

**Re-Righting History: A Phenomenological Study Addressing Teaching an Amended  
Version of American History**

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## **Abstract**

. The problem that this phenomenological research addressed was the lack of interpretative research centered on educators' lived experiences of being required to navigate state-mandated curricular expectations related to slavery and its historical legacy (Dallman, 2024). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine how educators interpret their professional accountability, ethical responsibilities, and instructional decision-making within the context of the legally imposed curricular mandates (Moffa, 2022). My research topic highlighted the lived experiences of educators regarding the implemented mandates surrounding changing the narrative of American history as it relates to enslaved individuals and the subsequent mistreatment of their descendants. Particularly, the bans and restrictions that are being placed on teaching American history. Eight participants were purposively selected for this research. For the research, participants were given a questionnaire and also took part in an interview. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed in conjunction with NVivo software to analyze the data. Themes indicated that educators were only vaguely familiar with the bans and legislation; they all expressed their personal feelings and concerns for students. Other themes pertained to curriculum content factors, the impact of the changed narrative, and the training and professional development required to implement it. This study's findings demonstrated that, despite educators' disagreement with legal mandates, many feel they are not as familiar with their state's regulations as they would like to be. Recommendations and contributions for practice for future research include examining the long-term impact of amended curricula on student knowledge, social attitudes, and civic engagement of American history.

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## Section 1: Foundation

Education reform is an ever-evolving process that relies on educators to implement changes at the classroom level. Educators learn about the necessary federal and state-mandated changes through professional development and are required to demonstrate the newly obtained principles and skills (National School Board Association, 2023). Recently, there has been a restructuring of how American history is defined. Some states have initiated efforts to limit what can be taught in state-funded public schools and universities. According to the World Population Review, there are currently 44 states in the United States, and nine have proposals or proposals in process that restrict the teaching of the historically racist past of America (World Population Review, 2024). In an effort to restructure the narrative of American history, some states have opted to restrict how it is taught, altering the traditional account.

In 2022, the state of Florida faced a lawsuit from a group of higher education students and educators who were challenging House Bill 7, Florida's Individual Freedom Act, also known as the Stop 'W.O.K.E.' Act (*Stop Wrongs Against Our Kids and Employees*). It is a bill that restricts educators and students in higher education classrooms from learning about or discussing issues related to race and gender. Bills such as this one have been adopted, and in some cases have been enacted, by several states to censor conversations about racism by labeling the topic of racism as harmful or divisive (Benson, 2022). Failure to comply with the bills has resulted in consequences such as budget cuts or loss of credentials. Governor DeSantis (FL) has appointed conservatives to campus leadership positions in his efforts to revamp undergraduate curricula in Florida colleges. Governmental control at this level might imply that the government is seeking to indoctrinate citizens to think in a particular way, which, incidentally, is the same claim the government makes about the teachings of critical race theory (Haynes, 2023). Unlike private

colleges and universities, state-funded institutions are required to comply with state guidelines and regulations (Department of Education Accreditation Reform). In March 2024, the 11<sup>th</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled the Individual Freedom Act as a violation of the First Amendment. A similar situation occurred in Arizona in 2017. *Gonzalez v. Douglas* was a case involving two curricular states that banned ethnic studies, which was found to be unconstitutional due to a violation of Free Speech (*Gonzalez v. Douglas*, 2017).

In a previous study on state efforts to change the narrative on what can be taught in public schools, Gloria Ladson-Billings identified schools as utilizing curriculum, instruction, testing, and classroom management as structural elements to perpetuate educational injustice (Ladson-Billings, 2021). School curricula can be viewed as social funding sites for racism. The information and experiences students are exposed to in school settings can reinforce racial ideology (Postel, 2022). When states place limitations on what can be taught in classrooms, they add to the perception of how racial inequality is established and maintained (Ladson-Billings, 2021). These methods are a part of the structural and institutional racism being removed from curricula.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem that this phenomenological research addressed was the lack of interpretative research centered on educators' lived experiences of being required to navigate state-mandated curricular expectations related to slavery and its historical legacy (Dallman, 2024). There is limited empirical research on how educators can make sense of their roles, responsibilities, and accountability in the current context. Historical information is being misrepresented in how it is taught in public schools (Salzman, 2022). It appears that there are no existing educational statutes preventing the teaching of false information (Souma, 2024). Future generations of

students will be impacted by the misinformation being taught to them. The effects of slavery still affect Americans in the current day (Woods et al., 2022). There were legal structures put in place after slavery that served as a means of oppression against marginalized individuals (Rochester, 2023). Those structures limited numerous opportunities, including employment, education, healthcare, and the accumulation of generational wealth for the descendants of enslaved individuals (Darity et al., 2024). Without a proper understanding of the history surrounding the inequality that led to marginalization and oppression among descendants of enslaved people, America could return to a similar situation (Samuels et al., 2023).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine how educators interpret their professional accountability, ethical responsibilities, and instructional decision-making within the context of the legally imposed curricular mandates (Moffa, 2022). This research was selected because it offers the opportunity to clarify straightforward questions from the perspective of educators who are legally required to teach misinformation (Morgan, 2022). States hold the right to regulate educational curricula, and under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, established in 1965, which forbids a national curriculum, the federal government may not extend any authority over the education process within states (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965). This study aimed to investigate educators' perspectives on being legally mandated to teach an intentionally amended version of history. The target population for this study consisted of educators from various states, selected through purposive sampling. Eight educators were recruited (regardless of race, gender, or political or religious affiliation). They were selected to share their lived experiences. Initially, a dialogue was initiated

to discuss the restructuring of educational practices and the misrepresentation of American history, laying the groundwork for the research data collection and data analysis.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative research was guided by two research questions that inquire into educational practices within the education system.

#### ***RQ1***

How do educators perceive their professional accountability when teaching state-mandated, amended narratives of American history related to slavery and the subsequent mistreatment of descendants?

#### ***RQ2***

How do educators interpret and experience state legal mandates that require the incorporation of amended narratives of American history related to slavery and the subsequent mistreatment of descendants into their curriculum?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical race theory, as proposed by Derrick Bell, Jr., Kimberle Crenshaw, and other legal scholars in 1989, served as the framework for this research. It served as a lens, offering clarity into the systemic process of changing the narrative of American history. Critical Race Theory addresses past and present power structures in America that are centered on oppression and inequality. Descriptive codes explained what the data were about, and interpretive codes offered a societal perspective on the research, examining how the need arose. This method was also intended to strengthen the research by realigning it with the epistemological foundation of the applied discipline in which it is being used (Hennick et al., 2020).

To establish background information on the laws and legislation governing the education structure in America, an overview of governmental programs was provided to outline and identify the origins of present laws and legislation, as well as to provide context for the current situation. Programs such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 were established to provide equal access to education without federal government interference. Its purpose was to implement the civil rights provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, providing equal educational opportunities for low-income, underserved minorities (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965). The Higher Education Act of 1965 restricted federal governmental control over institutions of higher education (Higher Education Act of 1965). Those legal measures laid the groundwork and have since been amended, resulting in the current situation that ultimately enabled the spread of misinformation. Information from these documents were evaluated to offer insight into the laws and legislation that retain authority to place limitations and restrictions on education.

This current urgency to change the narrative of American history and discredit critical race theory can be likened to an epiphany as to the reality of America's racist past and actually going through the process of changing documented history instead of making excuses. Critical race theory was a motivating factor in the amending of what can be taught about American history. Critical race theory is a theory developed by a group of civil rights activists at the end of the civil rights era. It highlighted the methods used in America to deny opportunities to minorities, infringe upon basic human and civil rights, and justify ill-treatment toward people of color through the establishment of laws, social norms, and customs. American society is structured to promote inequality (Ladson-Billings, 2022). This is the same inequality behind the changing of the African American narrative in public school curricula. However, denying the

truth about America's history and punishing individuals who refuse to be silenced is a violation of free speech (Salzman, 2022). In part, some of the unfavorable work conditions faced by teachers are a result of racialized hiring and training practices that promote teaching from the perspective of a white-dominated society (Young et al., 2023). Furthermore, critical race theory serves as an explanation of the oppressive social systems that support inequality in America, which reinforces the controversial nature of allowing it as an option for teaching American history (Young et al., 2023).

There are four tenets of critical race theory that are at the center of the controversy. The first claims that race is a social construct used to categorize people (Ladson-Billings, 2021). The second tenet states that racism is perpetuated by society through social processes that can be institutional, personal, or internalized (Ladson-Billings, 2021). The third tenet claims that racism is embedded in America's institutional and social systems (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Inequalities with income, education, healthcare, and housing demonstrate a racist infrastructure. The fourth tenet is intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2019). Intersectionality, a theory created by Kimberle Crenshaw that addresses how systems of oppression overlap to create experiences for individuals with multiple identity categories, such as being African American and female (Crenshaw, 2019). Other ethnic minorities may experience similar occurrences of racism as it relates to individual subcultures, such as Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, or people of Middle Eastern descent.

Critical race theory was never intended to be a part of the elementary or secondary school curriculum. Those grades are for learning practical applications and the fundamentals of education (Ladson-Billings, 2022). Critical race theory has always been intended to be used within a higher education setting. Concerns about using divisive concepts and indoctrinating a negative train of thought are stated as motivating factors for placing limitations on the use of

critical race theory in higher education (Morgan, 2022). However, those restrictions limit the educational process. These imposed limitations and restrictions on academic freedoms violate the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States (14<sup>th</sup> Amendment). Removing critical race theory from state-funded public schools is a symptom of a much larger problem. There is concern that critical race theory leads to more activism as opposed to resolution (Haynes, 2023). Instead of solving race-related problems, it keeps the issue of race in the consciousness of the American people (Postel, 2022). Changing the narrative to deny the truth about American history and placing punishments and limitations on individuals who refuse to be silenced is a violation of free speech (Salzman, 2022).

Critical race theory examines how social institutions in America have established structural laws, policies, procedures, and other rules that differentiate based on race (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Educators have used critical race theory to examine the impact of racism within American educational policies and practices, such as instruction, curriculum and student development, and administrative processes (Young et al., 2023). Within higher education, the tenets of critical race theory focus on colorblindness, selective admissions policies, and campus race relations (Young et al., 2023). These laws and policies that should otherwise apply to all Americans are sometimes more lenient to some and overly enforced against others. They are a part of an unfair system that limits opportunities for people of color (Crenshaw, 2019). Defining these occurrences and giving them a name inspires the need to deny the truth and relevance of racism. Changing the narrative about slavery and classifying it as an international apprenticeship opportunity is a much more optimistic perspective than the truth (Haynes, 2023).

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

### ***1<sup>st</sup> Amendment***

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution restricts Congress from imposing laws that prohibit freedom of religion or religious practices, freedom of speech, assembly, the press, and the right to petition the Government for a due process of grievances

### ***10<sup>th</sup> Amendment***

The Tenth Amendment of the United States Constitution delegates the regulation of educational policy and reform to the state and local levels

### ***14<sup>th</sup> Amendment***

The Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States restricts the rights of states to limit or alter the rights and immunity of citizens of the United States. This extends to not depriving US citizens of life, liberty, or property without due process of the law and equal protection under the law of citizens within its jurisdiction

### ***Accreditors***

Accreditors are independent organizations that make sure academic institutions meet standards and criteria, such as qualified instructors, support services for students, and proper curriculum

### ***Critical Legal Theory***

Critical legal theory is the belief that law is biased and designed to best serve the interests of those who create it. This theory suggests that biases sometimes lead to oppressive outcomes in certain social issues

### ***Divisive Concepts***

Divisive concepts refer to executive orders and laws that place bans and restrictions on what can be taught in schools and places of employment about U.S. history, race, gender, and sexuality

### ***History***

History is a chronological record of past events. A written record of important events and their causes

### ***Intersectionality***

Intersectionality is the overlapping correlation of class, race, and gender that comprise the human condition. As it relates to Critical Race Theory, it is a means of categorizing how systems of oppression overlap among people with multiple identities

### ***Stop W.O.K.E.***

The Florida Individual Freedom Act, or Stop W.O.K.E., is a law in the state of Florida (CB/HB 7) that regulates the content of instruction and training in schools and the workplace

### ***Title VI.***

Title VI states that no one in the United States shall be excluded from participation, denied benefits, or discriminated against in any activity that receives Federal funding based on race, color, or national origin

### **Review of Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine how educators interpret their professional accountability, ethical responsibilities, and instructional decision-making within the context of the legally imposed curricular mandates (Moffa, 2022). The resurgence of critical race theory in America's consciousness has necessitated a more proactive

approach to changing the narrative of American history. Misrepresented narratives are replacing factual information about slavery in America, systemic racism, and critical race theory in spite of documented proof of its existence. This restructuring has been deemed a violation of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, as it limits free speech and violates other constitutional rights (Griffen, 2022). There is a likelihood that African American interests are not being taken into account due to a lack of representation by African Americans (National School Board Association, 2023). This lack of representation is a point of interest, as it may be intentional rather than a result of a lack of interest among African American people (Haynes, 2023). The representation of African American people, or the lack thereof, within the decision-making structure of school leadership at the local level, such as school boards, warrants investigation.

The literature reviewed in this section situated the present study within a broader scholarly conversation concerning the role of law, legislation, and educational governance in shaping the teaching of American history. Central to this body of research is the examination of how school boards and boards of trustees develop policies and how these policies are subsequently translated into enforceable laws that influence curriculum design and instructional practice. Scholars emphasized that these governance structures are not neutral; rather, they are deeply embedded within historical, political, and social contexts that shape which knowledge is legitimized and which narratives are marginalized. Understanding this policy-to-law pipeline was therefore essential for analyzing how amended or contested narratives of American history were either advanced or constrained within public education systems.

Recent scholarship highlights the urgency of addressing African American educational achievement within this policy context. Whiting and Nyberg (2024) argued that systemic forces

embedded in legal and institutional structures continue to deny African Americans full access to rights and civil liberties, with direct consequences for educational outcomes. Their work positioned achievement disparities not as individual or cultural failures, but as the result of historically entrenched systems that shape both opportunity and knowledge production. This framing reinforced the importance of examining how historical narratives were constructed and taught, as these narratives influence students' identity formation, civic understanding, and academic engagement.

Building on this perspective, Pernell (2024) contends that contemporary efforts to alter or sanitize historical narratives function as a covert continuation of slave-era mind control strategies, designed to obscure oppression and maintain dominant power structures. This argument is echoed in the work of Young et al. (2024), who examined the application of Critical Race Theory in educational research and demonstrated how resistance to CRT often reflects broader anxieties about confronting systemic racism within American institutions. Collectively, these studies suggested that legislative and policy efforts to restrict or reshape historical narratives were not merely curricular debates but mechanisms for preserving racial hierarchies. The literature supported the need for critical, theory-driven analyses of educational law and policy to understand how they shape the teaching of American history and, ultimately, the educational experiences of marginalized students.

The sources informing this literature review were obtained through systematic searches conducted using the National University Library and established academic databases, including ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and SAGE Journals. These databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed and current scholarly literature, thereby facilitating efficient access to relevant research that would otherwise require substantially more time to

locate. Keyword-based search strategies were employed to identify pertinent studies and legal analyses. Frequently used search terms included *critical race theory bans*, *educational rights*, *civil rights*, *African American history*, *American history*, *Title VI*, *First Amendment rights*, *Fourteenth Amendment rights*, *Department of Education Office of Civil Rights*, *Higher Education Act*, *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, *Individual Freedom Act*, *African American History Task Force*, and *accreditation*. To ensure scholarly rigor and relevance, the search was limited to full-text, peer-reviewed sources published between 2021 and 2025. However, given the legal and historical nature of the topic, selected legal documents and foundational sources published outside of this timeframe were also included when necessary to support contextual and statutory analysis.

### **Educational Climate**

The educational climate in the United States has undergone a profound transformation, largely shaped by shifting political ideologies, state legislation, and evolving interpretations of American history (Racelis et al., 2024). The literature consistently demonstrates that state-level policy has become a dominant force in restructuring historical narratives and regulating curricular content, particularly within the social sciences (Gearheart, 2024). These changes occurred amid broader national debates about the role of federal oversight in education, including persistent efforts to weaken or dismantle the U.S. Department of Education and increasing state-level micromanagement of instructional content (Willever, 2022).

Education policy reform in the United States has historically mirrored the ideological priorities of presidential administrations (Willever, 2022). For example, the Obama administration emphasized civil rights enforcement in education, reinforcing race-conscious approaches aimed at addressing historical inequities. In contrast, the Trump administration

actively pursued the privatization of public education and promoted race-evasive legal frameworks, opposing race-conscious policies in education and law. However, race consciousness in American education extends beyond policy rhetoric and classroom instruction; it permeates institutional structures and the lived experiences of education professionals. Siegel-Hawley et al. (2023) highlighted this reality through a Critical Race Theory–informed study of racially marginalized staff at Florida State University. Participants reported experiences of discrimination, bias, ridicule, violence, and devaluation, while simultaneously demonstrating limited awareness of institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies (Lovette, 2024). These findings suggest that DEI policies alone are insufficient without transparency, communication, and meaningful institutional accountability.

Historically, federal involvement in education and civil rights predates modern administrations, tracing back to the Reconstruction era (Young et al., 2023). Federal interventions contributed to significant progress, including desegregation and expanded educational access for historically marginalized groups (Gearheart, 2024). Yet this progress has consistently been met with resistance. The literature documents a recurring political shift toward race-evasiveness, a framework that obscures structural inequities by making discrimination more difficult to identify and prove (Bissell, 2023). These cyclical shifts often coincide with changes in presidential leadership, reinforcing the instability of civil rights protections in education (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2023).

Civics education played a critical role in this sociopolitical context, equipping students with an understanding of legislative processes, policymaking, and democratic participation. Carlo (2024) argues that contemporary civics education legislation is increasingly framed as serving the common good, while in practice, it institutionalizes marginalization, restricts rights,

and limits freedoms of specific populations. Historical skepticism toward standardized assessments, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), underscores long-standing concerns about federal overreach and the imposition of a national curriculum. More recent NAEP data, collected every four years at the eighth-grade level, reveal persistent disparities in civics education opportunities for students of color, attributable to lower-quality instruction, reduced access, and diminished civic knowledge (Carlo, 2024). These inequities were particularly concerning given that civics education shapes students' understanding of societal norms, governance, and their roles within a democratic society.

The sociopolitical restructuring of education has also intensified scrutiny of curriculum design and implementation at the state level (Nwokocha, 2024). States exert significant authority over both formal and informal curricula (Willever, 2022). Formal curricula are designed and influenced by internal and external stakeholders, while informal curricula reflect what educators and communities deem relevant or permissible (Weiler et al., 2024). However, educators, particularly at the middle level, report feeling constrained by approved curricula, limiting their ability to address complex historical realities. Research by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2025) revealed that numerous widely used middle school history textbooks inadequately address slavery and the lived experiences of enslaved people, reinforcing curricular omissions that distort historical understanding.

The middle school years represent a critical developmental and educational juncture, as civics and history instruction are formally introduced and expanded (Weiler et al., 2024). The Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) emphasized the long-term significance of middle-level curricula, noting that early exposure to incomplete or politicized historical narratives can shape students' academic trajectories and civic identities well

into adulthood. It is within this context that political polarization and legislative intervention exert disproportionate influence over what students are permitted to learn about the nation's history and governance (Weiler et al., 2024).

In response to curricular gaps and increasing restrictions on historical instruction, Social emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a prominent educational framework. SEL focuses on identity development, relationship building, goal setting, and emotional regulation (White, 2024). While SEL provides students with essential life skills, the literature suggests that its expansion may also function as a substitute for critical engagement with historical and systemic injustices (White, 2024). Rather than confronting the historical roots of social inequities, SEL may redirect attention toward individual coping strategies, thereby leaving structural issues unexamined.

This tension is particularly evident in legislative actions such as Florida's Individual Freedom Act (House Bill 7), which mandates Comprehensive Health Education while replacing traditional SEL frameworks aligned with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Goggins-Brown, 2024). Although CASEL-based instruction emphasized healthy identity development, the new policy lacks clarity regarding implementation and oversight. Scholars argued that altering or minimizing instruction related to African American history—particularly slavery and post-emancipation mistreatment—had direct implications for the identity formation of African American students and descendants of enslaved peoples (Goggins-Brown, 2024).

The reach of restrictive legislation extends beyond social science classrooms, affecting educators across disciplines. Florida Educational Equity (2023) reported widespread concern among educators about unintentionally causing student discomfort or violating vague statutory

language. This climate of uncertainty had fostered self-censorship, with educators carefully monitoring language and instructional choices to avoid legal repercussions. Catena et al. (2024) document how English educators and teacher candidates had responded to these challenges by collaboratively redesigning courses to maintain culturally responsive and justice-oriented teaching practices. By aligning conceptual foundations, integrating inclusive materials, and sharing pedagogical strategies, these educators demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the face of legislative constraints.

Collectively, the literature revealed a complex interplay between education policy, race consciousness, curriculum control, and educator agency. State legislation has emerged as a powerful mechanism for reshaping historical narratives and regulating educational discourse, often under the guise of neutrality or unity. These policies not only influence what students learn but also shape educator practices, institutional cultures, and student identity development (White, 2024). The synthesis of existing research underscores the need for continued examination of how legislative trends affect equity, inclusion, and democratic education in the United States.

### **Censorship in US History**

Recent legislative efforts to regulate educational content in the United States reveal a growing tension between state authority and academic freedom, particularly as it relates to race, history, and identity (Willever, 2022). The Florida Individual Freedom Act (HB7), commonly referred to as the Stop W.O.K.E. Act, exemplifies this trend by imposing restrictions on how educators may address race, gender, and historical inequities in classrooms. Proponents frame the legislation as a safeguard against compelled guilt or ideological indoctrination, emphasizing principles of individual freedom that absolve students from responsibility for historical injustices committed by others of the same race or gender (Mattox et al., 2023). However, critics argue that

such framing obscures the broader implications of the act, namely, the curtailment of educators' ability to engage students in critical analysis of systemic inequality (Ramirez, 2023).

A central controversy surrounding HB7 is its explicit rejection of critical race theory (CRT). Although CRT was never designed as a K–12 instructional framework (Ladson-Billings, 2023), its theoretical foundations have become politically synonymous with any pedagogical approach that interrogates racism as systemic rather than individual. Because public colleges and universities operate under state authority, HB7's reach extends to higher education, resulting in curricular constraints and the denial of courses such as Advanced Placement African American Studies in Florida's public institutions. This expansion of legislative oversight into higher education raised significant concerns regarding academic freedom and the autonomy of professional educators, particularly when state mandates supersede disciplinary expertise (Bissell, 2023).

The broader movement to restrict educational content extends beyond CRT to include book bans and curricular limitations in schools, libraries, and even prisons. Johns (2024) characterized these efforts as a modern-day anti-literacy campaign, drawing parallels to historical slave codes that criminalized the education of enslaved Africans. Such policies disproportionately affect marginalized populations by limiting access to historical narratives that contextualize racial oppression and resistance (MacQuarrie-Tomey, 2024). Teachers and librarians face professional risk under these regimes, as violations, often defined ambiguously, can result in reprimands, credential loss, or termination (Bissell, 2023). This climate of surveillance and fear has contributed to a chilling effect in classrooms, where educators may self-censor to avoid punitive consequences (Nwokocha, 2024).

Empirical research further demonstrates the significance of instructional framing in shaping student understanding (MacQuarrie-Tomey, 2024). Studies involving semi-structured interviews with students taught by different history teachers reveal that instructional emphasis strongly influences what students identify as meaningful or significant content (Weiler et al., 2024). Despite variations in teaching style, students consistently internalized their instructors' perspectives, underscoring educators' power to shape historical interpretation. These findings challenge claims that exposure to critical perspectives inherently indoctrinates students; instead, they suggest that all historical instruction, selective or comprehensive, inevitably reflects particular values and priorities (Weiler et al., 2024).

Opposition to CRT and related pedagogies were frequently justified by concerns that they foster division or social fragmentation. Gearheart (2024) notes that critics often portray CRT as inherently divisive, arguing that it encourages resentment or collective blame. This perception has fueled legislation that promotes a sanitized or selective narrative of American history, emphasizing unity and progress while minimizing systemic injustice. Yet scholars argued that such approaches risk historical distortion by privileging comfort over accuracy. In this sense, restrictions on CRT function less as neutral safeguards and more as mechanisms for controlling historical memory.

State-level variation further illustrates the politicized nature of curriculum decisions. Souma (2024) identified Virginia as an outlier, noting its comparatively robust integration of African American history into state standards without imposing bans or restrictions. Although no federal mandates require the teaching of history, states bear responsibility for ensuring curricular accuracy and inclusivity (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965). Virginia's movement toward a multicultural curriculum contrasts sharply with states that restrict

discussions of race, demonstrating that inclusive approaches were possible within existing governance structures. Importantly, research suggests that students benefit academically and socially when curricula reflect their identities and experiences, reinforcing the educational value of representation (Haynes, 2023).

Educators navigating these contested landscapes face a profound professional dilemma. On one hand, culturally responsive teaching frameworks encourage honest engagement with racism, sexism, and inequality (Racelis et al., 2024). On the other hand, vague and punitive legislative mandates constrain such engagement, placing educators at risk for fulfilling best practices in teaching. Racelis et al. (2024) further suggested

that political exploitation may be the motivating factor behind these policies, as education becomes a battleground for ideological influence. This tension was particularly consequential given that classrooms remain one of the few spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds regularly engage in dialogue across differences.

In response to these developments, major academic and professional organizations, including the American Association of University Professors and the American Historical Association, have issued collective statements opposing educational censorship. These organizations emphasized that political mandates should not replace professional judgment nor undermine students' capacity to think critically about complex social issues (Racelis et al., 2024). Such opposition highlights a growing consensus within the academic community that legislative overreach threatens the foundational purposes of education in a democratic society.

The controversy surrounding the 1619 Project further illustrates the stakes of historical reinterpretation. Developed to address gaps in traditional narratives of American history, the project centers the experiences of enslaved Africans and their descendants, challenging

celebratory accounts that marginalize the realities of oppression and exploitation (Rochester, 2023). According to Rochester, the project is ideologically driven and aligned with CRT, leading many states to reject its inclusion in curricula. Yet its existence underscores the inherently political nature of historical storytelling and raises critical questions about who has the authority to define objective history. By foregrounding African American contributions and suffering, the 1619 Project exposes the racial and political undercurrents shaping curricular decisions.

Collectively, the literature reveals a pattern of increasing state intervention in education that prioritizes ideological conformity over historical complexity. Legislative efforts such as HB7, book bans, and restrictions on CRT reflect broader struggles over national identity, memory, and power. While advocates frame these measures as protective, scholars consistently identify their disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, educators, and students' access to a comprehensive historical understanding. The synthesis of this literature suggests that restricting narratives does not eliminate division; rather, it risks perpetuating ignorance, reinforcing inequity, and undermining the democratic mission of education.

### **The Changing Narrative of Race in America**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provided a foundational framework for understanding contemporary restrictions on academic freedom by situating education within broader systems of racial power. CRT asserts that racism is not aberrational but ordinary, deeply embedded in legal, political, and educational institutions (Delgado & Stefancic). From this perspective, recent legislative efforts to restrict race-conscious education were not isolated policy decisions but predictable responses to challenges against racial hierarchy. The nearly 600 initiatives introduced between 2021 and 2022 to limit instruction on race and systemic racism reflect what CRT

scholars identify as interest convergence, where progress toward racial equity is tolerated only insofar as it aligns with dominant political and economic interests (Nwokocha, 2024).

The reframing of academic freedom as conditional further illustrates CRT's emphasis on power and control over knowledge production. By labeling CRT, DEI, and related frameworks as woke and therefore divisive or indoctrinating, policymakers delegitimize counter-hegemonic knowledge while preserving dominant racial narratives. CRT scholarship emphasizes that such discursive strategies function to maintain whiteness as normative by defining what constitutes acceptable inquiry (Darity et al., 2024). Thus, restrictions on academic freedom operate not merely as educational policy but as mechanisms of racial governance.

One of CRT's central methodological tools is counter storytelling, which challenges dominant narratives that marginalize the experiences of people of color. The literature demonstrated that legislative attacks on CRT are fundamentally attacks on counter-narratives that expose the structural nature of racism. Briscoe (2024) illustrated how educators intentionally employed CRT-informed counter storytelling to disrupt media misrepresentations and racist narratives surrounding race-conscious education. These counter stories served not only as pedagogical tools but also as acts of resistance against epistemic exclusion.

CRT asserts that dominant narratives often masquerade as neutral or objective while erasing racialized experiences. Media avoidance of explicitly naming CRT, coupled with its vilification, reinforces what CRT scholars identify as colorblind ideology: a refusal to acknowledge race while simultaneously preserving racial inequities (Samuels et al., 2023). By centering counter stories, educators resist this erasure and reaffirm CRT's insistence that experiential knowledge is a legitimate and necessary form of scholarship.

CRT challenges dominant claims of neutrality and unity by exposing how calls for social cohesion often function to silence marginalized voices. Woods (2022) argued that labeling CRT and discussions of systemic racism as divisive misidentifies the source of social conflict. From a CRT perspective, it is not the acknowledgment of racism that creates division but the persistence of unaddressed racial injustice. Legislative efforts to prohibit such discussions reflect what CRT scholars describe as the protection of dominant group comfort at the expense of truth and equity.

Higher education institutions occupy a critical position within this dynamic. CRT emphasizes the role of education as a site where hegemonic ideologies can either be reproduced or challenged. When institutions fail to protect academic freedom and student activism, they reinforce structural racism by limiting opportunities for critical consciousness. Thus, the silencing of race-conscious discourse represented not only an educational failure but a broader abdication of higher education's social responsibility (Young et al. 2023).

The reparations scholarship aligns closely with CRT's emphasis on historical context, structural analysis, and the material consequences of racism. Darity and Mullen's conceptualization of reparations as acknowledgment, redress, and closure foregrounds the necessity of confronting historical injustice as a prerequisite for equity (Darity et al., 2024). CRT scholars argued that without acknowledgment, claims of colorblindness function to preserve existing racial hierarchies.

This framework helped explain why reparations discourse is often excluded from educational curricula. By documenting how chattel slavery and legal racism produced intergenerational harm, reparations scholarship destabilizes dominant narratives of meritocracy and progress. The intentional removal of this content from American history education reflects what CRT identifies as narrative resistance, efforts by dominant groups to suppress knowledge

that could legitimize demands for structural change (Johns et al., 2023). Synthesizing this body of literature through a critical race theory lens revealed that contemporary restrictions on academic freedom were best understood as mechanisms for maintaining racial hierarchy by controlling historical narratives. Legislative bans, media misrepresentation, and rhetorical strategies converge to marginalize CRT and race-conscious education precisely because these frameworks expose the structural and enduring nature of racism.

CRT illuminates how education functions as a contested site of power, where struggles over curriculum reflect broader struggles over racial meaning and national identity. Florida's legislative actions exemplify how law operates not as a neutral arbiter but as a tool that can either challenge or reinforce racial domination. The suppression of CRT, African American studies, and reparations discourse ultimately represented an effort to foreclose critical examination of America's racial past and present. From a CRT standpoint, protecting academic freedom is not merely a matter of professional autonomy but a necessary condition for racial justice. Without the freedom to engage race-conscious frameworks, education risks reproducing the very inequities it claims to oppose. Accordingly, this literature underscored the urgency of safeguarding CRT-informed scholarship as an essential component of democratic education and social transformation.

### **Existing US Government Education Acts and Legislation**

Debates surrounding the teaching of American history, particularly as it relates to slavery, race, and the experiences of African Americans, have intensified in recent years (Gearheart, 2024). Not all government officials agree with efforts to reframe or expand historical narratives to include the systemic mistreatment of enslaved individuals and their descendants (Morgan, 2022). This disagreement was reflected in contemporary legislative actions that simultaneously

promote inclusive curricula while enabling restrictive interpretations at the state level (Young et al., 2023). A salient example is H.R. 703, introduced during the Biden Administration, which required institutions applying for certain Department of Education grants to incorporate Black history into American history and civics curricula. The bill mandated instruction on the historical experiences of people of African descent and the economic and political conditions preceding the abolition of slavery, while also encouraging the use of resources from the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Although H.R. 703 appears aligned with broader equity goals, its implementation has become intertwined with existing legislative frameworks that allowed states significant discretion over curriculum. This tension illustrated how federal initiatives intended to promote inclusion can be leveraged to constrain rather than expand historical interpretation (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2023). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, originally enacted as a civil rights measure under President Lyndon B. Johnson, serves as a foundational statute in this process. The ESEA was designed to improve educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged and underserved communities by providing funding for textbooks, libraries, scholarships, and special education programs. Crucially, it also established accountability mechanisms intended to ensure quality education for all students while limiting the federal government's role to regulation rather than direct control over curriculum (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965).

Scholars have noted that the current efforts to alter historical narratives are made possible by repurposing the structural foundations of civil rights legislation (Haynes, 2023). While these laws were designed to prevent discrimination and ensure access to education, they are now being used to justify conditions on funding that effectively dictate how and what history is taught

(Young et al., 2023). In this context, compliance with state-approved narratives has become a prerequisite for maintaining accreditation and access to federal funds (Postel, 2022). Institutions that resist these narratives risk losing credibility, despite the continued formal teaching of history.

This phenomenon raised critical ethical and legal questions. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, particularly Title VI, prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in federally funded programs. Historically, this legislation represented a necessary federal intervention to dismantle legalized segregation and discrimination in public education and public accommodations (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2023). However, contemporary interpretations appear to be diverging from this original intent. Current lawmakers and policymakers have sought to withhold or deny funding from institutions that do not comply with state-imposed bans or restrictions on how racial history is taught, effectively redefining civil rights protections in ways that may undermine their foundational purpose (Department of Education Office of Civil Rights).

The theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) provided a lens through which these developments can be understood. Originally developed to examine how legal and social systems perpetuate racial inequality, CRT emphasizes the role of historical context and systemic oppression in shaping contemporary disparities (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Critics of CRT argue that it redefines American history in divisive ways, while proponents contend that it offers necessary tools for understanding entrenched inequities. Within the current educational landscape, CRT is frequently positioned as central to debates about historical narrative, serving both as a justification for inclusive curricula and as a target for legislative bans.

Benson (2022) argues that while instruction on the Civil Rights Movement is widely accepted in public education, the historical events that necessitated such a movement are increasingly subject to regulation. This selective framing allows for the acknowledgment of progress without fully addressing the injustices that made reform necessary. Such practices risk sanitizing history and minimizing the lived experiences of African Americans, thereby undermining the educational value of historical instruction.

Under current law, states retain broad authority over curriculum decisions, including the establishment of minimum standards and instructional limitations (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965). Local school boards, composed of elected officials, play a pivotal role in translating community preferences into policy. According to the National School Boards Association (2023), school board members articulate constituent concerns through policies that are then advanced by legislators into formal bills. While this process is procedurally legitimate, it raises concerns when policies promote misleading or incomplete historical narratives (Salzman, 2022). Importantly, the construction of such policies does not inherently violate civil rights law, as historical information continues to be taught. However, scholars argue that deliberately misrepresenting documented history constitutes an ethical breach that reflects power imbalances and cultural dominance rather than educational integrity (Salzman, 2022). Participation in school board meetings and local governance remains one of the few avenues for contesting these changes, yet disparities in representation limit the effectiveness of such engagement (Racelis et al., 2024).

As of 2022, African Americans held approximately 3.7% of school board positions nationwide, a figure that highlights significant underrepresentation in local educational governance (National School Board Association, 2023). This lack of representation has

implications for curriculum decisions, particularly in states where governors actively endorse candidates aligned with restrictive educational policies. The literature suggests that increased representation might have altered or mitigated the trajectory of policies aimed at reshaping historical narratives, though the causes of underrepresentation remain underexplored.

Potential explanations range from political disengagement to systemic barriers embedded in qualification requirements and electoral processes (Samuels et al, 2023). While African Americans are not formally barred from participation, the structure of local governance may implicitly exclude individuals who lack access to resources, networks, or institutional support. Postel (2022) extended this analysis by arguing that contemporary educational debates reflect a segregation of reality, in which documented historical truths are separated from officially sanctioned narratives, echoing earlier forms of structural exclusion.

The Higher Education Act of 1965 further complicates the issue, particularly for colleges and universities. Like other Johnson-era initiatives, the Act expanded access to education by introducing federal grants and loans, while explicitly prohibiting federal interference in curriculum and academic governance (Higher Education Act of 1965). Nevertheless, states control the dispersal of federal funds, placing institutions of higher education at heightened risk of financial and accreditation consequences for non-compliance with state-mandated narratives (Department of Education Accreditation Reform). This dynamic underscores the paradox at the heart of contemporary education policy: while federal law seeks to ensure access and equity, state-level control over funding enables political influence over academic content. The cumulative effect was a system in which the structural protections of civil rights legislation remain intact in form but were increasingly hollowed out in practice (Pernell, 2024).

Despite the scope and significance of these developments, there was a notable absence of research addressing mechanisms for appealing or challenging state-level misuse of curricular authority. Existing federal programs are not structured to intervene in cases where states act within their legal rights yet undermine the spirit of civil rights protections (Salzman, 2022). Moreover, the intersection of representation, systemic racism, and educational governance warranted further investigation, particularly with respect to how local qualification requirements may function as exclusionary mechanisms (Pernell, 2024). In sum, the literature suggested that the changing narrative of American history was not the result of isolated policy decisions but rather the cumulative outcome of long-standing legislative structures, political dynamics, and representational inequities. Addressing this issue would require a careful balance between respecting state authority and safeguarding the integrity of documented history, as well as renewed attention to representation and accountability in educational leadership.

### **Existing Education Acts and Legislation in Florida to Limit the Narrative**

The governance of education in the United States is rooted in a complex interplay of federal mandates and state authority. Under the Tenth Amendment, states retain primary control over public education, including curricula, teacher qualifications, and institutional governance (Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2023). Civil rights legislation, such as the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, established legal foundations for nondiscrimination and equal access to educational opportunities, reflecting centuries-long struggles to dismantle structural barriers faced by African Americans and other marginalized groups (Civil Rights Act of 1964). However, scholars noted that these foundational civil rights protections had repeatedly been contested and reinterpreted through political and legal mechanisms that shift the balance of authority and shape educational content and practice (Benson, 2022).

Academic literature on state curricular interventions underscores that debates about educational content were not new; however, the recent wave of laws restricting race-related instruction reflects a transformation in how educational authority is exercised in politically charged contexts (Postel, 2022). These interventions illustrated how policy actors reconfigured the meaning of equal access and academic freedom to align with dominant political ideologies at the expense of historically rooted civil rights commitments (Whiting, 2024).

Florida's *Individual Freedom Act*, popularly known as the Stop W.O.K.E. Act, enacted in 2022, exemplified this shift by imposing legislative restrictions on how race and racism may be taught in educational settings and workplaces. Under the Act, instructional content that discusses systemic inequality, privilege, or unconscious bias must be reviewed for compliance, a requirement that extends to African American history content in K–12 and higher education contexts. Critics argue that the law's vagueness and breadth create a chilling effect on educators' willingness to engage substantively with historically grounded analyses of race, marginalization, and power (NAACP LDF; ACLU press releases). This form of oversight was widely critiqued as antithetical to academic freedom, defined as the institutional and individual liberty of educators to teach and research without undue external interference.

Peer-reviewed research situates such legislation within a broader national pattern of anti-CRT measures that had resulted in heightened uncertainty and self-censorship among faculty. For example, Briscoe and Jones (2024) found that anti-CRT laws generated fear and constraints among educators, complicating their ability to teach about structural inequities and race, which, in turn, undermined pedagogical practices oriented toward critical inquiry and transformative learning. Their study, based on faculty experiences across multiple states, highlighted how

political backlash against CRT functioned as both symbolic and material pressure on academic autonomy.

Academic freedom scholars emphasized that laws like the Stop W.O.K.E. Act threaten the core mission of higher education by vesting curricular decisions in political authorities rather than disciplinary experts. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) had framed such laws as sabotaging higher education because they substitute scholarly judgment with legislative mandates, thereby chilling free inquiry and contravening established norms of faculty autonomy in research and instruction. The *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom* noted that Florida's law, by excluding certain race-based concepts from permissible discourse, undermines the very principles that academic freedom was designed to protect. Academic freedom is not merely a professional privilege but a democratic value that ensures ideas can be contested and refined in open inquiry rather than censored by political authority.

Building upon the Stop W.O.K.E. Act, Florida's *House Bill 999/Senate Bill 266 (2023)* further alters the governance of state-funded universities. This legislation bans funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in general education, prohibits mandatory diversity and critical theory content in hiring or promotion practices, and mandates curricular emphasis on Western civilization and civic literacy rather than race-centered frameworks. Peer-reviewed policy analyses of comparable legislation highlight that such laws frequently frame DEI and CRT as ideological threats rather than legitimate scholarly frameworks, a rhetorical strategy that obscures their pedagogical value. Academic critics argued that this rhetoric leads to a whitewashed curriculum, reinforcing dominant historical narratives while marginalizing counter-narratives essential to a full understanding of history. For instance, Dollinger et al. (2024) found that anti-DEI and anti-CRT state policies have a chilling effect on

intellectual freedom, eroding students' opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives and diminishing pedagogical richness

The Florida Department of Education's African American History Task Force (AAHTF) was established to guide compliance with statutory curriculum requirements. Despite its ostensible mission to support the teaching of African American history, critical scholarship questions whether its composition and mandate serve more as a regulatory apparatus than an independent academic body. AAHTF's role in monitoring instructional materials and advising state leadership places it squarely within the state's surveillance mechanisms, raising concerns about the co-optation of historically grounded scholarship for political ends. This dynamic reflects what social scientists described as narrative control, the process by which state actors shape collective memory and public understanding of history by privileging certain interpretations over others.

The Stop W.O.K.E. Act and related measures have faced multiple constitutional challenges, particularly regarding First Amendment and academic freedom protections (Salzman, 2022). Federal courts have at times enforced higher education provisions, recognizing that restrictions on classroom instruction may contravene free speech principles (Postel, 2022). These legal battles echo with broader scholarly debates about whether academic freedom is constitutionally protected or primarily institutional convention, a question that remains contested in legal scholarship (Siegel-Hawley, 2023).

Peer-reviewed legal analyses of anti-CRT bans argue that such laws often fail to articulate a legitimate pedagogical concern and instead serve as ideological censorship (Whiting et al., 2024). Legal scholars contend that protecting academic freedom in higher education is necessary to uphold constitutional principles and maintain the integrity of scholarly inquiry

(Young et al., 2023). The literature underscores that while states have legitimate authority over educational policy, the aggressive regulation of curricular content related to race and history, as exemplified by Florida's Stop W.O.K.E. Act, HB 999/SB 266, and related task forces, poses significant challenges to academic freedom, constitutional rights, and the integrity of historical scholarship. Peer-reviewed studies converge in demonstrating that laws restricting critical engagement with race and systemic inequality undermine educational quality, constrain scholarly autonomy, and may perpetuate inequitable power dynamics contrary to the foundational aims of civil rights legislation and democratic education (Postel, 2022).

### **Ethical Assurances**

This study was conducted in strict adherence to ethical standards for research involving human participants and in alignment with the principles outlined in the Belmont Report. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from National University was obtained prior to the commencement of any research activities. Data collection began only after formal approval was granted. Participants were purposively selected, were 18 years of age or older, and engaged in surveys and questionnaires administered in person and via telephone. All prospective participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, the procedures involved, the anticipated time commitment, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were provided with clear information regarding the study's objectives and expectations and were required to provide written informed consent prior to participation. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was emphasized: participants were assured that no personally identifiable information would be included in the study, and the researcher's contact information was made available for questions or concerns.

Participants were informed that, while their responses would remain confidential, the researcher is a mandated reporter and is legally required to report any disclosures of child abuse or elder abuse. Participants were also given the opportunity to review their responses and make clarifications to ensure accuracy and comfort with the information provided. To minimize potential risks, the study design and procedures were carefully considered. Given the nature of the research, there was a potential for emotional discomfort related to historical, civil rights, or sociopolitical content. No questions directly asked, implied, or alluded to participants' religious or political affiliations. Only standard demographic information was collected. Participants were provided with resources to pursue additional information or support related to the study topic.

All collected data, including audio recordings and written materials, were securely stored on a labeled data storage device and maintained in accordance with IRB requirements for 3 years. After this retention period, all data will be securely destroyed. These measures ensured that the study maximized benefits while minimizing potential harm to participants. The selection of participants was guided by relevance to the research questions rather than convenience or vulnerability, ensuring equitable treatment and fair inclusion in the study. Participants were not coerced, and inclusion criteria were applied consistently to all prospective participants.

Consistent with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexivity to acknowledge and manage personal assumptions, experiences, and perspectives. As an African American female and as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother, the researcher recognized potential influences of positionality on data interpretation. Reflexive awareness supported professional discretion and ethical rigor throughout the study, ensuring that findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences and not influenced by the researcher's personal viewpoint. By integrating these procedures, this study upheld the

Belmont Report principles of Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Justice, ensuring the ethical treatment of all participants throughout the research process.

### **Summary**

Section 1 established the foundation for examining how American history is taught in K–12 education and the systemic factors influencing instructional practices. This study employed a qualitative methodology grounded in Thorne’s interpretive description to examine educators’ lived experiences and professional perspectives, acknowledging their central role in curriculum implementation and pedagogical decision-making. Participants were recruited from multiple U.S. states and were provided with detailed background information regarding state-level educational laws and legislative mandates. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent procedures, including voluntary participation and the right to withdraw without penalty. The section situated the research problem within a historical and legislative framework, noting that educational policies enacted more than fifty years ago have contributed to the institutionalization of historical narratives that may misrepresent or omit critical aspects of American history.

The literature review identified a sustained pattern of legislative influence over historical instruction, demonstrating the intersection of policy, pedagogy, and social representation. A significant and persistent gap identified in the literature was the underrepresentation of African American voices on local school boards, raising questions about whose perspectives are prioritized in educational governance and highlighting structural barriers to equitable representation. By integrating interpretive qualitative analysis with historical and legislative context, Section 1 directly aligned the research purpose with the identified problem. This study was framed as a critical examination of how systemic legislative frameworks and local

governance structures shape both the content of American history instruction and the degree of inclusivity in decision-making processes that determine that content.

## **Section 2: Methodology and Design**

The problem that this phenomenological research addressed was the lack of interpretative research centered on educators' lived experiences of being required to navigate state-mandated curricular expectations related to slavery and its historical legacy (Dallman, 2024). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine how educators interpret their professional accountability, ethical responsibilities, and instructional decision-making within the context of the legally imposed curricular mandates (Moffa, 2022). This section included the data collection process. The target population was identified from the representative population from which they were recruited. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Relevant research instruments, such as interview questions, the questionnaire, and the software used to organize and analyze data, are also discussed. This section also examined the procedures for data analysis, the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the research.

### **Design and Method**

This study utilized a qualitative methodology and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA); interviews and questionnaires served as data sources. It was selected because it allowed in-depth exploration of how individuals interpret and rationalize lived experiences within a contextual and professional setting. IPA aligned with the purpose of this research to interpret how educators understand their professional accountability and experiences teaching state-mandated amended narratives of American history. IPAs' focus on participant interpretation and researcher interpretation made it appropriate for addressing the study's research questions. Qualitative research embraces subjectivity as a source of richness in understanding how individuals perceive reality. Information from interviews and questionnaires was analyzed for themes and patterns to better establish the impact of legislative changes on the educational

process. The qualitative methodology was used to clarify educators' perceptions of being legally required to teach an amended version of American history (CB/HB 7, 2022). Qualitative methodology focuses on collecting and analyzing narrative data based on human experiences (Hennick et al., 2020). Qualitative research is based on participants' knowledge and experiences instead of measurable items that researchers can quantify (Berneauer, 2023). Interpretative phenomenological analysis does not require a strict theoretical framework, allowing for theoretical flexibility. This research was suitable because data collection and analysis can occur simultaneously. Data collection and analysis occurred iteratively, enabling emerging themes to form subsequent analysis (Thorne, 2016). This research method served as a means to gather preliminary information on a topic, which, in turn, provided data for future studies (Thorne, 2016). Data were collected through interviews and open-ended questionnaires to assess educators' perceptions of the impact of misinformation in teaching. The collected information was inductively analyzed to produce themes. This method was also effective in presenting the situation in a realistic context by describing the problem, explaining its significance, and validating the findings (Yadav, 2022). It required working with the original dataset and applying that information within the context of the new research (Surway-Stepney et al., 2023). This was beneficial to the research in multiple ways. It allowed for analytic expansion, retrospective interpretation, amplified sampling, cross-validation, and induction (Thorne, 2016).

Case study analysis and grounded theory were also considered as alternative qualitative designs. A case study was not selected because it would require extensive engagement across multiple data-collection trials, exceeding the current scope of resources for this research. Given the current time constraints placed on this research, multiple trials of data collection and analysis could not be afforded. Grounded theory was not selected because it focused on theory

development rather than lived experiences. The goal of this study was to gather educators' perspectives on the legal mandate requiring them to teach an amended version of history, rather than to justify the need to teach an amended version of history (CB/HB 7, 2022). The data from the interviews and questionnaires were then entered into a software program that organizes and analyzes the data, as well as identifies trends and patterns within the data.

### **Population and Sample**

The target population for this study consisted of middle school, high school, and postsecondary educators who teach American history or closely related subjects, including civics, African American history, and other history-based social studies courses. These educators were selected for their direct professional engagement with curriculum content affected by recent legislative mandates that restrict instruction on race, gender, and systemic inequality. Specifically, the population included educators subject to Florida House Bill 7 (2022), commonly referred to as the Stop WOKE Act, or similar legislative measures for their respective states (*NC, SC, GA, TN, & TX*). Eligibility criteria required participants to be currently employed at a middle school, high school, college, or university and actively teaching American history or a related subject area. Focusing on this population ensured that participants possessed firsthand experience navigating instructional, ethical, and professional challenges associated with legally mandated curriculum restrictions.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation, consistent with the idiographic focus of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of participants based on expertise and predetermined inclusion criteria relevant to the research question (Campbell et al., 2020). This approach emphasizes depth of understanding rather than

breadth, aligning with IPA's emphasis on rich, detailed exploration of individual lived experiences. The final sample consisted of eight educators recruited through social media, representing middle school, high school, and postsecondary instructional settings. This sample size aligns with methodological recommendations for IPA studies, which support small, homogeneous samples to facilitate in-depth, case-by-case analysis and nuanced interpretation. Participants were selected based on their current employment status, subject-area specialization, and direct exposure to legislative mandates restricting the teaching of race- and gender-related aspects of American history.

Sample size adequacy was determined by data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from additional data collection (Etikan et al., 2016). This purposive sample enabled an in-depth examination of educators lived experiences teaching under restrictive legislative frameworks and supported the study's aim of understanding how such mandates influence instructional practice and professional identity.

### **Materials and Instrumentation**

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire. Interviews and questionnaires were selected as instruments for this research for two-fold purposes. Interview and questionnaire questions were constructed based on research from similar studies and approved by the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The semi-structured interview inquired into how educators feel about teaching an amended version of American history as it relates to slavery and the subsequent mistreatment of their descendants after slavery (see Appendix C). This information was provided by educators who teach American history and related subjects. The questionnaire guided the data in a specific direction while giving the educators the opportunity to share their personal experiences (see

Appendix A). It was anticipated that the combined information would offer a better understanding of the participants' perceptions of being legally required to teach a revised version of American history.

The accompanying questionnaire was more generalized, focusing specifically on whether the educators view the legal mandate to teach a changed narrative of American history as ethical. Interview questions will align with the research questions. There were two interview options. In-person or telephone interviews were available. Telephone interviews required an electronic questionnaire. The telephone interview was conducted using a telephone application that allowed recording, such as the iPhone record feature. The questionnaire was aligned with the research questions and formulated using Qualtrics. There were two options for the questionnaire. The link was available electronically via email or by scanning a QR code with an in-person interview. These instruments received Institutional Review Board approval prior to recruitment or administration to participants. Data collected through interviews and questionnaires were used to establish how educators view being legally mandated to teach an amended version of American history. The collected information was entered directly into the Qualtrics database and categorized into themes based on patterns and recurring responses. Any additional information provided through dialogue during the process was also noted and included as part of that individual's perception/experience.

These IRB approved instruments were user-friendly and specific. The interview provided a baseline of the educator's perspective on teaching American history. This was also used to help in assessing the classroom management aspect of the questionnaire. The questionnaire asked specific questions with four corresponding options to choose from. Once the information was obtained, it was coded and sorted into themes in the Qualtrics database. Follow-up questions and

prompts were used to clarify participant' responses to their lived experiences, which are consistent with IPA procedures for phenomenological research.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

After receiving approval from the IRB, recruitment for participation was initiated. The individuals who chose to participate were screened for the inclusion criteria to proceed with the research. I had already completed the CITI training and proceeded to review institutional policies and consider the feasibility of the study. Purposive sampling was used to select educators to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was selected because it allowed participants with knowledge and experience specific to the topic to offer insight. The inclusion criterion for participants was being actively employed as a full-time educator, teaching American history or a related history subject in middle school, high school, or on the college level, and teaching history courses in which the revised version of history is being taught. After receiving approval from the IRB, participants were recruited through direct contact with educators. Recruitment information was posted on my private social media accounts, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. My contact information was included, along with recruitment information for individuals who are willing to participate. Each participant was presented with a consent form prior to participating in the study. Recruitment respondents were then contacted via email once National University approval was obtained.

The objective was to interact with the participants, gather insight into their classroom experience, and collect enough information to include in the research. Dates and times for the interview were based on the participant's availability. All documentation was electronically generated. The consent form, demographic survey, and questionnaire were emailed to participants who were unavailable for an in-person meeting. For individuals who choose to meet

in person, a QR code was available to access the documents. An electronic tablet was used to voice-record the interviews. The location of the in-person interview was determined based on the availability of the participant and lasted approximately 30 – 45 minutes each for the interview and questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed electronically, based on the participant's convenience, and automatically entered into Qualtrics. An explanation was offered regarding confidentiality and how the information will be stored. During this process of determining confidentiality and procedures, participants were reminded that participation is voluntary and that there will be no monetary or other compensation involved. Upon completion of the research, I provided the participants with a transcript of the interview for review for accuracy.

Data were analyzed with steps consistent with interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2021). I followed these steps: immersive reading of each transcript to gain familiarity with the data. Initial note-taking focusing on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual elements. Developed emergent themes from participant responses. With the use of NVivo, cross-case analysis helped identify patterns of shared and divergent interpretations were established. I looked for patterns from data provided by all participants. This process was repeated for each participant.

The development of superordinate themes that represent broad interpretative categories. Research question 1 generated three main themes and research question two generated three main themes. Throughout the research process, I maintained reflexive notes to document analytic interpretations to support transparency. Participants were reassured of confidentiality to encourage them to speak honestly and freely about their experiences. The use of purposive sampling added an element of authenticity, as participants were free to decline, meaning they genuinely participated of their own free will. Software such as NVivo or other similar software

was used to secure field notes, transcripts, and qualitative coding schemes. Data from the interviews and open-ended questionnaires were input into the software, which helped organize and analyze the data. This also helped identify patterns and trends in the data. I examined and became very familiar with the research data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and drafting a report on the collected data.

### **Assumptions**

It was assumed that participants possessed foundational knowledge of legislative mandates affecting curriculum, such as Florida House Bill 7 (2022) or comparable legislation. It was also assumed that participants would respond honestly and that varying levels of teaching experience would influence perspectives. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was assured. Purposive sampling led me to assume that participants were involved in the research because they were interested in the study and wanted to express their thoughts on educators being legally mandated to teach an amended version of American history as it relates to slavery and the subsequent mistreatment of their descendants. Given the study's participation criteria, it was also assumed that enough volunteers would come forward and be willing to participate. This was not necessarily the case. Several educators initially committed to participating in the research but later declined.

### **Limitations**

An anticipated limitation of this research was that the participants were vague in their responses. This was not the situation. The participants were quite open about their feelings regarding the issue of slavery and oppression, and the way the government is trying to control the narrative. Responses were thought out and intentional. Another limitation may have been the lack of an opposing opinion, which meant the research would not provide comparative data.

None of the participants supported the legal mandates. A third possible limitation could have been researcher bias. I was taught a broader version of American history as it relates to slavery and the subsequent mistreatment of slave descendants, and I felt that I would possibly have been at risk of making judgments based on upbringing and life experiences. A fourth limitation was the possible bias among participants regarding their views on being legally mandated to teach a revised version of American history and whether they view it as ethical. The targeted population of participants in this study may have been unwilling to participate. This could prospectively mean that some of the participants selected for this research will be biased.

To mitigate limitations, the interview portion of the research was structured around open-ended questions to allow participants to explain their answers. Responses to questions were based on perceptions of how the questions were being received. Participants could misinterpret the questions, leading them to mean something other than what was intended. Participants' personal biases were acknowledged from the individual's perspective, not the researchers'.

### **Delimitations**

The first delimitation for this research was that it would be limited to educators who teach American history or a related subject. A second limitation applied only to faculty teaching American history or related subjects at middle, high school, or college levels. State governments oversee higher education curricula through the Board of Governors (FDOE, 2024). The data needed to be collected from educators knowledgeable about the changes to curricula. Given the state's significant role in decision-making regarding bans and restrictions, gaining the perspective of educators most affected by the changes is important (Higher Education Act of 1965). The participants' responses were what this research sought. Educators who teach the courses specific to American history are the targeted participants.

Other delimitations of this research were educators from various states who were directly affected by the changes to school curricula. The focus was not only on educators at the college level but also on those who teach American history or related subjects in middle and high schools. An inquiry was made into how many years of teaching experience the educator has and how long it has been since the implementation of the curriculum change.

### **Summary**

Section 2 detailed the qualitative interpretative phenomenological methodology used to examine educators' experiences with legally mandated curriculum revisions related to slavery and systemic oppression. Purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires were used to collect data, which were analyzed using IPA and NVivo software. The methodology aligned with the study's purpose of understanding educators' perspectives while maintaining ethical and scholarly rigor consistent with National University EdD dissertation standards. This research was intended to examine educators' perspectives on being legally mandated to teach an amended version of documented American history. Purposive sampling was used as a means of identifying and selecting knowledgeable, qualified participants from whom to collect data. The research began following approval from the National University Institution Review Board. Participants were offered two options for the interview: in-person or via telephone. The interview was geared toward obtaining consensus among educators who are legally mandated to teach an amended version of American history. The questionnaire was available electronically through email or in person through a QR code. The questionnaire inquired as to whether educators perceive teaching a changed narrative of American history as ethical. The collected data were compiled, coded, and analyzed using software such as NVivo.

The software was used to organize the collected data through triangulation of interviews, questionnaires, and research data.

### **Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations**

The problem that this phenomenological research addressed was the lack of interpretative research centered on educators' lived experiences of being required to navigate state-mandated curricular expectations related to slavery and its historical legacy (Dallman, 2024). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine how educators interpret their professional accountability, ethical responsibilities, and instructional decision-making within the context of the legally imposed curricular mandates (Moffa, 2022). The interview protocol was intentionally constructed in alignment with the research problem statement, guiding research questions, and a comprehensive review of the literature. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and met specific criteria, including current professional engagement as educators teaching American history or closely related disciplines. Each participant completed a six-question questionnaire administered through the Qualtrics survey platform prior to participating in an audio-recorded interview consisting of nine semi-structured questions. Interview durations ranged from 9 minutes and 36 seconds to 41 minutes and 2 seconds, and interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via telephone to accommodate participant availability.

Several limitations affected this study. In the period following the election of the current President of the United States, substantial structural changes were initiated within the national education system, including proposals to dismantle the Department of Education. These changes resulted in immediate funding challenges for institutions of higher education and the revocation of credentials for some educators who did not meet newly established guidelines. As a result, many educators were hesitant to participate in the study, requiring adjustments to the recruitment strategy. Ensuring participant anonymity became increasingly difficult, as potential participants

expressed concern about potential professional repercussions. Another limitation was the limited diversity of perspectives, as some interview questions elicited similar responses across all participants. Additionally, as an African American educator, I acknowledged the potential influence of positionality and unconscious bias and took deliberate steps, such as reflective journaling, to ensure that data interpretation remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than my personal experiences.

Section 3 provides a detailed presentation of the research findings, including participant characteristics, data collection procedures, analytic processes, and the methodological strategies used to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and confirmability.

## **Findings**

The participants were all educators from diverse backgrounds, many of whom lived in different states and were at various stages of their careers. Each of the states represented has laws and legislation similar to Florida's House Bill 7, the Florida Individual Freedom Act. Participants were recruited nationwide via social media. Some of their responses were as varied as their location, with an underlying commonality.

Eight participants committed to this research. They are all educators of history or a related topic, although their backgrounds are varied. Of the eight participants, 4 are male, and 4 are female. Participant 1 is a female high school educator from Florida with 21 years of experience in the field of education. She is a 50-year-old Caucasian female with a master's degree in education. Participant 2 is a male college educator with more than 21 years of experience in education. He is an African American from South Carolina, over 50 years old, and has a master's degree in education. Participant 3 is a Caucasian female from Florida with over 5 years of experience as an middle school educator. She is 45 years old and has a bachelor's

degree. Participant 4 is a Caucasian female from Tennessee with 8 years of experience teaching middle school. She is 48 years old with a bachelor's degree. Participant 5 is an African American male from Texas with 12 years of experience as a college educator. He is 56 years old with a master's degree. Participant 6 is an African American male from New York with 17 years as a high school educator. He is 54 years old and has a master's degree. While New York does not have legislation restricting the teaching of American history as it relates to slavery and the subsequent mistreatment of their descendants, Participant 6 committed to participating in the research. Participant 7 is an African American female from North Carolina with 26 years of teaching middle school. She is 61 years of age with a doctoral degree. Participant 8 is a Caucasian female from Georgia with 4 years of educational experience. She is 36 years old, holds a master's degree, and is also pursuing a doctoral degree.

Of the eight participants who asserted it is unethical to change the narrative of American history as it relates to enslaved Africans and the subsequent mistreatment of their descendants, four of those participants were Caucasian. There was partial agreement as to whether it was beneficial to change the narrative of American history. Participant number 2, an established professor of African American studies, very eloquently described his perspective. He stated that "it depends on the changes" (P2). "The manner in which things are being conducted at this moment only adds to the ignorance of the people" (P2). There is also the issue of how information is being conveyed. For example, he suggested, "learn from the bad and build on the good" (P2). Only teaching the good aspects of anything cripples future generations when they find themselves in a situation where they have to deal with the bad. He also feels that it is the duty of those in the teaching field to go where people are on social media and at town halls to offer the truth about the misinformation being presented as truth. He recommends meeting

people where they are to get them where you want them to be as a better approach. Table 1 summarizes participants' demographic characteristics.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information of Study Participants*

| <b>Demographic Variable</b>         | <b>Category</b>           | <b>n %</b> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| <b>Region of the U.S.</b>           | North/Northeast           | 2 25       |
|                                     | East Coast/Midwest        | 2 25       |
|                                     | South/Southeast           | 4 50       |
| <b>Years of Teaching Experience</b> | 1–4 Years                 | 1 13       |
|                                     | 5–10 Years                | 1 13       |
|                                     | 11–20 Years               | 1 13       |
|                                     | 21+ Years                 | 5 63       |
| <b>Subject Area</b>                 | History                   | 3 38       |
|                                     | English                   | 2 25       |
|                                     | Mathematics/Science/Other | 3 38       |
| <b>Race/Ethnicity</b>               | African American          | 4 50       |
|                                     | Caucasian                 | 4 50       |
| <b>Gender</b>                       | Male                      | 4 50       |
|                                     | Female                    | 4 50       |
| <b>Age</b>                          | 36–45                     | 1 13       |
|                                     | 45+                       | 7 88       |

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the individuals interviewed for this research. Given the sensitive nature of the research, which involves the removal of certain aspects of American history related to African Americans, I deemed it necessary to gather the perspectives of a diverse group of participants. Based on the Table, 8 individuals committed to participating in the research. The table provides information about the educators, including their region of the United States, years of teaching experience, subject area, race/ethnicity, gender, and age. These factors were selected because they affect educators' perspectives.

The number of years of teaching experience establishes a framework for how the educator approaches teaching. The subject area that the educator teaches attests to knowledge of

African American history and the current trend to place limitations on what can be taught. Race and ethnicity are mentioned to suggest the educator's possible viewpoint. Gender and age are identified to provide clarity from the educator's perspective.

Two participants were from the North/Northeastern United States, two from the East Coast/Midwest, and four from the South/Southeastern United States. Five participants have 21 or more years of teaching experience; one has 11-20 years; one has 5-10 years; and one has 1-4 years. Three of the educators teach history or a related subject, two teach English, and three teach a subject identified as 'Other'. Their information was included because they teach or have taught U.S. History, government, or civics. Four of the participants are African American, and four are Caucasian. The research was not limited to African Americans or Caucasians; however, responses were not received from any other ethnic group. One participant is in the age range of 36–45, while seven are 45 years of age or older.

### ***Trustworthiness***

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed strategies consistent with qualitative and IPA research standards. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, detailed transcription, and the use of verbatim participant quotations to ground interpretations. Reflexive journaling was used throughout the research process to document analytic decisions and the researcher's interpretative stance. Trustworthiness ensures that the necessary steps are taken to guarantee the reliability of the research. Various strategies are used to ensure credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability within the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). An audit trail was maintained throughout the research. The use of databases, such as Qualtrics, helped keep the information organized. Participants were provided with a QR code or a link via email to access the survey in the Qualtrics database. A collection of survey data was

sent directly to Qualtrics, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Dependability was confirmed once all participants had been contacted and verified their responses to the interview questions. Participants were given the opportunity to review their semi-structured interview responses through a process known as member checking. In-person participants were provided with a transcribed copy of the interview to check for accuracy. Participants who were interviewed by phone were contacted via Zoom at their convenience to verify the transcribed information.

The researcher must take critical steps to ensure that research findings are precise, reliable, and unbiased (Stahl & King, 2020). Among those critical steps are triangulation, reflexivity, bracketing, participant validation, negative case analysis, and thick description were used to reinforce the trustworthiness of the research. These methods also helped to maintain the transparency of the research and attest to the reliability of the findings. The six-phase Braun and Clarke thematic analysis approach was used to establish initial codes and categories, which were then grouped into themes. It serves as a six-phase process that guides, rather than rules, to be applied in a flexible approach that fits the data and research questions (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009/2021).

**Table 2**  
*Stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

| Phase | Phase Name                                       | Description   |
|-------|--|---|
| 1     | Reading and rereading                            | The researcher becomes immersed in the data by repeatedly reading the transcript and, where possible, listening to the audio recording. This process prioritizes entering the participant's experiential world while maintaining an interpretative stance (Smith et al., 2009/2021).  |
| 2     | Initial noting                                   | Detailed exploratory commenting is conducted on the transcript, including descriptive (content-focused), linguistic (language use), and conceptual (interpretative) notes. This stage reflects the double hermeneutic, as the researcher interprets the participant's meaning-making. |
| 3     | Developing emergent themes                       | The initial notes are transformed into emergent themes that capture psychological essence while maintaining grounding in the participant's words. Themes represent a synthesis of description and interpretation.   |
| 4     | Searching for connections across emergent themes | Emergent themes are examined for conceptual connections and organized into clusters or superordinate themes using analytic strategies such as abstraction, subsumption, contextualization, and polarization.  |
| 5     | Moving to the next case                          | The researcher repeats the analytic process for each subsequent case, bracketing ideas from earlier analyses to preserve IPA's idiographic commitment and respect each participant's unique account.  |
| 6     | Looking for patterns across cases                | Patterns of convergence and divergence are identified across cases, resulting in a final thematic structure that reflects shared experiential themes while acknowledging individual variation.  |

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is an iterative, inductive, and idiographic approach that emphasizes detailed case-by-case analysis prior to cross-case comparison.

Keywords were documented from the questionnaire and interviews. Terms were categorized and developed into themes. Those themes were divided into subthemes. The data analysis resulted in a thematic framework. The researcher must take critical steps to ensure that research findings are precise, reliable, and unbiased (Stahl & King, 2020). Among those critical steps were triangulation, bracketing, participant validation, negative case analysis, and thick description, which were used to reinforce the trustworthiness of the research. These methods also

helped to maintain the transparency of the research and attest to the reliability of the findings. Table 2 shows the six phases of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin. This IPA approach was used to establish initial codes and categories, which were then grouped into themes. It served as a six-step process that guides, rather than rules, to be applied in a flexible approach that fits the data and research questions (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009/2021).

### **Credibility**

Credibility was established through multiple strategies with the purpose of minimizing bias and ensuring the trustworthiness of the findings (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Triangulation was used to strengthen the data by increasing internal validity and reducing researcher bias. Consolidating the various sources of data, considering their strengths and limitations, reinforces credibility (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Bracketing was a means of minimizing my personal biases during the collection of the data (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Being cognizant of my own personal beliefs and assumptions during the research process was my way of exercising reflexivity. Bracketing allowed me to acknowledge my preconceptions and analyze the data without being influenced by my personal beliefs. These two strategies were used throughout the data collection and analysis process. During each interview, I was intentional about checking for understanding and clarity of the questions. Participant validation provided the participants with the opportunity to elaborate on their responses. Negative case analysis is used to account for any data that did not otherwise exhibit an overall understanding of the phenomenon. This type of data is referred to as outliers or codes that do not align with the main theme (Creswell & Creswell).

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the likelihood that research findings can be applied to another context, setting, or group within a similar research environment or participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). The instruments used in this research can be easily replicated for future studies. The semi-structured interview was recorded on an electronic device and transcribed using Turbo AI. The questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics. The objective of this research was to gather the perspectives of purposively selected educators in regard to the changing narratives of American history. The data collection method, tools, and instruments used for collection and analysis are transferable (Stahl & King, 2020). It was not my intention to provide definitive truths that are attested to by educators everywhere. The purpose was to offer a context-relevant consensus of educators regarding the changing narrative of American history as it relates to enslaved individuals and the subsequent mistreatment of their descendants. Thick description was used to convey detailed accounts of the participants lived experiences. Through their individual accounts, the participants shared their genuine feelings and emotions about the legal mandates in education. The use of thick description captured the subtleties, complexities, and emotions within the data (Dodgson, 2023).

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the research process and its findings over time (Rose & Johnson, 2020). This means that similar results can be obtained should the research be repeated in a similar context with similar participants. Using an audit trail enabled me to create codes and demonstrate their relationships to themes. Dependability relies on the researcher's trust in conducting the research process (Stahl & King, 2020).

### **Confirmability**

The research data was analyzed and interpreted without personal bias. Confirmability refers to the likelihood that research findings can be verified or confirmed by others (Stahl & King, 2020). Records of the research process have been documented and maintained. This information included participant selection, informed consent, interviews, the data-collection timeline, and any necessary adjustments. The questionnaires and demographic survey were administered through the Qualtrics database, which cannot be altered, changed, or manipulated. The interviews were recorded and have not been altered in any way. I remained cognizant of my biases while analyzing the data. The participant selection criterion was relevant to the research because it ensured a diverse group of educators at various stages of their lives and careers. The remaining data was collected from semi-structured interviews and an accompanying questionnaire.

### ***Research Question 1***

How do educators perceive their professional accountability when teaching state-mandated, amended narratives of American history related to slavery and the subsequent mistreatment of descendants?

The participants of this research agreed that it is unfortunate that legal mandates are being enacted requiring educators to teach a revised version of American history focusing on enslaved individuals and the subsequent mistreatment of their descendants after slavery. Many participants strongly believe this will result in a disservice to future generations. Participant 4 is an educator and the lead civics educator in her county in Florida. She stated that “the benchmarks were updated in 2022, but there was not much variation from what was previously taught”. “The benchmarks are very specific, and educators have to be mindful of how they are presented to

students” (P4). Participant 5 was discouraged by the thought of legal mandates to change the narrative of American history. He is discouraged by “the disregard for loss of life and mistreatment that slaves endured”. He stated that” it hurts that future generations will not know the truth about their ancestors who helped make this country what it is” (P5). (P8) is an African American history educator in the state of Georgia. She works in an African American history museum that has a Jim Crow section and a slavery section. She was selected for this research because her museum was once a popular field trip location for schools in Georgia and Florida. With the new legislation being passed, “many schools are now forbidden to patronize the museum or are restricted to where students can go inside the museum” (P8). Table 3 presents Themes 1, 2, and 3 in response to Research Question 1. Table 3 illustrates the alignment of themes with participant perspectives.

**Table 3**

*Educator Perspectives on State-Mandated Curriculum Changes*

| <b>Themes</b>                         | <b>Educator Perspectives</b>   | <b>Removed Content</b>                      |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Familiarity with Bans and Legislation | Most participants were vaguely familiar with legislative bans; they often obtained information from media sources rather than through formal policy communication. | State-determined curriculum content         |
| Personal Feelings                     | Participants expressed concern about doing a disservice to students and fear of repeating historical injustices through omission.                                  | Benchmarks restricting content presentation |
| Student Concern                       | Educators reported concern regarding increased societal division and students’ lack of comprehensive historical understanding.                                     |   |

***Theme 1: Educator Familiarity with Bans and Legislation***

The participants all seemed opposed to the bans and legislation that restrict the teaching of some African American content. During the interview, one question asked them to describe their understanding of their state’s policy on bans and restrictions. Many of them were only vaguely familiar with the state legislation. Information provided in the media that reinforced the

consequences of noncompliance was mentioned more than the policies within their respective states. (P3) stated that she “hasn’t looked into it as much as she should have, but she knows they’re not wanting to teach certain parts of history”. (P4) shared a similar sentiment by saying “I’m not as ‘up’ (*up to date/informed*) on it as I should be, but I know about it”.

### ***Theme 2: Personal Feelings of Educators***

The participants expressed empathy for future generations. (P5) feels “empathy for the doers, the future leaders of tomorrow, because they are being cheated out of the truth”. Many fail to see the benefit of being less than forthcoming about the narrative of enslaved Africans and the subsequent mistreatment of their descendants. (P8) expressed concern because of the way she was raised to “stay away from people who are not white”. In their own way, they expressed fear of history repeating itself, a lack of understanding of the plight of marginalized people, and a belief that the changed narrative would only lead to greater division (Goggins-Brown, 2024).

### ***Theme 3: Educator Concern for Students***

It outlines their familiarity with bans and legislation, their concern for students and future generations, and their personal feelings. Some participants expressed anger, while others expressed disappointment with the state of the education system. Others want to rationalize that the intent may be genuine, but the approach is misguided and may possibly lead to even greater division among the American people.

All participants gave similar answers and explained their perspectives. Many of the participants disagreed with changing the narrative. Surprisingly, a response to one of the survey questions was made regarding whether it is beneficial for states to change the narrative of documented historical information regarding slavery in America and the subsequent mistreatment of their descendants, after slavery came from an unlikely source. Participant 2, an

African American history studies instructor at a university in South Carolina, stated that “it depends (*on what the information will be replaced with*)”. There is concern that “the current instruction could be replaced with a narrative that creates an even greater divide” (P2).

One of the participants shared a lived experience with me during the interview. Participant 8 is a young Caucasian female who was raised in the northeastern United States and has recently graduated from college with her master’s degree. She went into great detail about how she “was raised to fear and distance herself from African American people” (P8). She was raised in a community that encouraged segregation and limited interactions with non-Caucasian people. During her college years, she had opportunities to interact with a more diverse group of people, which changed her perspective on how she was raised. She also mentioned that she is currently in therapy, learning to cope with her upbringing.

### ***Research Question 2***

How do educators interpret and experience state legal mandates that require the incorporation of amended narratives of American history related to slavery and the subsequent mistreatment of descendants into their curriculum?

Each participant in this research explained how the curriculum on African American history had changed since they were taught it as students. The overall consensus is that there is less information available about slavery and the plight of descendants of the enslaved people. They each mentioned the vagueness of the current instruction. Each of them also spoke about how they present information to their students and move on to the next topic with minimal discussion about subjects related to African American history.

Table 4 illustrates Themes 1, 2, and 3 in relation to Research Question 2. It outlines decolonization in the classroom from the standpoint of training and professional development,

curriculum content, and the impact of the changed narrative. Educators with 20 or more years of experience were more detailed in their descriptions of the evolution. Table 4 summarizes these findings.

**Table 4**  
*Curriculum Changes and Educator Perspectives*

| <b>Themes</b>                         | <b>Re-Righting History</b>                             | <b>Change Implementation</b>                                  |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Curriculum Content Factors            | Divisive content prohibited                            | States control content through benchmarks                     |
| Impact of Changed Narrative           | Ignorance perpetuated; future generations ill-prepared | Slow, gradual curriculum evolution; less detailed instruction |
| Training and Professional Development | Best practices dictated; minimal training provided     | Subtle, unstructured changes implemented over time            |

The findings suggest several implications:

***Theme 1: Curriculum Content Factors***

Curriculum content is being tailored to address key points of discussion regarding specific topics. (P7) stated that she had “been teaching for a long and noticed changes over the years”. At first she “didn’t think too much about it but over time started to become concerned”. States provide benchmarks that outline how information is to be taught and regulate what educators can teach. (P3) stated, “We (*the education system*) have an agenda, and yet to me, when you change the benchmarks the way they’ve been changed... it seems like what we have been accused of (*changing the narrative*) is what is being changed in those benchmarks”). Educators are required to adhere to these guidelines or face the risk of reprimand for noncompliance (Nwokocha, 2024).

***Theme 2: Impact of Changed Narrative***

There is no definitive way to determine the impact the altered narrative of American history will have on future generations. It is a topic that our nation’s leaders feel strongly about.

The participants speculate that future generations will be lost and confused about the state of society. (P4) is “saddened for the younger generation”. She felt “they are going to be a lost generation by not knowing their history”. There are bound to be inconsistencies with the overall state of the nation with the removal of the truth about how America came to be. When asked the interview question, what does changing the narrative of African American history imply about education in the United States? (P2) pointed out that “we haven’t learned our lesson, and academics (*educators*) are out of touch”. Most people are aware that they are being misled about the narrative of African American history, and some are subject to falling under the influence of others, such as Dane Calloway, who refutes that the transatlantic slave trade ever happened, or Tariq Nasheed, who misleads young people about their own history.

### ***Theme 3: Training and Professional Development***

Best practices serve as a method for approaching and discussing divisive subject matter. Most of the participants noticed subtle changes from previous years of teaching history (Willever, 2022). One of the interview questions asked if any of their students had expressed concern about the information currently being taught compared to what they had learned in the past. Only a few participants noticed students' concerns. (P1) stated that one of her previous students contacted her after the student had gone to college to compare what she was being taught in college to what she had learned in high school. The student recalls that the information “was not as in depth as she had remembered”. The current practice involves omitting key pieces of information or presenting them less thoroughly (Johns, 2023). The most notable change is the enforcement of punishment for noncompliance with the restrictions.

Participants in this research, particularly those with 20 or more years of teaching experience, spoke about the gradual disappearance of content on African American history from

the curriculum. Surprisingly, most participants stated that they have not been provided with any special training to implement historical content in their curriculum. Some of them claim they have not noticed much student concern about how African American history is taught (Johns, 2023). While there have been subtle changes to the content over the years, “they have not been made aware of any distinct changes that would stand out to the extent that students would inquire about the information that has been disregarded” (P7).

### **Evaluation of the Outcomes**

The findings of this study both align with and extend prior research on the politicization of curriculum, academic freedom, and the teaching of African American history. Existing literature has documented educators’ resistance to legislatively mandated curriculum changes that restrict discussions of race, racism, and historical injustice, often citing concerns related to professional autonomy, constitutional protections, and ethical responsibility to historical truth (Morgan, 2022). Similarly, participants in this study strongly opposed state-mandated narrative changes, viewing them as an overreach of governmental authority and a distortion of historical realities.

However, this study adds nuance to prior research by revealing a disconnect between educators’ passion and their practical engagement with the mandated changes. While earlier studies often emphasize active resistance or advocacy among educators, the present findings suggest that many participants were not fully informed about how the mandates concretely affected their curricula or had experienced only minimal changes due to slow implementation (Nwokocha, 2024). This supports prior scholarship indicating that policy-level restrictions do not always translate immediately into classroom-level transformations, particularly during early stages of enforcement (Morgan, 2022).

Consistent with critical race theory literature, participants' concerns reflect broader patterns of systemic power used to marginalize counter-narratives that challenge dominant historical frameworks (Haynes, 2023). Prior research has argued that bans on critical race theory and related content function as mechanisms to preserve hegemonic narratives by limiting educators' ability to contextualize systemic racism (Miller et al., 2023). The reluctance or silence observed among participants in response to final interview questions further extends this body of research, suggesting that fear of professional retaliation, job loss, or institutional reprimand may suppress open discourse, even when educators personally oppose the mandates.

Moreover, this study reinforces existing research highlighting the tension between federal educational frameworks, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and Department of Education guidelines, and state-level actions that restrict academic freedom. While prior literature asserts that these foundational documents were designed to protect equitable and truthful education, the findings here demonstrate how state policies may undermine those protections in practice (Johns et al., 2023). The participants' shared concern for future generations being ill-informed echoes longstanding scholarly warnings about the long-term societal consequences of historical erasure (Whiting et al., 2024).

Overall, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by illustrating how educators navigate mandated historical revisions in real-world contexts marked by political pressure, institutional surveillance, and personal risk. It underscores that resistance may not always manifest through overt action, but instead through silence, cautious compliance, or limited engagement, an important consideration for future research on educational policy, curriculum control, and the lived experiences of educators.

## **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The approach to revising the narrative of American history has become increasingly rigid. Educators are required to deliver an altered interpretation of historically documented events. School districts should implement professional development that provides educators with the necessary tools to interpret state-mandated legislation. As described in Table 3, many of the educators were only vaguely familiar with the legislation. Educators can benefit from targeted professional development on legislative literacy and instructional ethics. Establishing clear district-level guidance that aligns with historical accuracy may serve as more of a compromise than the benchmarks, which limit instructional content. Table 4 references best practices in training and professional development. Creating institutional safeguards that allow the educator to use professional judgment and self-censorship to facilitate instruction of sensitive topics. School districts could also establish professional learning communities where educators can learn how to navigate legislative mandates related to American history.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future studies should utilize alternative sampling methods (e.g., random sampling) to capture broader perspectives, including opposing views. Explore focus-group methodologies to facilitate richer discussion and interaction among educators. Examine the long-term impact of amended curricula on student knowledge, social attitudes, and civic engagement. The sampling method may have contributed to the lack of opposing opinions. Using a different sampling method, such as random sampling, could yield different results. Many of the participants' responses in this research were similar. In the future, a more random selection of educators may yield opposing opinions that provide different perspectives.

Conducting a study with a focus group may possibly add a different element to the research. It would allow educators to engage in conversations about their lived experiences related to the subject matter, as well as the students' responses in class. One foreseeable drawback of focus groups is the potential for participants to influence one another's opinions. All of the participants are aware of the laws and legislation that place restrictions on what and how American history is taught in their respective states. All participants expressed concern about the outcome of future generations being taught a whitewashed version of American history.

### **Conclusions**

This research highlights the tension between state-mandated curriculum changes and educators' ethical and professional responsibilities. Participants consistently reported concern over the implications of altering historical narratives related to slavery and its aftermath. Interpretative phenomenological analysis provided insight into educators' perceptions of legal mandates, the classroom environment, and the potential consequences for future generations. Ensuring accurate historical education is not only a professional responsibility but a societal imperative. Failure to teach the truth about the past risks perpetuating inequity and misunderstanding in American society (Novick, 2023). There is an underlying message in the changing narrative of American history. While it is possible to alter reality, the truth will always remain the truth (in reality). Education is being compromised when reality is sacrificed for a false narrative. This research addressed two issues regarding that reality: educators' perspectives on being legally mandated to teach an alternative truth, and how they perceive the classroom environment in light of the changed narrative of American history.

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## Appendices

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## Appendix A

### Re-Righting History: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Addressing Teaching an Amended Version of American History

#### Questionnaire

1. Can you describe your understanding of Florida's Freedom Act, House Bill 7 (*or similar legislation for your respective state*), and how it affects any recent changes to how American history is taught?
2. Were you provided with any special training to accommodate the required implementation of the historical content for your curriculum?
3. Please describe any statutes or policies that guide your choice of historical content.
4. Based on your observation, have students demonstrated any concern regarding what is currently being taught about African American history as compared to what they may have learned in the past?
5. How do you think changes in the narrative affect students' understanding of American history?

6. What are your thoughts on the ethical implications of teaching an amended version of American history?
7. How do you think students are impacted by the changes in the historical narrative taught in schools?
8. Is there anything you would like to share about the bans and restrictions placed on the teaching of American history?
9. Is there any additional information you would like to share about your experiences related to this topic that we have not discussed?

## Appendix B

### Re-Righting History: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Addressing Teaching an Amended Version of American History

#### Interview Protocol

Your participation in this research is greatly appreciated. Thank you for committing to this interview and participating in the audio recording. Please be advised that the researcher is the only individual with access to your responses and other information you provide. The digital recording will remain confidential, password-protected, and stored in a locked, safe place once it is transcribed. The audio recording will then be disposed of once it is transcribed. At no point will your real name or identity be compromised. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time.

You have agreed to participate in this interview and meet the criteria of being an educator currently employed at a college or university, and willing to share your experience and insight about: Re-Righting History: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Addressing Teaching an Amended Version of History. This research seeks to examine the perspectives of educators who are being legally mandated to teach an amended version of American history as it relates to slavery and the mistreatment of their descendants after slavery.

## Appendix C

### Re-Righting History: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Addressing Teaching an Amended Version of American History

#### Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your understanding of Florida's Freedom Act, House Bill 7, and how it affects any recent changes to how American history is taught?
2. Were you provided with any special training to accommodate the required implementation of the historical content for your curriculum?
3. Please describe any statutes or policies that guide your choice of historical content.
4. Based on your observation, have students demonstrated any concern regarding what is currently being taught about African American history as compared to what they may have learned in the past?
5. How do you think changes in the narrative effect students' understanding of American history?

6. What are your thoughts on the ethical implications of teaching an amended version of American history?
  
7. How do you think students are impacted by the changes in the historical narrative taught in schools?
  
8. Is there anything you would like to share about the bans and restrictions placed on the teaching of American history?
  
9. Is there any additional information you would like to share about your experiences related to this topic that we have not discussed?

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Email/Letter

My name is Constance Bernard, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I am conducting a research study to establish a consensus as to how educators feel about being required to teach an amended version of American history.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all of these criteria:

1. Actively employed as an educator
  - Teach American history or a history-related subject
  - Working knowledge of how African American history relates to American history

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Conduct an interview, which will be either in-person, over the telephone, or via Zoom. Complete a questionnaire that will be offered electronically (iPad). Access will also be available via a QR code or an email link.
  - In-person meetings will be conducted at a time and location convenient to the participant.
  - The combined interview and questionnaire process will not exceed 30 minutes.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Decolonization in the classroom
- Legal mandates to teach an amended version of history
- Ethical viewpoint of being required to teach an amended version of history as an educational standard

Participants will be given the convenience of selecting from an in-person, telephone, or Zoom interview. The questionnaire will be available electronically or in person to those opting to conduct an in-person interview. If you are interested in participating in this study, please click this link: [insert survey/questionnaire link]. If you have questions, please contact me at [Constance Bernard (850) 405-7589].

Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!

Constance Bernard

## Appendix E

### Information Letter

My name is Constance Bernard, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU). I'm asking you to take part in a research study about educators being required to teach an amended version of American history. The name of this research is "Re-Righting History: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Addressing Teaching an Amended Version of American History."

This form will give you information about the research to help you decide whether you would like to participate and/or have your data used. Please read this form and ask any questions you have.

What will happen during the research?

If you agree to participate in the research, you will do the following things:

- Conduct an interview, which will be either in-person, over the telephone, or via Zoom.
- Complete a questionnaire, which will be offered electronically (iPad). Access will also be available via QR code or an email link.
- In-person meetings will be conducted at a time and location convenient for the participant.
- Participants will be audio-recorded.
- The elapsed time for the interview and questionnaire will take 30 - 45 minutes each.
- Why is this research being done?
- The purpose of this research is to investigate whether educators find it ethical to be required to teach an amended version of American history.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are an educator who teaches history or a social sciences subject.

How many people will take part?

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 8 participants taking part in this research.

#### **What are the potential risks of taking part in the research?**

While participating in the research, the risks, side effects, and/or discomforts include:

- Having your identity exposed

- Misinterpretation of your responses
- Being uncomfortable answering the questions due to tough memories or emotions

To decrease the impact of these risks, you are free not to participate in the research. Participants are also free not to answer any question that is uncomfortable.

What are the potential benefits of taking part in the research?

The benefits to participation in the research that are reasonable to expect are understanding whether educators view it as ethical that they are required to teach an amended version of American history. This research will help me understand how educators feel about being required to teach an amended version of American history.

Taking part in the research is voluntary

You may choose for your data not to be included in the research. This decision will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled and will not affect your relationship with your instructor (Dr. Thomas). If you do not want your data used for this research, please let me know at (850) 405-7589 or [c.bernard7339@o365.ncu.edu](mailto:c.bernard7339@o365.ncu.edu).

How will my information be protected?

I cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential:

- Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law.
- No information that could identify you will be shared in publications about this research and databases in which results may be stored.
- The people who will have access to your information are I, my dissertation chair, and my dissertation committee.
- I will secure your information with these steps: keeping all digital interview files in a password-protected computer folder.
- After 3 years, all data will be destroyed.

Will my information be used for research in the future?

Information collected from you for this research may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for future research. If this happens, information that could identify you will be removed before any information is shared. All data about you will be de-identified.

Will I be paid for participation?

There will be no compensation, monetary or otherwise, for participation in this research.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There is no cost to you for taking part in this research.

Who should I call with questions or problems?

For questions about the research, contact the researcher Constance Bernard at (850) 405-7589.

You may also contact me by email at [c.bernard7339@o365.ncu.edu](mailto:c.bernard7339@o365.ncu.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about research, or to obtain information or to offer input, please contact the NU Institutional Review Board at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu).

Can I withdraw from the research?

If you decide for your data to be included in this research, you can change your mind and decide to remove your data from the research at any time in the future. Please let me know that you no longer wish for your data to be included, and I will delete all data collected from you.

### **Opt-Out**

If you would like to “opt out” your data from this research, please contact (Constance Bernard, [c.bernard7339@o365.ncu.edu](mailto:c.bernard7339@o365.ncu.edu), (850) 405-7589).

## Appendix F

### Consent Form

My name is Constance Bernard, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU).

I'm asking you to take part in a research study on the changing narrative in African American history in the United States. The name of this research study is "Re-Righting History: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Addressing Teaching an Amended Version of American History."

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. You are 18 years of age or older.
2. You are currently employed as an educator.
3. You teach American history or a related social sciences subject.

I hope to include 8 people in this research.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What you will be asked to do: If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Complete an online survey for 20 minutes

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Decolonization in the classroom.
- Legal mandates to teach an amended version of American history.

- Your perspective on being required to teach an amended version of American history as an education standard.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this study. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participating at any time.

Benefits: If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this study.

Mandated Reporting: My professional role outside of NU requires me to report suspicion of child or elderly abuse, suspicion of possible harm to self or others, and committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

Confidentiality: I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. I will securely store your data for 3 years. Then, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

If you have questions: Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at [c.bernard7339@o365.ncu.edu](mailto:c.bernard7339@o365.ncu.edu) or (850) 405-7589.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu).