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The dominant narrative of slavery in South Carolina's history standards

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ABSTRACT

Using a critical analysis approach, I investigated the dominant narrative of slavery and African Americans prior to the Civil War in the 2011 *South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards Support Document* for the 11th grade U.S. History course. Findings indicate that the *Support Document* does not offer a complete narrative of slavery and African Americans, perpetuates a negative image of African Americans, excludes themes of African American heroism, and maintains myths related to slavery. The dominant narrative found in the *Support Document* was compared to the scholarship of historians to construct a counter-narrative for teacher leaders to consider during curriculum development.

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Introduction

Claiming the United States' school system was in dire straits and losing the intellectual and economic battle with other countries, *A Nation at Risk* called for "rigorous and measurable standards... for academic performance and student conduct" ([National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983](#), p. 27). The accountability movement resulting from *A Nation at Risk* advocated for standardized tests to measure student achievement. By the mid-1990s, the accountability movement had produced a bureaucratized educational system consisting of state standards and national, state, and district-level tests ([Darling-Hammond, 1997](#)). At the classroom level, standardization of education "has meant a focus on standardized education procedures, prescribed curricula... and test-based strategies tied to tracking" ([Drake, 2012](#), p. 28). The accountability movement ultimately resulted in the passage of the [No Child Left Behind Act \(2002\)](#), which provide a federal mandate for public schools to systematically assess children's mastery of standards. However, since the passage of No Child Left Behind, social studies has remained less tested compared to subject areas such a mathematics and language arts ([Chudowsky, Kobler, Gayler, & Hamilton, 2002](#); [Mcintosh, 2012](#)).

During the advancement of the accountability movement, Apple and Giroux criticized the policies supporting standardization and testing. [Apple \(1993a, 1993b\)](#) argued that standards create "legitimate" or "official" knowledge as the policies initiating them result from the powerful social groups within society as a means of maintaining their power. To that end, powerful conservative groups sought standardization policies and curriculum to reduce education to meeting conservative ideological and economic goals ([Apple, 1991](#)), the removal of discourse and diversity from pedagogy, and the ending of teachers as engaged academics in a democracy ([Giroux, 1995](#)). After the passage of No Child Left Behind, [Apple \(2005\)](#) looked

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broadly at the educational system and concluded the accountability movement injected concepts of market forces into educational reform agendas, marginalized multiculturalism in the curriculum by focusing on Eurocentric history and values, integrated conservative Christian concepts of values and morality into both the reform agendas and the curriculum, and was supported by a middle class successful in an economy based on standardization, efficiency, and measurement who transfers this understanding to school reform. Additionally, Giroux (2009) observed that the accountability movement has resulted in schools no longer being seen as a public good, teachers no longer regarded as essential to school reform, and rote, uniform pedagogical practices, all serving to ill-prepare students to be citizens of a democracy.

Social studies courses are not immune to the standardization of the accountability movement. Within a decade of *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002), all 50 and Washington, DC had developed social studies standards (Stern & Stern, 2011). In discussing the politics of official knowledge, Apple (1993a) used social studies curriculum to demonstrate how standards represent the political “conflict over what some regard as simply neutral descriptions of the world and others regard as elite conceptions that empower some groups while disempowering others” (p. 222). More specifically, standardization of social studies curriculum runs counter the concept of social studies as dynamic, fluid, interpretive discipline for social awareness and social justice (Chandler, 2009). In addition to the standardization of curriculum, testing has entered the social studies classroom. Although the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) does not mandate standardized tests in social studies, twelve states currently include social studies as part of either an end-of-course exam program or exit exam program in public high schools (McIntosh, 2012). Although initially supportive of the standardization of social studies curriculum (Ravitch, 1997), Ravitch (2010) now argues that, because students are performing higher on standardized tests but students’ depth of understanding is decreasing, “we have obtained a paradoxical and terrible outcome: higher test scores and worse education” (p. 230). Due to the pressures and constrictions of standardized testing, social studies teachers in the period since *No Child Left Behind* incorporate teacher-centered instructional strategies centered on test preparation and less student-centered instructional strategies focused on deeper thinking and citizenship development (Misco, Patterson, & Doppen, 2007; Vogler, 2005; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Additionally, in the wake of *No Child Left Behind*, education researchers have expressed concern over the impact of standards and standardized tests on African-American students due to the narrowing of curriculum to the exclusion of African-American voices (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Harrison-Jones, 2007).

Observing the result of standardization in creating legitimate knowledge, Apple (2005) noted that standards and accountability are designed to reinforce a “vision of a common culture” grounded in European traditions, the Christian faith, and “fears about Latin America, Africa, and Asia” (p. 272). With this, Apple identified the dominant narrative in American culture and educational policy. Andrews (2004) defined dominant narratives as an internalized “normative experience” serving as the “blueprint for all stories” of ourselves and others (p. 1). Andrews noted in this definition that the dominant narrative is reproduced when we “[w]ittingly or unwittingly... become the stories we know” (p. 1). However, when our experience does not align with the dominant narrative, we are “challenged” to “make sense” of our experience, thus such counter-narratives make us “aware of new possibilities” (Andrews, 2004, p. 1). Taking Apple (2005) and Andrews (2004) together, the dominant narrative of Western thought the story that is embedded and reproduced in curricular standards. To identify dominant and counter-narratives, critical analysis is utilized. Cornbleth and Waugh (1995) defined critical analysis as the challenging of conventions, power structures, and histories that serve to oppress the socially and politically weak through the “suppression of alternative points of view” (p. 30).

Considering South Carolina, the *South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards* (2011) contains standards for an 11th grade United States history survey course titled *United States History and the Constitution*. According to the *South Carolina Education Accountability Act of 1998*, students enrolled in *United States History and the Constitution* are required to take a state-written End-of-Course Examination worth 20% of the final grade for the course (S.C. Code Ann. § 59-18-320). To help teachers align curriculum with the state exam for *United States History and the Constitution*, the *South Carolina Department of Education produced the 2011 South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards Support Document* (2012b), henceforth referred to as the *Support Document*. The *Support Document* is a 147-page historical narrative that specifies three major categories of knowledge for each standards indicator. The categories are: (1) “Previous/future knowledge”, (2) “It is essential for students to know”, and (3) “It is not essential for students to know”. Under each category, a written historical narrative explains to teachers the precise content and historical perspectives for which students will be held accountable on the End-of-Course Exam for the 11th grade *United States History and the Constitution* course. Within the South Carolina standards for 11th grade *United States History and the Constitution* African American history is addressed, as the *South Carolina Educational Improvement Act of 1984* (S.C. Code Ann. § 59-29-55) requires regular inclusion of African American history curricular materials used in South Carolina’s public schools should appropriately educate all children about African American history.

I am a social studies teacher in South Carolina. Like many of my colleagues in the state, my instruction is based on the *Support Document*. As a current practitioner, I am concerned about the portrayal of African Americans in the South Carolina social studies standards. This is especially a concern considering that South Carolina’s United States History standards are held in high esteem nationally (Stern & Stern, 2011), yet the African American pass rates on the United States History End-of-Course Exam are nearly half that of white students (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012a). Additionally, anecdotal evidence from conversations with teachers around the state indicates that teachers are increasingly reliant on the *Support Document* in the face of the End-of-Course Exam.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to conduct a critical analysis the South Carolina standards for 11th grade U.S. History using slavery as the focal point. Questions guiding this study were:

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