controversial topics while providing an avenue for their voices to be heard. By incorporating cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in this way, students were not only learning about history but were also gaining important life skills such as public speaking, conflict resolution, and advocacy. As the HUAC hearing concluded, students were then presented with information on the real-life HUAC and McCarthyism, the practice of accusing Federal Government employees of having affiliations with communists or leaking info. It was also revealed that there were no actual students who were pretending to be communists, meaning the hysteria and concerns of students the past week were entirely unfounded.

This led to a class conversation on how individuals could bring negative attention to themselves which could lead to accusations of communism despite no actual affiliations. Students drew parallels between how their classmates were accused due to small actions during the group activities or even for wearing the color red to school and how actual victims of McCarthyism were accused due to already present stigma such as members of the LGBTQ+ community being accused (a phenomenon known as the Lavender Scare) or even how reformers and activists were accused due to pushing for equal rights. The class discussion highlighted the danger of false accusations and the potential harm that can come from small actions or pre-existing stigmas, displaying students' historical empathy and ability to engage with diverse perspectives in history.

The use of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in the self-study showed promising results in improving the history education of students. By incorporating these concepts into both formal and informal interactions with students, the study was able to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment where students felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences and perspectives. The incorporation of cultural diversity in lesson plans allowed students to engage more deeply with the material and develop a sense of historical empathy while also encouraging reflection on dominant narratives and perspectives. My findings indicate that cultural democracy and critical pedagogy can have positive outcomes for both educators and students, suggesting that the incorporation of these concepts in classroom instruction can lead to positive changes in how students engage with history education in the United States. Ultimately, these changes can contribute to a more equitable and just society by empowering the next generation with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to promote change.

### ***Student Engagement with Diverse Perspectives in History***

The study of history provides a unique opportunity for students to develop their critical thinking skills and engage with diverse perspectives. However, research has shown that students often struggle to connect with historical events and the individuals who shaped them, particularly if they cannot relate to the dominant narrative. In response and in accordance with my self-study, I incorporated cultural democracy and critical pedagogy into my classroom and its curriculum. At the beginning of the semester, I relied mostly upon my cooperating teachers' lesson plans and

their unit plans, but over time I was able to create my lessons and units, allowing me to include more culturally diverse themes and more interactive conversations.

The first unit I fully created for my US History students was the 1950s Unit, which I chose to center upon the concept of the American Dream and whether it was achievable for every American. To ensure that the lesson aligned with the principles of my study, I sought to incorporate diverse perspectives and explicitly instruct students to consider how different groups were able to access or were denied the benefits given to American citizens after WWII (Bartelds et al., 2020). Throughout the unit, I spent time noting the different actions, such as the Truman administration's "Fair Deal," which acknowledged "prejudice and intolerance" in the country, as well as actions of businesses or citizens, such as the creation of the prefabricated yet cheap Levittowns that made homeownership accessible to millions -- as long as they were white. By drawing upon both primary and secondary sources, as well as incorporating various teaching methods to help students understand the diverse perspectives on the American Dream, I allowed students to display historical empathy as they considered that the predominant narrative of the ideal American life may not have been realistic for all citizens (Brooks, 2011; Pollock & Shabdin, 2013). Incorporating these elements, the lessons allowed students to critically analyze historical documents, foster inclusivity, and gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the American Dream.

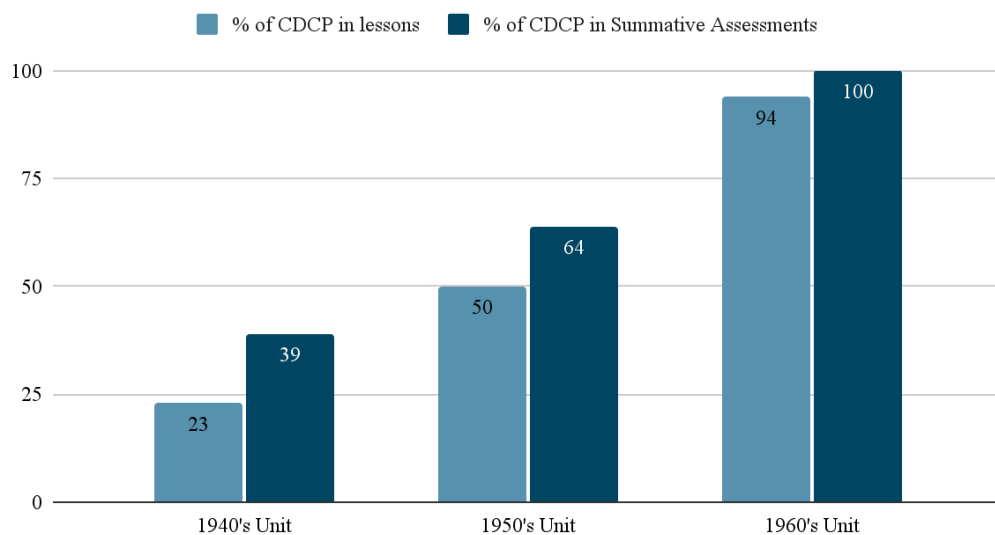
This complexity was subsequently represented in students' work. In alignment with Bolton & Elmore (2013), students were given the rubric for the summative assessment. They were also given formative assessments that drew students' attention to the key details of the unit and assessment. At the end of the unit, students were instructed to create a pitch for a hypothetical TV show or movie showing how Americans were (or weren't) able to achieve the American Dream in the post-World War II era and early 1950s. Students were able to choose the other details, such as the identity of the characters they created as well as the circumstances that the characters were in. Given this choice, 24 of the 36 (or approximately 67%) students participating in the study acknowledged in their summative assessment that living in America was more difficult for minority groups such as people of color or LGBTQ+ identifying individuals.

The implementation of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy elements affecting student summative assessments was not solely limited to the 1950s Unit. This positive impact was observed not only in the 1950s Unit but also in all three units taught during the self-study. Lessons that included cultural democracy and critical pedagogy elements in the self-study course often included sources that touched on diverse perspectives and engaged students in conversations that challenged the dominant narrative. These lessons purposefully provided students with sources that highlight the experiences of different groups during that time period. These approaches helped students to broaden their understanding of history and incorporate minority perspectives into their summative assessments, resulting in more comprehensive and empathetic analyses.

In the 1940s unit, which was shared amongst me and my cooperating teacher, 23% of the unit’s lessons included elements of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy (CDCP) and 39% of student assessments included CDCP elements. In the 1950s unit, which was guided by my cooperating teacher’s unit plan but allowed me to create my lessons, 50% of lessons and 64% of student assessments included CDCP elements. The impact was most evident in the 1960s unit, where 94% of lessons and 100% of student assessments included CDCP elements (*Figure 2*). This suggests that as students became more familiar with diverse perspectives in history, they were more likely to display their knowledge in their assessments.

**Figure 2**

*CDCP Elements in Lessons per Unit versus CDCP Elements in Student Summative Assessments*



The implementation of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy elements also had an impact on how students informally engaged with history, in addition to impacting their summative assessments. Students displayed a heightened level of historical empathy and incorporated minority perspectives into their discussions and informal reflections. This was particularly evident during class discussions, where students engaged in thoughtful conversations and shared their own perspectives on historical events. Students engaged in these conversations, often referring to their personal experiences to guide their questions and understandings of historical events. Students engaged with course materials, asking questions that furthered their understanding and often led to a change in perspective that was more inclusive of how different groups were affected by the same event or practice.

For instance, cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in the 1950s and 1960s unit often manifested in the forms of including the perspectives of people of color, resulting in conversations about the civil rights movement and racism in America. By engaging with primary sources such as interviews and documents, began to acknowledge how prevalent racism was in these decades, gaining a new understanding of the civil rights movement. This shift in understanding is most clear in the conversations surrounding Levittown, which students initially

heralded as the “perfect place for a family,” recalling their earlier history courses and after viewing advertisements for the homes (field notes, October 5). Further discussion and additional primary sources allowed the students to move beyond surface-level observations of happy families in photographs to more critical analyses, revealing that there were no people of color featured in photographs of Levittown and even documents that explicitly implemented segregation and barriers to people of color (field notes, October 19). Students also displayed historical empathy by considering how they would react in similar situations, such as one Hispanic student questioning if he was “white-passing” enough to be allowed into Levittown or various students making connections between race-relation stressors throughout American history up to the recent 2020 Black Lives Matter movement (anecdotal records, 8-MAA, 10/5; 8-SKG, 11/3; 3-GAJ, 10/21).

Students engaging in this critical analysis as a class led to further questions that interrogated the primary sources themselves and displayed historical empathy. In addition to noting that segregation and institutionalized racism was the norm of the era, students began to make connections across the materials they learned, returning to discussion topics from the 1950s unit during lessons in the 1960s unit or otherwise continually creating connections in their knowledge. This extended into the present day, where students empathized with historical individuals and considered how they may have reacted to the events.

Cultural democracy and critical pedagogy can be implemented through both formal lesson planning and informal interactions with students. Integrating more cultural democracy and critical pedagogy elements into instructional lessons fosters student engagement with the materials and enables them to reflect their knowledge in assessments. After being exposed to diverse perspectives and allowed to critically access dominant historical narratives, students incorporated minority perspectives into their assessments and conversations, resulting in more comprehensive and empathetic analyses of American history.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the essential role of school and community dynamics in creating an inclusive curriculum that promotes equity and social justice for all students. The demographics of the school and the community are critical factors that affect both the students and the instructional staff’s willingness to engage with diverse perspectives in the curriculum. While some individuals may resist incorporating diversity in the curriculum, this study shows that incorporating cultural democracy and critical pedagogy, especially in history instruction, can lead to positive outcomes for both educators and students. By emphasizing the importance of creating a safe and inclusive learning environment, students feel comfortable discussing their personal experiences and perspectives. This approach can foster increased engagement, historical empathy, and critical thinking skills. Explicit instruction, further improved by the usage of primary sources, encourages students to gain a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of historical eras as students consider how different groups were privileged or marginalized. Students display their newfound understanding in informal classroom settings and also incorporate diversity into their summative assessments.

The findings of this study have significant implications for my practice as an educator, as they highlight the importance of creating an inclusive curriculum that promotes equity and social justice for all students. I must be intentional in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment through explicit practices that allow students to feel comfortable discussing their personal experiences and perspectives. By emphasizing the importance of diversity in the curriculum and explicitly instructing students to consider how different groups were privileged or marginalized, I can help my students gain a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of history. These findings reaffirm my commitment to teaching with social justice and inspire me to continue to incorporate elements of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy into my curriculum to ensure that all my students have an equal opportunity to learn and grow.

The implications of this study in the larger context of education and teacher preparation programs are also significant. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of diverse perspectives in the classroom, and this study provides further evidence of its critical role, particularly in a history classroom. As the field of education become contentious in the public eye and the content, as well as the methods of teaching, are focused on, it is of increasing importance to incorporate best practices that will ensure students are exposed to the real, diverse history of their country and are empowered to make a positive impact in their communities. Incorporating the practice of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy into professional development and teacher preparation programs can better equip teachers to create a safe and inclusive learning environment that fosters increased engagement, historical empathy, and critical thinking skills in their students.

Future research can build on the findings of this self-study by further investigating the effectiveness of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy in a variety of instruction settings. While this study suggests that the incorporation of these practices can lead to positive outcomes for both students and educators in a history class, it is essential to explore their impact in a broader range of classroom contexts. As this study was limited to a single student-teaching experience in two classrooms, further research should be conducted to replicate and expand upon these findings to assess the generalizability of these results to other classroom settings. Recommendations for future research could also include exploring specific elements of cultural democracy and critical pedagogy that may be particularly effective in promoting historical empathy and critical thinking skills. For example, additional research could focus on how different years of US history or different historical topics could benefit from incorporating these practices. This research has the potential to make a lasting impact on education by providing evidence-based strategies for promoting inclusive curriculum and advancing social justice in classrooms.

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