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Asian War Children's Literature in U.S. Preservice Teachers' Learning: Disrupting American Exceptionalism Master Narrative

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Abstract

This action research examines the pedagogical impact of challenging the narrative of American exceptionalism through children's literature in a U.S. teacher-preparation program. It explores how American preservice teachers engage with the United States' complex military history in Asia, a topic often underrepresented in educational curricula. Through a three-week unit titled "Unlearning American Exceptionalism," preservice teachers analyzed Asian-war children's literature, revealing cognitive and emotional dissonance with the ingrained national ethos. The study's findings suggest a shift in the preservice teachers' perspectives, from accepting to critically questioning historical narratives, emphasizing the need for empathetic engagement and ethical reflection in teaching. The process culminated in a final assignment in which participants shared their insights with the community, emphasizing the role of educators in fostering critical consciousness. This research underscores the importance of integrating difficult history and challenging dominant narratives within social studies education, advocating for a holistic pedagogical approach to prepare future educators for an interconnected world.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, Asian War, Difficult history

Introduction

The United States' engagement in Asia is a significant yet often overlooked aspect of U.S. history in school curricula (An, 2016, 2022; Lancaster & Hilburn, 2023; Jackson, 2018), despite the United States' expansive engagement in Asia—including advocating for the Open Door Policy in China at the turn of the 20th century, annexing Hawaii in 1898, the colonization of the Philippines from 1898 to 1946, military confrontations in World War II against Japan (1941-1945), the ongoing Korean War (1950-present), and the Vietnam War (1965-1973). Furthermore, the continuous U.S. military presence in Asia further underscores the significance of this engagement. Even with this extensive history, U.S. social studies education often underrepresents these events, both in U.S. (Lancaster & Hilburn, 2023) and world history curricula (Cartwright, 2022; Jackson, 2022). This gap is particularly notable given the prevalent U.S.-centric and American exceptionalism perspectives in world history courses. The limited discussion of U.S. military involvement in Asia may stem from the narrative of

American exceptionalism, which does not easily accommodate the complex realities of U.S. actions in Asia. This study aims to address this educational gap through an action research project with American preservice teachers. By exploring their perspectives, the study seeks to enhance critical global awareness and challenge the dominant American exceptionalism narrative, particularly in the context of U.S. military engagements in the Asia-Pacific region.

To comprehend the U.S.' interactions with Asia, the concept of American exceptionalism is pivotal, defined robustly by Kim (2022) as a metapolitical authority wherein the U.S. views itself as temporally and spatially exceptional, exempt from norms it imposes on others. My positionality significantly influenced the formulation of this action research project. As a South Korean citizen living, researching, and teaching in the United States, my identity as a foreign-born educator who has crossed borders has uniquely shaped my approach. I endeavor to equip U.S. preservice teachers with tools to critically engage with the world and empower students from marginalized backgrounds to become agents of change. Drawing from this background and my teaching philosophy, I developed a three-week module titled "Unlearning American Exceptionalism." In this module, I invited U.S. preservice teachers to delve into Asian War children's literature and engage in related discussion activities. The aim was to broaden their perspectives and challenge the ingrained U.S.-centric knowledge they had assimilated during their K-12 schooling. The research question posed: How did my students engage in the dialectical process of learning when confronted with difficult history that challenges the narrative of U.S. exceptionalism? These findings not only inform my future scholarly enterprises, but also offer valuable insights for critical teacher-educators interested in the exploration and deconstruction of this complex topic.

Conceptual Framework

American exceptionalism, a concept deeply ingrained in the United States' national identity, asserts a distinct historical and cultural preeminence, suggesting that the nation bears a unique responsibility to lead and mold the global order in the image of its foundational values of freedom and democracy. This belief system, acting as a cornerstone of the national ethos, posits that America's path is not only different from but also superior to other nations, charting a course of benevolent guidance towards a liberal democratic future. However, critical examinations challenge this narrative pointing out that the U.S. trajectory has mirrored that of its Western European counterparts in its imperialistic endeavors and global impact, especially evident in the 20th Century (Hopkins, 2018; Loveman, 2010). Hopkins (2018) argues that American exceptionalism often serves as a veil for the country's imperial ambitions.

American exceptionalism, which found its genesis in the early Puritan vision and evolved through the nation's history, took on new dimension during the Cold War (Van Engen, 2020). Loveman (2010) detailed how the U.S. foreign policy, veiled in the rhetoric of defending democracy, often resulted in support for non-democratic regimes in Latin America, revealing a dissonance between ideals and actions. This pattern persisted into the post-Cold War era with a resurgent American mission to export liberal democracy, a mission that despite its noble proclamations, sometimes contradicted the principles of sovereignty and self-determination it aimed to uphold (Loveman, 2010). The legacy of the Puritan "city on a hill" thus morphed into a justification for a form of neo-imperialism, underpinned by a belief in the U.S.' unique role in leading a global order reflective of its values (Loveman, 2010). This exceptionalist narrative has been perpetuated through education, wherein the

simplified origin story of Puritan America has often overshadowed the diverse and multifaceted realities of the nation's past (Van Engen, 2020).

The post–World War II era saw a significant expansion of U.S. militarist settler imperialism in Asia and the Pacific, consolidating the U.S.' dual identity as a settler colonial state and a military empire (Kim, 2010). The strategic establishment of military bases created zones with ambiguous jurisdiction, projecting U.S. military might and facilitating an exceptionalist narrative that justified its imperial reach. Kim (2010, 2022) underscores how this military presence reinforced the U.S.' metapolitical authority and settler imperialist ambitions. Bascara's (2006) examination further elucidates how the model-minority myth and Asian American cultural politics are intertwined with this history, complicating the perception of American exceptionalism. The myth serves to legitimize U.S. imperial actions abroad while shaping the domestic racial politics that affect Asian Americans, who must navigate the ramifications of a national identity steeped in exceptionalist doctrine (Bascara, 2006). Through this lens, the pervasive U.S. military empire, with its global network of bases, notably in the Asian region, is both a physical manifestation of and a rhetorical shield for America's imperial ambitions, as it continues to influence the discourse surrounding American identity and its role in global politics (Bascara, 2006; Kim, 2010).

Confronting the dominant narrative of American exceptionalism, American preservice teachers face challenges when educational and cultural narratives are brought into question. The narrative of American exceptionalism is pervasive in American education, and as Van Engen (2020) has shown, there is a process of selective memory that often excludes many of the nation's more controversial historical episodes. The omission of uncomfortable truths from the nation's history, particularly those involving military interventions in Asia and the Pacific, has significant implications for shaping a national consciousness that tends to overlook the darker aspects of American history (An, 2022a, 2022c; Eshelman, 2022; Gross & Terra, 2019). This exclusion is due in part to a long-standing tradition of crafting national narratives that conform to a particular vision of American identity.

The study of U.S. military interventions in Asia during the 20th century represents a difficult history for American preservice teachers, as it introduces them to narratives that starkly contrast with the widely held beliefs and collective memory of American exceptionalism (An, 2022a, 2022c; Eshelman, 2022; Gross & Terra, 2019). This contrast leads to cognitive and emotional dissonance, challenging the conventional historical narratives these preservice teachers have encountered, which typically portray the U.S. as a global champion of democracy and peace. Difficult history, as defined by Gross and Terra (2019), comprises narratives that are integral to a nation's identity yet reveal unsettling truths about violence, conflict, and trauma. Addressing such history requires a critical reassessment of personal and collective beliefs and fosters a reevaluation of the tension between promoting shared national identities and advocating for a critical understanding of historical narratives.

In addressing the ethical complexities inherent in the study of difficult histories, such as U.S. military intervention in Asia, it becomes crucial to integrate nuanced ethical reflections that expand beyond mere judgement to embrace a multifaceted ethical understanding. Drawing from the literature (Milligan et al., 2018), it is crucial to emphasize the importance of engaging with historical ethical judgments, not as conclusive moral assessments but as opportunities for deeper reasoning and reflection about past actions within their specific contexts. Similarly, Yoon (2022) argues for the necessity of recognizing the students' role as moral evaluators, who must navigate their historical positionality to make informed ethical judgments about historical events, emphasizing a balanced understanding of past and present moral frameworks.

Furthermore, the concept of ethical judgment in history education involves more than evaluating past

actions through a presentist lens; it entails a critical engagement with the ethical dimensions of history that influence contemporary societal values and educational imperatives, as discussed by Gibson et al. (2022). The authors illustrate how ethical reflections in history education can foster a critical consciousness that helps students appreciate the complex interplay between historical narratives and current ethical standards. This approach aligns with insights from Milligan et al. (2018), who advocate for an enriched ethical perspective in history education that encourages students to explore historical events and actors through rigorous ethical inquiry, thereby enhancing their understanding and ethical reasoning skills.

Engaging with the difficult histories of U.S. military interventions in the Asian region is not just an academic exercise but a profound educational imperative that challenges the prevailing narratives within social studies curricula. These histories, including the bombing of Manila, the Vietnam War, the Korean War, and the ongoing U.S. military presence, are deeply intertwined with current geopolitical tensions and underscore the need for American preservice teachers to adopt a pedagogical approach that transcends traditional narratives. Bacevich's (2013, 2016) examination of American militarism and Johnson's (2007) critique of American imperialism underscore the pervasive influence of militaristic attitudes on society and education, illustrating the urgency of integrating these complex narratives into the classroom to foster critical thinking and a nuanced understanding of global conflict.

The K-12 social studies curriculum, both in its design and implementation, is frequently circumscribed by national interests, often presenting a narrative steeped in ethnocentrism, especially in the portrayal of militarism and warfare (Loewen, 2008). This ethnocentrism extends into teacher-preparation programs and influences the broader community of social studies researchers, perpetuating a Western-centric paradigm rooted in Enlightenment thought (Popkewitz, 2012). McCorkle's studies (2017, 2021) emphasize the need to challenge and deconstruct the dominant militaristic narratives and revive the historical focus of peace education, advocating for a curriculum that includes broader perspectives and encourages critical reflections on war. This approach is critical to expanding students' worldviews and cultivating a global understanding, which is indispensable in an interconnected world. Such an educational strategy acknowledges the complexities of the United States past military actions and prepares preservice teachers to guide future generations through the moral and ethical ambiguities inherent in these difficult histories.

Methodology

Research Design

In a children's and young adult literature course—an interdisciplinary elective grounded in critical pedagogy and sociocultural theories of learning—the study implemented a concise action research design over six sessions spanning three weeks. Situated midway through the semester, the research coincided with a course theme dedicated to critical literacy, with a focus on deciphering global political and social issues through literature. The unit sought to dismantle the narrative of American exceptionalism by employing Asian-war children's literature, encouraging students to critically analyze U.S. military interventions in Asia within a broader framework of critical global citizenship.

Participants

This action research involved eight volunteer participants from a teacher-preparation program's elective course

on children's and young adult literature at a Mid-Atlantic liberal arts college. The demographic details of these participants are outlined in the table1:

Table 1. Participants summary

Name (Pseudonym)	Year of Study	Gender	Ethnicity/Race	Career Aspiration
Emily	sophomore	non-binary	White	School counselor
Hannah	senior	woman	White	Special education teacher
Sarah	junior	woman	White	Elementary school teacher
Olivia	senior	woman	White	Environmental educator
Rachel	junior	woman	White	Elementary school teacher
Jasmine	senior	woman	Jamaican/Black	Secondary science teacher
Lauren	junior	woman	White	Elementary school teacher
Brianna	junior	woman	Black	Secondary English teacher

Data Collection

Qualitative data was gathered to assess participants' experiences and viewpoints, utilizing a comprehensive array of materials. These included instructional resources, class notes, photographic evidence, audio recordings from discussions, introspective personal reflections, completed coursework, responses from email surveys, and detailed semi-structured interviews. Each interview, lasting approximately 40 minutes, aimed to probe deeply into the participants' interactions with children's literature that addresses Asian wars. Furthermore, the interviews sought to gain insight into the participants' beliefs and instructional strategies for teaching such nuanced topics. The interview protocol queried participants about their personal and professional backgrounds, experiences with the chosen children's literature, and their interpretations of the unit's key concepts, including the U.S.' colonial history, military engagements, implications for migration, and the principles of critical citizenship.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from various sources were thoroughly analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial phase involved an in-depth review of the data corpus to gain a comprehensive understanding of its content. This examination was followed by a systematic coding process using MAXQDA software, wherein the data were carefully examined line-by-line. This coding not only highlighted significant instances of participant engagement with course materials but also revealed their conceptual grasp and understanding. For the coding process, I utilized a combination of open and in-vivo coding techniques during the initial cycle, focusing on identifying any evidence of participants' response to the unit. This resulted in the generation of 234 initial codes, which in further cycles collapsed into 10 sub-themes: empathy, collaboration, supplementary texts, self-reflection, perspective change, complexity/simplicity, prior knowledge/previous experience, sharing-private, sharing-professional, and facing struggle. Each sub-theme was then mapped to the specific elements of the course sessions and participant responses in the results section, illustrating their practical implications and how they influenced the learners' engagement and understanding throughout the educational program.

Unlearning American Exceptionalism—A Teaching Plan Overview

The unit, titled ‘Unlearning American Exceptionalism,’ weaves critical global citizenship education (Andreotti, 2006, 2014; Pais & Costa, 2020) into the analysis of children’s literature depicting Asian wars. It was structured around the central inquiry, ‘Is the United States a Guardian of World Peace?’ This question steered the examination of essential concepts and historical contexts within the unit. Each of the five sessions was meticulously designed to disentangle different layers of this complex theme.

First Session

The initial session centered on deconstructing the concept of global citizenship, challenging students to critically engage with its multifaceted implications. The discussion progressed to an extended investigation into and exploration of Smith’s (2016) theorization of the pillars of white supremacy, contextualizing its structural impact within a global framework. Preservice teachers also examined diverse immigration stories, evaluating the portrayal of immigrant protagonists in contemporary media and literature. This critical lens aimed to unravel the narrative of American exceptionalism by juxtaposing it with the lived realities of immigration and the systemic nature of racial injustices. Through this examination, the session sought to instill a critical consciousness among preservice teachers, fostering their ability to understand and question their roles within the broader tapestry of global citizenship and societal structures.

Second Session

In this session, the class delved into the theme of ‘difficult knowledge’ through a critical lens on U.S. military actions in the Korean War, guided by An’s (2022) scholarly insights. The discussion challenged dominant narratives of U.S. benevolence, encouraging preservice teachers to critically assess historical accounts. A key part of the session was a mini lecture on the Manila bombings and U.S. involvement in WWII, supported by historical photographs, providing a foundation for the analysis of the children’s book *Tucky Jo and Little Heart*. This activity sought to reveal biases in the portrayal of American soldiers and Filipino villagers, and the emotional complexities of war. Concluding the session, students reflected on the meaning of American identity, weighing the notion against global and planetary responsibilities, and exploring the tension between national pride and historical truths.

Third Session

During this session, preservice teachers engaged in an incisive critique of the representation of Southeast Asian refugees in children’s literature, informed by An’s scholarly articles (2022a, 2022b). Students confronted the common reductionist depictions of the U.S. as a savior, probing their pre-existing educational narratives. Through thoughtful group discussions, they recognized the necessity of gradual, age-appropriate engagement with political intricacies. The preservice teachers’ in-depth analysis of the literature scrutinized the portrayal of both American and Southeast Asian figures, leading to a critical conversation about racial stereotypes, the construction of white supremacy, and the implications of the model minority myth. This rigorous examination contributed to a more profound understanding of U.S.’ complex historical interaction with Asia, preparing the preservice teachers to navigate the delicate fabric of global citizenship and the demands of critical, informed pedagogy.

Fourth Session

In the fourth session, preservice teachers continued their extensive inquiry into children’s literature that touches on the themes of war and refugees. The session began by setting the stage for critical analysis with a prompt that

encouraged students to think about the essence of the stories they read, including the perspectives and contexts presented. The main activity was a collaborative workshop wherein students critically analyzed their chosen books (*Inside Out & Back Again*, *When Spring Comes to the DMZ*, *Tucky Jo and Little Heart*) discussed in Sohyun An's works), probing how wars were depicted and how Southeast Asian refugees, or Koreans in the case of *When Spring Comes to the DMZ*, were portrayed. Preservice teachers were asked to construct a thesis statement in response to each prompt, supported by evidence from the texts. This exercise emphasized the importance of identifying and questioning militarism, colonialism, and racism within the narratives. It was a step towards understanding the implications of these portrayals for the refugees' attitudes towards the U.S., their assimilation experiences, and their personal agency.

The session concluded with group presentations in which students shared their analyses and insights. The presentations were designed to synthesize their critical reflections and showcase their understanding of the complexities surrounding the portrayal of war and refugees in their selected children's literature. This session aimed to reinforce the importance of a nuanced approach to historical events and their representations in educational materials.

Fifth Session

In the concluding session, the preservice teachers were engaged in a critical examination of children's literature with an emphasis on unlearning narratives of American exceptionalism. They received a mini lecture on postcolonial theory to set the foundation for their analysis, providing them with the necessary conceptual tools to dissect the portrayal of U.S. military engagements and the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees in the assigned literature. The workshop facilitated by the mini lecture allowed students to apply postcolonial critiques to their book analyses, focusing on how narratives challenge or uphold imperialistic views. They assessed the representation of immigrant characters and their struggles, and how these stories either perpetuate or question the dominant discourse of U.S. benevolence and the realities of war.

Moreover, the group discussions encouraged a re-evaluation of imperial privilege as conceptualized by Chávez-Moreno, prompting students to reflect on their personal privileges within the imperial power structure. This reflection was integral to understanding the broader implications of the U.S.' geopolitical actions and fostering a more empathetic approach to global citizenship. The session culminated in presentations wherein students shared their critical analyses, highlighting their evolving understanding of the complex interplay between historical narratives, national identity, and global responsibilities. This pedagogical design was aimed at equipping future educators with the skills to critically engage with difficult histories and to challenge the simplified tales of U.S. intervention in their teaching practices.

Final Assignment

In their final assignment for the "Unlearning American Exceptionalism" unit, preservice teachers were tasked with sharing insights from the course with an audience outside of the classroom, such as elementary students, friends, or family. This initiative aimed to extend the conversation on difficult histories and American exceptionalism beyond the academic setting, fostering broader societal engagement. Students selected meaningful topics from the unit, developed strategies for conveying these concepts in an accessible manner, and executed their plans through various means, including discussions around children's literature related to the themes explored in the unit.

Following their outreach, preservice teachers reflected on their experiences in essays, detailing the

process, their audience's reactions, and their own learning outcomes. This exercise not only deepened their understanding of the unit's content, but also emphasized the role of educators in promoting critical literacy and challenging dominant narratives. Through this process, the assignment showcased the potential for educational practices to bridge classroom learning with real-world applications, encouraging a more inclusive and critical examination of history and current events.

Preservice Teachers' Dialectical Journey Through Difficult History

This unit's findings illuminate the nuanced ways preservice teachers engaged with challenging histories that confront the narrative of U.S. exceptionalism. Through a dialectical learning process, they critically navigated children's literature that offered alternative viewpoints, prompting a shift from acceptance to a more skeptical and reflective response. The students' journey involved empathy, ethical consideration, and an evolving readiness to integrate these complex histories into their own narratives and future teaching.

Transformation in Empathy and Ethical Reflection

Children's literature served as a medium for profound personal and professional growth in terms of empathy and ethical reflection. The selected texts—*Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai & Shappell, 2011), *When Spring Comes to the DMZ* (Won & Won, 2019), and *Tucky Jo and Little Heart* (Polacco, 2015) provided diverse narratives that resonated deeply with the participants. As students navigated the stories of child protagonists, they engaged with complex themes like immigration, war, xenophobia, and racism, not just as distance concepts, but as lived realities that demanded both empathetic engagement and a deeper ethical reflection (Yoon, 2022).

The transformative learning was evident in the writings of the preservice teachers. For example, Olivia's insights from *Inside Out & Back Again* revealed a shift from awareness to an empathetic connection with the protagonist's plight as a war refugee. She remarked in her writing assignment:

By reading literature from many different perspectives the reader is able to gain a new understanding of how the U.S. is involved in global issues, specifically war refugees. ... *Inside Out and Back Again*... the experience of a young girl having to escape ... during the Vietnam War ... allows the reader to understand the difficulties of leaving one's country and all of the emotions involved... Another important part... is gaining empathy towards those that are new to the U.S. and how much xenophobia refugees face... Having children's accounts of what it is like to be a refugee in the U.S. helps grasp the idea that foreigners are still humans with emotions and should be treated as such.

This connection then fostered a critical ethical reflection on the broader implications of U.S. involvement in global issues, particularly the treatment of refugees and the emotional weight of xenophobia (Gibson et al., 2022). Such historical empathy was critical in fostering a more distinguishing, nuanced understanding of U.S. history and its global impact, furthering their development as educators who are sensitive to the complexities and moral dimensions of teaching.

When exploring *Tucky Jo and Little Heart*, preservice teachers analyzed the American soldier's narrative impact on Filipino villagers. They reviewed scenes of Johnnie's, an American soldier, efforts to save villagers from bombings, considering the complex emotions of Filipinos towards their helpers amidst the destruction. This activity prompted a critical look at the story's U.S.-centric bias and the villagers' portrayed helplessness, enhancing the understanding of storytelling perspectives. The discussions also prompted deeper

moral reasoning, urging teachers to recognize the importance of diverse perspectives in narratives (Milligan et al., 2018).

The activities in which preservice teachers engaged with children's books showcased the potential of literature to transform empathetic responses into ethical understanding. Through these carefully curated literary experiences, the participants navigated the emotional and cognitive dissonance that challenging historical narratives often evoke, finding solace and clarity in the innocent yet profound perspectives of child protagonists. This connection with child protagonists' viewpoints not only softened the initial impact of difficult history, but also provided a springboard for a nuanced moral reasoning (Yoon, 2022).

Developing Moral Reasoning in Historical Context

The exploration of children's literature within this unit provided preservice teachers a dynamic space to enhance their moral reasoning amidst historical complexities of U.S. military interventions (Yoon, 2022). As they delved into narratives like *Tucky Jo and Little Heart*, supplemented by a historical overview of the Manila bombing and the U.S. involvement in the Philippines during WWII, participants began to critically assess the representation of American soldiers, challenging glorified depictions and recognizing the ethical implications often obscured by narratives of heroism (Gibson et al., 2022).

Brianna's argumentative essay showed a sophisticated understanding of interconnected systems of oppression, citing academic work to underscore the complexities of colonialism and the nuanced nature of complicity. Similarly, Jasmine synthesized issues of war and immigration with a critical eye, challenging the oversimplified narratives in children's literature. Jasmine wrote:

By depicting the experience of war and immigration through the eyes of a young refugee, the books offer a more complex understanding of the Vietnam War, portraying the US as both 'benevolent rescuer' and 'violent aggressor' (An, 2022a). An (2022a) contrasts this with popular YAL narratives that present Southeast Asian refugees as 'helpless victims...rescued by the United States,' a narrative opposite to that in *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai & Shappell, 2011). This understanding of 'difficult knowledge' is crucial for children to make informed decisions about war and its broader implications (An, 2022b).

Jasmine's essay highlighted that carefully chosen academic supplementary texts provided the necessary lens to identify and question the simplified tales of U.S. intervention and their implications on readers' perceptions.

Group discussions further played a pivotal role in developing moral reasoning, offering a collaborative space for preservice teachers to navigate complex historical narrative. Sarah highlighted the pedagogical power of peer dialogue during the interview:

I was like maybe other people have a little bit more background knowledge... but we kept working through the group, I was trying to share my perspective a little bit... [the group discussion] helped me to... share my ideas more... I feel I have more knowledge about the subject therefore can kind of talk about it a little more than I had in the past...

These exchanges were not just about sharing knowledge, but also about collaboratively deconstructing the layers of American exceptionalism and colonialism. The dialogical approach not only broadened their cognitive horizons but also reinforced their understanding of the ethical dimensions in historical narratives (Milligan et al., 2018).

Despite these dialogues and the incorporation of academic references in their analysis, some groups

exhibited a need for a stronger foundational understanding of broader historical narratives. The data suggested a gap in understanding the connections between U.S. imperialism, colonialism, and their impact on global conflicts, such as the Cold War's influence on civil wars in Asia. This discontinuity indicates the need for children's literature to be complemented with explicit historical content to ensure a more robust development of moral reasoning.

Shifts in Perspective: From Awareness to Commitment

The learning trajectory of preservice teachers in this project exemplifies a transformative engagement with history and literature. Through critical examination of children's literature and supplementary academic texts, they cultivated the ability to scrutinize and reinterpret dominant or 'master' narratives. This reevaluation went beyond mere academic exercise; it engendered a shift towards a more informed and critically conscious perspective, crucial for understanding the multiplicity of historical events and their portrayals. Rachel wrote:

An (2022b) explores the common narratives written about Asians in children's and YAL, noting, '...one of the popular narratives presents Southeast Asian refugees as helpless victims of communism who were then rescued by the United States and became a successful, grateful minority in the United States' (p. 251). This reflects how literature can distort readers' perception of the United States' war efforts and global involvement. An's (2022b) study, along with Cummins (2013), highlights the danger of one-dimensional narratives that could lead readers to uncritically support U.S. war efforts...

Rachel reflects on how children's literature often cast Southeast Asian refugees as helpless victims saved by the U.S., subsequently becoming a 'successful, grateful minority.' An's (2022b) examination, alongside Cummins (2013), underscores the danger of such simplified narratives that risk leading readers to an unreasoned endorsement of U.S. war efforts. Rachel's critical engagement with these texts modeled a method to challenge and dismantle these oversimplified tales, paving the way for a more critical and deeper understanding of U.S. benevolence and heroism.

Hannah's reflections during the interview further illuminate the profound personal changes that accompanied their academic learning. She candidly acknowledged moving away from a 'white mindset,' a perspective influenced by her upbringing in a stable, homogenous environment. This admission marked the beginning of a significant perspective shift for Hannah—a reexamination of internalized biases and a deliberate move towards inclusivity and empathy. Her gratitude for the eye-opening education she received is a testament to the depth of her transformation. This educational journey exemplifies the transformative power of history and literature, not only in shaping the intellectual perspectives of future educators but also in inspiring a heartfelt commitment to social justice and equity.

The unit's focus on dissecting master and counter narratives, addressing gaps in the K-12 curriculum, and analyzing the politics of discourse, provided a rich platform for the preservice teachers to actively reshape their viewpoints around difficult history. The participants not only engaged in reevaluating historical narratives but also in internalizing the critical skills necessary to recognize and address social justice issues. Such intellectual and personal growth underscores the immediate effect of the unit, as the preservice teachers evolved into educators with the knowledge and empathy required to integrate social justice into their teaching practices.

Civic Engagement Through Recontextualizing Classroom Learning

The design of the final assignment in this unit was pivotal in nudging preservice teachers to bridge the gap between academic insights and societal application. By encouraging them to share their classroom learnings

with individuals outside our classroom, the assignment prompted them to consider action items and practical applications of their knowledge. This step was crucial in shifting their perspective from theoretical understanding to active application, thereby re-establishing their relationships with others through the lens of difficult historical narratives. For her final project, Lauren exemplified this engagement. She wrote:

I loved author Thanhha Lai's ideas in her book regarding a different perspective on the Vietnam War. I thought it would be very beneficial ... to read this book and better understand a different perspective on the War and how the history we are taught in school that glorifies the U.S. is sometimes not the full if at all the actual truth. ... This inspired me to ... interviewed three individuals, all from different generations, and asked them to read *Inside Out and Back Again* and, following their reading, had a sit-down interview with them. ... After reading this book, there was a positive reaction; many expressed their previous education [about] the Vietnam War.

The positive reactions and the shift in understanding post-discussion signified the impact of Lauren's project, demonstrating her ability to bridge historical knowledge with contemporary reflection, a key aspect of civic engagement.

Similarly, Sarah, with her focus on the U.S. Southern border-crossing issue, navigated the complexities of current affairs through children's literature during a read-aloud session. By choosing *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales for her application project, Sarah not only enhanced her pedagogical skills but also engaged young students with the sensitive issue of immigration, fostering early civic awareness. She said:

I'm really happy I got this experience because ... I actually ... started thinking about the materials that I want to present in class and how I want to teach the class and how it would be beneficial ... I think that will stick with them. And they can carry that through their education in the future, which is really exciting ... starting point and then they can do the inquiry later.

Reflective Reorientation: Embracing Complex Histories

In this unit, preservice teachers embarked on a reflective journey, critically reassessing their educational experiences and personal beliefs considering difficult historical narratives. Jasmine's engagement with topics her family avoided—like war and immigration—stirred an undercurrent of frustration, revealing an emotional intersection between personal/family history and broader societal narratives. She reflected, "...it was nice learning more, but there was also a sense of frustration underneath it," capturing the challenge of reconciling her pursuit of knowledge with the silence that had long shrouded these complex subjects. Her experience underscores the tension between seeking justice and confronting the enduring injustices that persist in personal and collective memory.

Brianna found a new vocabulary—imperial privilege—for articulating previously recognized but unnamed concepts. "I could recognize this, but sometimes it takes a definition or a word to really put it into perspective for me, like, 'Oh, that's what this is.' Now I can explain..." she reflected, illustrating the cognitive empowerment that comes with precise terminology.

Hannah and Olivia's discoveries were marked by revelations about the global impacts of U.S. policies, which led them to examine and question the limited perspectives they had grown up accepting as unilateral truth. Hannah recounted, "So it was really interesting to see. Kind of like have my eyes opened," while Olivia expressed a growing awareness of the United States' complex international role: "I think the main difference for me is realizing that the United States is not always good... I'm very aware of it, especially with the different

Asian countries and the United States.”

The unit provided preservice teachers with a platform to critically question their long-held beliefs and values. It encouraged them to transition from acceptance to questioning, fostering a healthy skepticism that paves the way for ongoing intellectual and personal evolution. Their narratives boldly underscore the transformative educational experience that not only imparted knowledge but also instilled a deep self-awareness and readiness for continued growth.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the pedagogical significance of employing children’s literature to navigate the often-monolithic narrative of American exceptionalism. Engaging with children’s literature that presents alternative perspectives on U.S. history facilitated a profound empathetic and ethical understanding among preservice teachers, challenging their preconceived notions of history, particularly U.S. military intervention in Asia. This direct engagement with children’s narratives enabled preservice teachers to confront and question the dominant narrative of American exceptionalism, fostering a more nuanced and critical understanding of historical events.

This reflective engagement is aligned with findings from scholars like Bishop (1990) and Rosenblatt (1985), who note the power of narratives to offer windows into different experiences and foster an active construction of meaning. Preservice teachers like Olivia experienced shifts in perspective through these stories, moving from simple awareness to a deeper empathetic connection. This process echoes the transactional reader-response approach advocated by Rosenblatt, wherein readers bring their own experiences into their interpretation of texts. The effectiveness of this approach is supported by existing research (e.g., Cai, 2008; Glenn, 2012), which suggests that “diverse” children’s literature can challenge biases and promote critical dialogue.

This study leveraged children’s literature as a transformative pedagogical tool, establishing a foundation for dialogic learning and the unlearning of the American exceptionalism narrative. Additionally, academic works, such as those by An (2022a, 2022b), provided a model for deconstructing these narratives, enabling preservice teachers to identify and critically engage with the dominant storytelling. These texts served as a scaffold, offering the means to dissect the master narratives woven into children’s stories and to pose robust challenges against them. Conceptual pieces like those by Chávez-Moreno (2021) offered the preservice teachers critical language, such as the concept of “imperial privilege,” which enabled them to articulate and confront the complexities of difficult histories. This dialogic interplay occurred at every level of the educational experience: between students and literature, between literary and non-literary materials, among the students themselves, and between the students and the instructor.

The holistic pedagogic design of this study was instrumental in its success. It was not merely about the texts themselves but about the intertextual and interpersonal dialogues they engendered. The carefully selected children’s books acted as a primer for deeper exploration, while the scholarly articles and theoretical frameworks provided the analytical tools needed to navigate and critique the content. This multilayered approach catalyzed a dynamic learning process wherein unlearning and relearning occurred in concert, fostering a comprehensive educational journey that went beyond the traditional bounds of classroom instruction. Through this pedagogical design, preservice teachers were not just absorbing knowledge, they were actively participating in the creation

of new understandings, redefining their roles as future educators in a global and historical context.

The findings of this study offer a compelling directive for social studies educators globally, especially those teaching against the entrenched narrative of American exceptionalism. It emphasizes the necessity for an inclusive curriculum that spotlights diverse perspectives, particularly in Asia, to counter the simplified historical portrayals that omit complex global relations. By integrating children's literature and critical discussions into the classroom, educators can cultivate empathetic understanding and critical thinking among students. This pedagogical shift encourages learners to engage thoughtfully with present topics such as immigration, the model minority myth, and xenophobia/nationalism, fostering a critical global awareness. For educators both inside and outside the U.S., this study advocates for a reevaluation of teaching strategies to better prepare students as informed and reflective global citizens, aligned with the imperatives of social justice and educational equity.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of learning interventions that challenge the narrative of American exceptionalism on preservice teachers' understanding and teaching practices. This includes developing and testing specific pedagogical strategies for effectively conveying difficult history and challenging deeply ingrained narratives of national identity. Additionally, research could focus on understanding how to equip students with the appropriate and necessary tools to approach new perspectives on American exceptionalism effectively, particularly in the face of potential political backlash.

As the world's most significant military and financial power, the question of what constitutes critical global civic education for American students is paramount. Providing a space for students to critically examine issues such as immigration, U.S. military, political and economic presence overseas—particularly in Asia—can be instrumental in fostering critical consciousness. Cultivating this awareness is not merely an academic endeavor but a civic duty, ensuring that future generations can contribute to a more equitable and conscientious global community. Integrating such content into educational programs is a vital step toward nurturing informed global citizens that transcends the limited perspective of neoliberalism and nationalism and engages with the profound implications of historical and present-day actions.

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