Stebbins, A., Schroeder, S., & Han, S. (2024). Liberty Bells, flags, and monuments, oh my: Teaching citizenship through American symbols with TeachersPayTeachers. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 24*(3), 313-344.

Liberty Bells, Flags, and Monuments, Oh My: Teaching Citizenship Through American Symbols With TeachersPayTeachers

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This article shares a critical content analysis of 36 highly rated curricular units found on the website TeachersPayTeachers.com (TpT) focused on the teaching of American symbols. Lessons and curricular resources focused on American symbols, such as the United States Flag, Statue of Liberty, and Liberty Bell, remain prominent in the elementary curriculum. Often, these lessons ignore and further marginalize groups that have been historically excluded in the United States. Findings indicate that the symbols chosen to represent the United States fail to capture the expansive history of the nation, exclude historically marginalized groups, and promote a whitewashed, monocultural, exclusively positive vision of citizenship in the United States. Moreover, the transmission-based pedagogy embedded in the TpT resources fail to offer students opportunities to inquire about or consider points of contradiction and complexity regarding patriotism and citizenship. The article concludes with implications of findings and recommendations for research and practice.

Over the last decade, the site TeachersPayTeachers.com (TpT), a popular Internet platform for teachers in the United States, has become one of the primary sites of curricular inspiration for elementary teachers (Carpenter & Shelton, 2022; Sawyer et al., 2020). Aguilar et al. (2022) claimed that TpT "is the largest online teacher resource exchange, boasting over 3 million materials and over 1 billion downloads of those materials" (p. 1). Existing scholarship, though, suggests that TpT is populated by subpar curricular materials, lacking in rigor, differentiation, and standards-alignment (Aguilar et al., 2022; Gallagher et al., 2019; Hertel & Wessman-Enzinger, 2017; Hu et al., 2018; McDonald, 2018; Polikoff & Dean, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2020) and features problematic and outright racist content (Gallagher et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2020). Because of its popularity with K-12 educators, scholars have called for additional research into the quality of materials found on the site (Aguilar et al., 2022; Carpenter & Shelton, 2022).

At the same time, social studies scholars have indicated a crisis in citizenship and civic education, wherein both educational researchers and K-12 educators have narrowly defined citizenship, civic engagement, and patriotism. These critiques are rooted in critical theories of citizenship and the well-documented erasure of Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous voices in K-12 social studies curriculum and scholarship.

The problem is especially pronounced when it comes to the youngest learners (Swalwell & Payne, 2019). At the elementary level, the teaching of American symbols is one of the first entry points in the official curriculum for young children to learn the bounds of citizenship in the United States. Often teaching ways to enact patriotism through reverence to the flag, founding fathers, monuments, and other symbols of so-called liberty and justice, American symbols lessons teach specific and problematic visions of citizenship (Hawkman & Van Horn, 2019).

Although elementary social studies is a marginalized content area (D'Souza & Kullberg, 2018; Fitchett et al., 2014; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012), in our experience in elementary classrooms across multiple U.S. states, lessons on American symbols remain prominent in the elementary grades. An assumption exists in scholarship that these lessons exclude and further marginalize those who have been systematically oppressed in the United States (Collins, 2009), yet systematic study into the content of curriculum available to teach American symbols is scarce.

Given the prolific use of TpT by teachers and concerns in social studies scholarship around the teaching of citizenship and patriotism, this article describes findings of a critical content analysis of 36 highly rated curricular units found on TpT focused on the teaching of American symbols to elementary students. Through this critical content analysis, we sought to build an understanding of the materials available to teachers nationwide to teach American symbols, adding to an empirical literature base that is lacking. Two research questions guided our study: (a) What content, pedagogical practices, and social studies skills are emphasized in American symbols resources found on TpT? and (b) What vision of citizenship is taught through the content and pedagogy of American symbols resources on TpT?

Literature Review

Patriotism and Citizenship

Schools have long been the place in the United States where visions of patriotism and citizenship could be fostered in youth (Kaestle, 1983). The shape of patriotism and resulting civic education has ranged from democratic to authoritarian, depending on the cultural and social climate as well as a host of other factors (Kissling, 2017; Westheimer, 2009). Westheimer delineated that democratic patriotism gives rise to dissent and the holding of one's country and its leaders to account, while authoritarian patriotism allows for a more "non-questioning loyalty" to the state (p. 318).

Social studies scholars have indicated over the past decade that more authoritarian visions of patriotism — as well as narrow visions of citizenship — have dominated social studies instruction in U.S. schools, as the teaching of patriotism and citizenship are often intertwined. Hawkman and Van Horn (2019) pointed out that

> dialogues around patriotism are laced within efforts to promote a citizenship education historically shaped by white, patriarchal, middle-class, and hetero-normative values. Therefore, discussions of what it means to be patriotic, a citizen, or an American often ignore the lived experiences of people of color, Indigenous Peoples, women, the working class, and the LGBTQ + community, promoting a singular notion of patriotism that is narrowly constructed and exclusionary. (p. 106)

Civic dialogues that center white, patriarchal, middle-class, and heteronormative values, Woodson and Love (2019) argued, have led to a positioning of Black students, in particular, as students who "have less, know less, do less, and hope less than middle-class White peers" (p. 91), creating what researchers have termed a "civic participation gap" or "civic opportunity gap." "Gap" rhetoric restricts what researchers and teachers believe students outside of the white, middle class, heterosexual norm are capable of civically and serves to alienate students rather than broaden a vision of American citizenship.

In his study of primary students, Johnson (2019) illustrated how black primary grade boys are able to parse the difference between "the rhetoric of democracy versus the reality of democracy" (p. 37), suggesting that elementary age students are ready and able to deal with complicated and contradictory histories of nationhood and civic life. Rodríguez (2018) pointed out that without such complications the "narrow, simplified constructions" of citizenship that many schools teach "leave many students feeling detached and unrecognized (p. 531). As a result, scholars such as Rodríguez, Busey and Walker (2017), Sabzalian, (2019), and Vickery (2016), have suggested that a broadened vision of citizenship taught in schools must include critical, anticolonial, Black, Indigenous, and feminist perspectives on citizenship and patriotism, which we take up in our theoretical framework.

American Symbols in Elementary Social Studies

Instructional approaches across elementary social studies classrooms often lack criticality. Research suggests that elementary social studies pedagogy often centers dominant narratives (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2021), transmits facts via textbooks (Zhao & Hoge, 2005), focuses on "cute" or "fun" activities (Bauml, 2016), emphasizes literacy as opposed to social studies skills (Hinde, 2015), and adds surface-level information about "heroes and holidays" to the curriculum without changing the curriculum (Banks, 1989).

Regarding the teaching of American symbols in elementary classrooms, empirical research is scant; however, Hawkman and Van Horn (2019) pointed out that in the early elementary grades "students are often taught to recognize symbols (e.g., the Statue of Liberty, the U.S. flag, the White House, etc.) rarely with a critical lens" (p. 111). They asserted that teachers may "unconsciously" teach these symbols and related civic worship of these symbols "as *what Americans do*, without questioning why" (p. 111, emphasis in original).

Scholars and teacher educators have sought to challenge that unconscious civic worship by suggesting pedagogical approaches with a critical or multiple perspectives lens. Britt (2013) offered an example of using children's literature to teach multiple perspectives of American symbols by using paired texts to explore the history of the Statue of Liberty. The first book, *Emma's Poem*, explores the poem "The New Colossus," which is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. The second text, *Naming Liberty*, is a "double story" that features a historical fiction of a Russian family's immigration story, coupled with a timeline of the creation of the Statue of Liberty.

According to Britt (2013), the intentional use of multiple texts on the same topic can help students "develop a deeper understanding of the related stories of people who were part of the story of the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of freedom and democracy in America" (p. 6). In other words, exposing students to multiple perspectives can add depth to students' understanding of American symbols.

Primary sources are another avenue to teach multiple perspectives of American symbols. Maguth et al. (2013) engaged a class of fourth graders in two sets of primary sources about the Statue of Liberty in an effort to critically examine its symbolism. The first set of primary sources depicted the "traditional" perspective of liberty with photographs of immigrants eagerly arriving to the United States with the Statue of Liberty in the background. The second set of primary sources depicted a critical perspective of liberty by referencing the inequality and injustices that disallowed some people from accessing freedom, including an excerpt from Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech, "the meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" and a post-Emancipation Proclamation cartoon titled "Is Slavery Dead?"

The second set of primary sources complicated the master narrative that the Statue of Liberty was a symbol of freedom and liberty for all people at the end of the 19th century. Maguth et al. (2013) explained the significance

of teaching American symbols with a critical lens by urging students to examine symbols to "gain a better understanding of…our nation's continuing struggle to live up to the ideals that are symbolized in paint, cloth, bronze, and gold — and declared so hopefully in its laws" (p. 12). As Maguth et al. demonstrated, primary sources are an entry point for students to engage in multiple perspectives of American symbols.

Muller (2018) also demonstrated elementary students' ability to take up critical perspectives about American symbols when engaging in inquiry-based learning. After engaging in a 10-week critical inquiry unit about Confederate monuments, findings suggested students "became more adept at using a critical lens to see how a monument could degrade voices in the community" (p. 22). Indeed, students demonstrated their uptake of critical perspectives of symbols by going from thinking "only good people have monuments" (p. 20) to writing letters to state legislators asking for a Confederate monument to be removed. The findings of Maguth et al. (2013) and Muller (2018) suggest elementary students can analyze symbols with a critical lens.

In addition to using texts, primary sources, and an inquiry-based approach to teach multiple perspectives, scholarship suggests complicating the teaching of American symbols by challenging the traditional canon. For example, teachers can teach about Black founders instead of just the white Founding Fathers (King, 2014) or about Mary Pickersgill, the woman who sewed the Star Spangled Banner, who is often overshadowed by Betsy Ross (Smith & Wei, 2013). By teaching beyond the canon of American symbols and Founding Fathers (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2021), social studies teachers can expand students' depth of knowledge about American history. Libresco (2013) suggested that framing American symbols as "living symbols" — symbols that can be interpreted and debated — opens the door to inquiry and complicating the canon of American symbols.

Social Studies Resource Quality on TeachersPayTeachers

Curricular examples of how to develop a critical lens toward American symbols are present in social studies practitioner journals (e.g., Britt, 2013; Libresco, 2013), yet given the widespread use of the site TeachersPayTeachers.com (TpT) by teachers (Shelton et al., 2021), it makes sense to focus on teacher-created materials self-published on curricular marketplaces and social media. Scholars have continually critiqued curricular resources found on TpT as problematic. Critiques span subject areas, from math (Hertel & Wessman-Enzinger, 2017; Hu et al., 2018; Kaminski & Sloutsky, 2020; Sawyer et al., 2020) to English language arts (Benko et al., 2022; Polikoff & Dean, 2019) to science (McDonald, 2018) and to social studies (Harris et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2020, 2023).

Across subjects, issues range from a lack of rigor to poor standards alignment (Aguilar et al., 2022), to content inaccuracies. In social studies, however, the issues are especially pronounced. Imagery within materials, often created with clip art, relies on stereotypes of Black and Indigenous peoples, and content is often inaccurate or harmful (Harris et al., 2021). Social studies materials tend to reinforce visions of a white, cis-gendered, heteronormative society (Gallagher et al., 2019) that fail to showcase

multiple perspectives. Highly problematic and publicized lessons that encourage teachers to simulate slavery or the immigrant experience have been found on TpT, as well as materials that fail to address the truths of holidays like Thanksgiving and Columbus Day (Rodríguez et al., 2023; Waxman, 2019).

The for-profit nature of TpT, its adherence to platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016), and the "education influencers" who populate the site add complexity to the issue of poor-quality materials. As Rodríguez et al. (2020) stated, "Digital for-profit platforms are not neutral sites for curricular discourse" (p. 516). By design, Shelton et al. (2021) argued, TpT inherently values some visions of education more than others, particularly those that can "turn a profit," as TpT earns "20% from most sales, collects user data, and encourages future buying behavior" (p. 1).

Shelton et al. (2021) argued that this desire for profitability make it difficult for platforms like TpT to "maintain quality curriculum" (p. 15), as they promote largely white, female education influencers (Shelton et al., 2022) and online teacherpreneurs (as defined by Shelton & Archambault, 2019), who likewise are driven by a profit motive. Scholars have found that the emergence of the education influencer phenomenon has given rise to a new set of consumerist discourses that cultivate a consumer teacher mentality (Schroeder et al., 2023), driving teachers to purchase new curricular materials of questionable quality.

Theoretical Framework

Consistent with the emerging scholarship that critiques TpT materials, we approach American symbols materials on TpT with a theoretical perspective characterized by critical theories of citizenship and patriotism. In particular, we are guided by notions of justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), democratic patriotism (Westheimer, 2009), Black critical patriotism (Busey & Walker, 2017), anticolonial civic education (Sabzalian, 2019), cultural and communal citizenship (Vickery, 2016), and critical civic education (Wheeler-Bell, 2014).

We purposefully do not merge these into one single theory of critical citizenship, as we want to underscore that citizenship is a contested and differently defined term. We acknowledge there are disparate voices and visions that do not all harmonize, except, perhaps, in their rejection of a single vision of citizenship and patriotism. Approaching our theoretical framework in this way mirrors how we advocate for teaching American symbols: through multiple and conflicting perspectives and embedded within diverse communities.

One of the primary goals of social studies instruction in the elementary grades is fostering civic engagement (National Council for Social Studies [NCSS], 2017). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) outlined a paradigm of three types of citizenship schools promote: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented. Schools that foster justice-oriented citizenship empower students to identify root causes of injustice and teach patriotism through a democratic lens. Democratic patriotism, as opposed to authoritarian patriotism, encourages critical thinking and does not demand blind fidelity to the government. Teaching democratic patriotism

requires teachers to facilitate inquiry-based pedagogy that allows students to think about patriotism in substantive ways and ask questions rather than absorb facts (Westheimer, 2009, p. 320).

Busey and Walker (2017) took the conceptualization of patriotism one step further by examining Black critical patriotism. Black critical patriotism differs from authoritarian and democratic patriotism in that it adds nuance based on the Black experience. Without Black critical patriotism, the Black experience is either sanitized to fit the "master narrative of U.S. history and citizenship" or ignored completely (p. 476). Black critical patriotism portrays Black "resistance to subpersonhood" as its central tenet (p. 461). Historically, this patriotic resistance took the form of "Black physical resistance, Black political thought, and Black intellectualism" (p. 461). Busey and Walker suggested that "Black critical patriotism is necessary for more accurately theorizing how Black history and, consequently, racialized citizenship can be taught in our schools" (p. 466).

Black critical patriotism aligns with a framework of cultural and communal citizenship that Vickery (2016) argued some African American women teachers seek to cultivate in their students. This vision of citizenship perpetuates "critical notions of citizenship that align[ed] with their [African American] identities and their community" (p. 40). In this way, the teachers complicate the traditionally static pedagogy of civic education by situating Black culture and community at the forefront of citizenship teaching and learning. Likewise, Rodríguez (2018) finds that Asian American teachers enact cultural citizenship in the classroom, highlighting "how communities of color often strive for full recognition in U.S. society while they simultaneously challenge the requirements for recognition" (p. 553).

Indigenous peoples have also experienced erasure from the mainstream literature and discussion of citizenship education (Sabzalian, 2019). Dominant discourse and pedagogy in social studies and civic education often fail to acknowledge the "citizenship, nationhood, and sovereignty" of Indigenous peoples (p. 23). Sabzalian argued that "scholars and educators must recognize and interrogate the ways settler colonial discourses shape normative frames for citizenship education" (p. 17). American symbols, from an anticolonial perspective, necessarily take on a fundamentally different character.

We see these theories of citizenship and patriotism working to promote what Wheeler-Bell (2014) described as critical civic education. Taken up by Swalwell and Payne (2019) for young children, Wheeler-Bell's theory of critical civic education provides a framework that articulates "what early childhood civic education is possible and desirable for a healthy democracy" (p. 129). Rather than conventional civic education, which posits young children as "future citizens" and focuses on the rote teaching of concepts such as allegiance, laws, and patriotic symbols, critical civic education uses inquiry-based pedagogy to position students as "already citizens" who are "capable of and already enacting civicness in their everyday interactions and lived experiences" (p. 131).

When the theories outlined previously are embraced, critical civic education comes to life in the elementary classroom by influencing how teachers design, facilitate, and assess learning experiences and how

students engage with content. Lessons about American symbols may be among the first encounters young people have with formal citizenship and civic education in the elementary curriculum. These lessons lay the groundwork for future civic learning and the ways young people take up both critical and traditional approaches to civic and social studies education in the future. NCSS (2017) explained that "democratic strategies" and "meaningful inquiry" can prepare students "to participate respectfully and intelligently in a nation and world marked by globalization, interdependence, human diversity, and societal change" (p. 186). Citizenship, then, is not taught only through content, but through pedagogical practices of inquiry, dialogue, and active meaning-making. Thus, it is crucial to bring a critical perspective to the texts *and* activities that foster this early learning, so we sought to understand our data sources informed by the theories outlined above, particularly as we answered our second research question.

Methods

Data Sources

Our data set included 36 curricular resources downloaded from TpT. To compile this data set, we searched TpT for resources tagged for first grade using the search term "American symbols." We used the search term "American symbols" because it is commonly used in the extant literature on this topic (e.g., Britt, 2013; Hawkman & Van Horn, 2019), as well as in schools, curriculum, and standards, including the state standards in Pennsylvania where we teach. We chose first grade as our search due to the tendency for American symbols to be taught early in the elementary grades. Our search yielded 36 resources with over 200 ratings during summer 2021. Other downloads were present under the search term, yet we chose to limit our focus to those with over 200 ratings because the remaining resources had significantly fewer ratings, suggesting they were not as widely purchased.

While we specifically searched for TpT resources tagged as "first grade," many resources were tagged with additional grade levels, which is common on TpT. Twenty-two of the 36 sellers had over 10,000 followers, indicating their popularity with teachers. Two of the downloads had over 3,000 reviews, although the other 34 downloads had 200-900. The popularity of the two resources with 3,000+ downloads is consistent with Koehler et al.'s (2020) findings that a few TpT sellers dominate sales on the site. All of the resources were purchased — we did not analyze free materials.

Before engaging in critical content analysis, we explored other general characteristics of the materials, including page length, number of reviews, followers, price per material, and "tags" of resource type and subject area. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics of the 36 TpT resources.

The 36 TpT curricular resources were each tagged with one to three labels to indicate the resource type. The purpose of a resource type tag is to contextualize the type(s) of lessons, activities, or instructional materials present within each TpT resource. Of the 36 resources in this data set, the

majority were tagged as printables (69%), activities (41%), and fun stuff (19%; see Table 2).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the 36 TpT Resources

Characteristic	*M*	*SD*
Page length	65	53.6
Number of reviews	622	906.8
Number of followers	27,500	35.3
Price	$5.37	2.2

Table 2
Resource Type Tags of the 36 TpT Resources

Resource Type	*n*	Percentage
Printables	25	69
Activities	15	41
Fun Stuff	7	19
Literacy Center Ideas	6	17
Lesson Plans (Bundled)	5	14
Thematic Unit Plans	5	13
Note: One to three tags were provided by sellers on TpT.		

Table 3
Subject Tags of the 36 TpT Resources

Subject Tag	*n*	Percentage
Social Studies – History	17	47
Presidents' Day	13	36
U.S. History	13	36
Writing (also include "Writing-Expository")	10	28
English Language Arts	9	25
Reading	6	17
Balanced Literacy	6	17
Holidays/Seasonal	5	14
Math	4	11
Informational Text	3	8
Science	3	8
Government	3	8
Economics	2	6
Note: One to three tags were provided by sellers on TpT.		

Similar to the resource type tags, sellers on TpT are able to tag one to three subject areas that most closely align with their product. These subjects range from broad terms (e.g., social studies) to specific thematic areas (e.g., holidays). Within our data set of 36 TpT resources, the most common subject tags were Social Studies-History (47%), Presidents' Day (36%), and U.S. History (36%; see Table 3).

Data Analysis

After compiling the data set and gathering the preliminary descriptive data from the TpT website, we analyzed the data using the tools of critical content analysis. Using the term critical "signals a political stance by the researcher" (Johnson et al., 2016, p. 15). We were not merely looking at the contents of the data, but bringing a critical lens toward the teaching of citizenship and patriotism to the data as well. As Beach et al. (2009) explained, in a content analysis, "the content of text data is interpreted through a process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 129). They also suggested that bringing different critical theories to bear on a single text results in different readings of the same text. With this in mind, we acknowledge that our reading of these materials, given our theoretical framework, likely resulted in a unique interpretation of the materials.

Our coding process was multistep. First, we independently open coded 10 of the materials (as recommended in Saldaña, 2016), collecting noticings and memos of our initial impressions of the curricular materials. While this was an inductive process, we necessarily brought our knowledge of critical theories of citizenship and patriotism to the texts. We were sensitive to the representations of people and events in the materials, noting the widespread exclusion of People of Color and Women.

Next, we met after analyzing 10 resources to compare analytical memos and initial codes and categories. We solidified initial codes and developed categories to guide a deductive analysis. We developed a codebook to guide analysis of the remaining 26 materials, using a spreadsheet to keep track of annotations, tallies, and other counts within the data. A sample of our codebook is included in Appendix A.

We recoded the initial 10 materials using the codebook and proceeded through a process of independent coding and categorizing, meeting to discuss codes and categories after each subsequent 10 resources were analyzed. We then looked at the data with an eye toward our research questions, grouping data from the content analysis together to develop themes through axial analysis. Because our initial inductive analysis to develop the codebook did not include critical elements of citizenship and patriotism found in our theoretical framework, we applied our theoretical framework to the analysis of our codebook, looking at the people, symbols, pedagogies, and other content present in the materials and identifying what was left out, or part of the null curriculum (Eisner, 2002).

Positionality

At the time of the study, Abigail was a doctoral candidate studying elementary social studies education and, at publication, is now an assistant professor of elementary education. She is a white, cis-gendered, female born and raised in the United States. As a student herself, she learned about patriotism from an authoritarian perspective.

She has 6 years of teaching experience, including 3 years as an elementary classroom teacher and 3 years teaching elementary social studies methods courses. As a teacher, she observed the prevalence of simplified, whitewashed elementary social studies curriculum, as well as the ubiquity

of sites like TpT and Pinterest. These experiences sparked an interest in critically analyzing the elementary social studies curricular materials on these sites. As a methods instructor, she draws from her experiences to teach preservice teachers how to analyze curriculum and design or redesign lessons to be critical, integrative, and inquiry-based, including lessons about American symbols.

During the study, Stephanie had been an assistant professor of elementary social studies education for 6 years, teaching elementary social studies methods courses throughout this time. As of publication, she has been promoted to associate professor. She has taught numerous lessons to preservice teachers regarding the teaching of American symbols as well as the pitfalls of using sites like Pinterest, TpT, or Instagram for teaching inspiration. Prior to graduate study, Stephanie worked as a secondary social studies and English teacher.

She is a white, cisgendered, female who was born in the United States. Visions of authoritarian patriotism (Westheimer, 2009) were dominant in Stephanie's tenure as an elementary and secondary student in a conservative environment, although she often rejected those visions in favor of critique and respectful dissent.

Seunghoon was a doctoral student at the time of the study and at the time of publication is a doctoral candidate studying in social studies education and teaching social studies method courses from elementary to secondary levels. Collaborating closely with Abigail and Stephanie, he taught preservice teachers how to critically use online resources, with American symbols as examples.

Unlike the other two authors, Seunghoon was born and raised in South Korea and had no official experience in the U.S. schooling system before starting his doctoral study. The representations of American symbols that he experienced in South Korea were largely sugar coated due to the amicable relationships between South Korea and the U.S. Seunghoon's unique positionality allowed him to critically question what would have been normally taken for granted. He is Asian, cis-gendered, male, and a former elementary teacher with 6 years of experience.

Our differing positionalities both limit and offer important vantage points from which to understand the data in this study. We come to this research with a certain amount of closeness to the topic. Having lived the experience of citizenship and been raised under an authoritarian vison of patriotism, we are attuned to the ways more traditional or authoritarian visions of citizenship and patriotism can negatively impact one's worldview. We all also have experience teaching about American symbols and TpT in an elementary social studies methods course setting.

Teaching and being enmeshed in the literature around the topics of TpT and American symbols necessarily predisposes us to critique that requires bracketing and seeking disconfirming evidence. Our national identities also played an important role in this research. Abigail and Stephanie are from the United States, while Seunghoon is from South Korea, offering a unique vantage point. Abigail and Stephanie could compare what we might consider common sense notions of thinking about American symbols against the notions of someone who was not raised in the United States.

Results

Problematic Content

Analysis of the 36 TpT resources revealed problematic content related to American symbols. The problematic content included a whitewashed collection of symbols, primarily fact-based content, and misleading imagery. The following section explains the problematic content of each of these areas.

American Symbols (Un)Represented

Within the 36 TpT resources, the American symbols represented were largely repetitive. Upon analysis, we identified a canon of eight symbols, each being represented in at least 50% of the data set (see Table 4). These symbols were defined within the TpT resources as being representative of the history of the U.S. From monuments that honor former presidents to symbols that represent qualities traditionally associated with the United States, including characteristics such as strength and freedom, this canon of symbols took precedence within and across the data set of TpT resources. While other American symbols were included in the TpT resources, they were not represented with the consistency or fervor of the canon.

Table 4
Canon of American Symbols Represented in the 36 TpT Resources

American Symbol	*n*	Percentage
American Flag	32	89
Statue of Liberty	32	89
Bald Eagle	31	86
Liberty Bell	28	78
White House	26	72
Washington Monument	19	53
Lincoln Memorial	18	50
Mount Rushmore	18	50

Given the prevalence of the subject tags “Social Studies-History” (47%) and “U.S. History” (36%) noted in Table 3, the American symbols featured in the 36 TpT resources should arguably represent the history of the United States. However, this canon of symbols, as well as other symbols outside of the canon (see Table 5), provide a limited scope of the history of the United States that fails to showcase the diversity of American history.

Optimistic, Oversimplified, Whitewashed Content

Beyond who and what were represented and, notably, who and what were *not* represented, the content defining the American symbols in the 36 TpT resources painted an optimistic, oversimplified, whitewashed picture of American history. For example, the two people most frequently represented as American symbols in the TpT resources were George

Washington (39%) and Abraham Lincoln (36%). Other presidents were sparingly discussed in a few of the resources, but not comparable to the representation of Washington or Lincoln.

Table 5
Other American Symbols Represented in the 36 TpT Resources

American Symbol	*n*	Percentage
George Washington	14	39
Abraham Lincoln	13	36
Pledge of Allegiance	6	17
Barack Obama	5	14
Capitol Building	5	14
Franklin D. Roosevelt	4	11
Thomas Jefferson	4	11
Betsy Ross	3	8
Jefferson Memorial	3	8
WWI Memorial	3	8
Declaration of Independence	3	8
Benjamin Franklin	2	6
Uncle Sam	2	6
John F. Kennedy	2	6
Air Force One	2	6
National Anthem	2	6
Note. This table features American symbols outside of the canon that were represented in at least two TpT resources.		

Even Barack Obama was only portrayed in the American symbols materials in five of the TpT resources (14%), despite all 36 being published on TpT after he became America's first Black president. Within the content about U.S. presidents, optimistic, single-sided narratives were prominent (see Table 6 for examples). None of the TpT resources even minutely discussed any of the presidents' complex stories of participating in and contributing to enslavement and oppression. Instead, the TpT materials conveyed only the positive contributions of white presidents who, through policy or their own hand, murdered and enslaved Indigenous and Black peoples.

Table 6
Examples of Optimistic, Whitewashed Content About George Washington

TpT Resource	Quotation From the Resource
12	"George Washington led Americans in the fight for freedom from England."
25	"George Washington was very brave. … George Washington helped America win our freedom."
29	"George Washington served as Commander and Chief of the Continental Army; he lead [sic] his troops to victory in the Revolutionary War."
33	"Washington set the example for how later presidents should lead."

Beyond presidents, there were limited representations of people of diverse races and genders in American history within the TpT materials. For example, women were not well-represented within the 36 TpT resources. Betsy Ross was mentioned most often (8%), followed by a singular, brief mention of a few first ladies (e.g., Martha Washington, Mary Todd Lincoln, and Eleanor Roosevelt), who were mentioned only in relation to their husbands. People from other oppressed communities were also lacking or entirely missing from the TpT resources. Besides Barack Obama, Martin Luther King, Jr., was the only other Black American represented in the 36 TpT resources. He was mentioned in only one of the TpT resources, and it was strictly in relation to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, which is celebrated each January in the United States. Indigenous peoples, people of other communities of color, and related monuments or symbolism were not represented at all within the data set.

Within and across the data set, the places defined as American symbols were also described from the white gaze using a complimentary tone that avoided complexity. For example, despite Mount Rushmore's prevalence (50%) in the data set, none of the TpT resources mentioned the significance of the Indigenous land on which Mount Rushmore sits. Instead of digging into the complexity of Mount Rushmore's story, the TpT materials conveyed a single story of grandeur and nationalistic pride for the four carved presidents (see Table 7). Along the same lines, the narratives about the Statue of Liberty in the TpT materials favored positive notions of welcome, freedom, and acceptance (see Table 7). None of the TpT resources referenced the policies and injustices that refuse certain people from being welcomed to the United States. Like the narratives surrounding Mount Rushmore and the Statue of Liberty, the American flag was stripped away of complexity by staying within the lines of undeniable positivity, pride, and respect (see Table 7).

Additionally, the TpT resources failed to reference symbols of significance to Black Americans, not to mention Americans of Latinx or Asian descent. For example, when the TpT materials outlined significant monuments in Washington D.C., the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, Jefferson Memorial, and World War I Memorial were all discussed; however, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial and Rosa Parks Statue in the U.S. Capitol were not.

Fact-Based Content

The content of the TpT resources was primarily fact based. Whether in the form of a list, informational booklet, or vocabulary cards, 28 of the 36 (78%) TpT materials taught social studies by means of historical and informational facts. While there is nothing inherently wrong with using facts to teach about a new concept, the problem occurs when facts are the only means of teaching social studies content. The fact-based TpT resources depict social studies as a surface-level content area, lacking critical thinking, student engagement, and purpose. Contributing to this lack of depth, the facts within the TpT resources were often decontextualized and trivial.

Table 7
Examples of Whitewashing in the TpT Resources

TpT Resource	Quotation from Resource
American Flag	
18	"We must also remember to honor and treat the U.S. flag with respect."
24	"I'll pledge allegiance to the flag, the red, the white, the blue. I am a proud American, honest, kind and brave. I'll pledge allegiance to the flag, forever shall it wave."
33	"We say the Pledge of Allegiance to show that we are proud to be Americans."
34	"When you say the Pledge, you are promising to be a good citizen."
Mount Rushmore	
15	"These four presidents were chosen because they represented the first 150 years of American history."
17	"The mountain itself was originally named after Charles E. Rushmore New York City attorney investigating mining claims in the Black Hills in 1885."
18	"These four presidents were chosen to be the faces of Mount Rushmore because they represented United States' perseverance and growth."
28	"Mount Rushmore National Memorial is a sculpture carved into the granite face of Mount Rushmore near Keystone, South Dakota."
Statue of Liberty	
5	"The statue is an icon of freedom and of the United States: a welcoming signal to immigrants arriving from abroad."
11	"The Statue of Liberty's torch lights the way to freedom showing us the path to liberty."
18	"Many immigrants traveled to the United States by boat and saw the Statue of Liberty welcome them to their new home."
33	"On the plaque at the bottom of the Statue of Liberty is a very well-known message. The message says that America is a land that accepts people who need safety and refuge. We will help them. We will give them opportunities to live freely and safely."

In several instances, the facts were shared out of context because they were poorly integrated with another content area (e.g., literacy or mathematics). We characterized these facts as decontextualized due to their displacement from rich social studies content. For example, in Resource 1, students were tasked with measuring different sized American flags. On the worksheet, an informational bubble in the corner shared a fact about the first American flag being 42 feet wide. This lone fact was shared completely out of context of any other information about the American flag.

Social studies facts in the TpT resources were also decontextualized due to oversimplification. Distilling the social studies content down to miniscule facts stripped the TpT resources of depth and academic rigor. For example, Resource 25 listed the following three facts about the Liberty Bell: (a) "cracked," (b) "no longer rings," and (c) "rang when leaders made laws." The use of oversimplified, decontextualized facts, which were prevalent

across the materials, results in missed opportunities for rich social studies learning and inquiries.

In addition to decontextualized facts, trivial facts were also common within the TpT resources. Facts of little importance were common across and within the TpT materials. Although these facts were about an American symbol, the emphasis on being "fun" or "interesting" masked or erased opportunities for meaningful social studies learning.

For example, several of the TpT resources identified the White House as an American symbol, followed by a series of trivial tidbits about the 132 rooms and 35 bathrooms (Resource 9), the 570 gallons of paint it takes to paint the exterior (Resource 17), the kitchen's five chefs (Resource 13), and the various recreational facilities on the grounds, such as a movie theater, bowling alley, and swimming pool (Resource 2). While fun facts such as these may pique students' interest, they were coupled with little to no opportunity for further inquiry.

Additionally, despite near-ubiquitous fact usage, discrepancies emerged in the way the American symbols were described and defined across the 36 TpT resources. Analysis revealed that the facts presented in the TpT resources did not always align across resources. In some cases, descriptions of symbols varied from resource to resource. For example, when describing the American flag, various "meanings" were assigned to the colors (see Table 8).

Table 8
"Meanings" of the Colors of the American Flag

TpT Resource	Red	White	Blue
Resource 7	Courage	Purity	Loyalty
Resource 8	Strength	Loyalty	Honesty
Resource 15	Bravery	Purity	Justice
Resource 17	Valor, Zeal	Hope, Purity	Truth, Sincerity
Note. While other TpT resources identified and described the American flag as an American symbol, these four resources were the only resources that explicitly labeled the "meanings" of the colors.			

In other cases, inaccurate details were shared within the TpT materials. For example, Resource 12 incorrectly labeled the Capitol building as the "Capital," and Resource 13 incorrectly stated the Statue of Liberty is located on Ellis Island when it is actually located on Liberty Island. These discrepancies raise concern about the quality of the content being included in the TpT resources and beg the question, where are these facts and definitions coming from? Of the 36 TpT resources, none included citations for any of their content. However, interestingly, all 36 TpT resources cited their fonts and clip art.

Imagery

In the 36 TpT resources, American symbols were visually depicted using photographs and clip art. Of the 36 TpT resources, 21 exclusively used clip art to represent the American symbols, while the remaining 15 resources

used a mixture of clip art and photographs. Notably, none of the TpT resources in the data set exclusively used primary source photographs to illustrate the American symbols. Analysis of the imagery suggests the clip art contributes to the problematic content of the American symbols TpT resources.

First, the clip art almost exclusively illustrates happy, smiling faces on the symbols. The Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore, and even bald eagles were depicted with smiling faces. Additionally, cartoonish, smiling clip art of figures in American history, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, abounded, possibly suggesting to students that America was founded in a seemingly happy and simplistic way. The smiling clip art complicates the possibility of dissent, ignores the emotions and experiences of oppressed communities, and ultimately perpetuates the notion that American symbols and patriotism are exclusively associated with feelings of happiness and pride.

Mirroring the problematic canon discussed previously, the TpT resources' clip art presented a whitewashed narrative of patriotism and American symbols. However, the imagery did so with a slightly different approach. While the text-based content of the TpT resources largely failed to mention any histories or perspectives of Black, Latinx, Asian, or Indigenous peoples, there was some evidence of racial diversity in the imagery (n = 14). However, with a few exceptions (e.g., Barack Obama and Martin Luther King Jr.), the presence of imagery depicting racial diversity were relegated to the margins as merely background, nameless, supporting characters, often used as design elements.

Additionally, all clip art characters were illustrated with the same happy optimism echoed in the text-based evidence previously described. The clip art people wore Americana-themed clothing, held American flags, or appeared to be engaging in some other type of "patriotic" activity such as watching fireworks. Simply put, although diverse skin tones were represented in imagery of the TpT resources, the marginal presence and positive overtones suggest the imagery is problematic.

The clip art also posed problems in the myriad ways the American symbols were depicted. Some TpT resources included inaccurate illustrations of American symbols, such as an American flag with the incorrect number of stars or stripes (e.g., Resources 1 and 11). Other resources included inconsistent imagery, where the American symbols were represented in more than one way within a single TpT resource (e.g., Resources 8 and 27). In other cases, the American symbols clip art were decontextualized placeholders for math and literacy tasks, such as counting tally marks superimposed on American flags (Resource 23), identifying rhyming words on the Statue of Liberty (Resource 1), and solving addition problems on Abraham Lincoln's top hat (Resource 24). Taken together, these inaccurate, inconsistent, and decontextualized depictions distort the American symbols, detract from social studies content, and potentially confuse students.

Problematic Pedagogy

In terms of pedagogy, the TpT materials mostly failed to engage students in inquiry-based learning, wherein students might explore compelling questions or points of contradiction and complexity regarding patriotism and citizenship. Instead, the materials often suggested that teachers should simply print and teach materials to transmit knowledge through facts, comprehension, and recall. Also present in the TpT resources were additive and holiday-based pedagogical approaches, such that American symbols were either added as an afterthought to another subject's lessons or were merely a seasonal topic for fun crafts and games. Taken together the transmission, additive, and holiday approaches to teaching American symbols featured in the 36 TpT resources encourage pedagogy that minimizes the opportunity for inquiry, let alone teaching critical perspectives of citizenship and patriotism.

The Transmission Pedagogical Approach

Given that most of the content present in the TpT resources were facts, the activities largely reflect an emphasis on recall and comprehension, not inquiry. Examples of the types of learning activities included in the TpT materials included worksheets, graphic organizers, fact flipbooks, booklets, games, and crafts.

Worksheets were one of the most prevalent learning activities in the dataset, featuring tasks such as identifying true and false statements, answering written comprehension questions, labeling diagrams, matching words and pictures, writing vocabulary words or definitions, and coloring pictures. These types of activities fail to encourage students to ask questions, discuss compelling questions or topics, or think critically. Indeed, even when the TpT worksheets featured a graphic organizer, more often than not the task was to copy facts from a corresponding reading passage. With this overarching emphasis on skills such as memorization and comprehension, the TpT materials encourage a pedagogical approach of transmitting knowledge.

Further underscoring the transmission-focused pedagogies, the TpT materials rarely featured opportunities for student discussion or collaboration. Indeed, contrary to the fact that some of the TpT resources were tagged as "activities"' (n = 15) or "fun stuff" (n = 7) — implying a more student-centered pedagogical approach — most resources were designed to be completed independently, ranging from completing a worksheet to making a craft. These types of closed-ended activities squander opportunities for student-led engagement and inquiry.

Even when discussion questions were provided, they were often superficial opinion questions that restricted student wonderings, personal connections, or deeper content-based learning. For example, Resource 7 featured a collection of short passages about American symbols with corresponding discussion prompts that were designed to encourage students to discuss with each other. While the discussion portion of these lessons was promising in theory, the prompts often missed the mark. This can be seen in the discussion prompt that accompanied a reading passage about bald eagles, which stated, "Benjamin Franklin wanted the turkey to

be the national symbol. Which animal would you vote for? Why?" The wording of this discussion prompt limits possible inquiry, instead minimizing the activity into a meaningless vote void of context.

Beyond the lack of collaboration and discussion opportunities, the TpT materials also largely failed to provide differentiation solutions for students' learning needs. In some cases, booklets and comprehension questions were available at different reading levels; however, student differentiation often ended there. The reliance on fact-based social studies content and transmission-based pedagogy often assumes a one-size-fits all learning approach, which may hinder students' ability to engage with the material.

Interestingly, in several cases, differentiation was offered for teachers, such that they could choose between printing the materials in color or black and white ink or choose between different designs and formats of worksheets/materials in an effort to reduce ink and paper consumption. This approach suggests that the creators of the TpT materials placed more weight on planning for teachers' printing preferences than on students' learning needs or interests.

The Additive Pedagogical Approach

Several of the TpT materials encouraged pedagogy that poorly integrated social studies with other content areas, such that social studies content appeared to be an additive or afterthought. For example, Resource 1 included an activity called "Patriotic Sentences," implying the integration of literacy with social studies. The directions for the activity suggested students should unscramble sentences and copy them onto a worksheet. The sentence cards each featured clip art of American symbols; however, the corresponding sentences had nothing to do with the symbols (e.g., clip art of the Capitol building accompanied the sentence "Where are you going?"). In other words, the American symbols were completely arbitrary to the learning activity at hand, illustrating low-quality curriculum integration.

Unfortunately, low-quality social studies integration was common in the dataset. Based on the tags selected by the sellers, the TpT resources featured the integration of social studies with writing (n = 10), English language arts (n = 9), reading (n = 6), balanced literacy (n = 6), math (n = 4), and science (n = 3). However, as with the example described previously, the integrative pedagogies were generally lackluster regardless of the content area.

For example, writing activities asked students to consider prompts such as, "If you were president, what would you do?" (Resource 6) and "Who is your favorite president and why?" (Resource 19). However, in these resources, little to no content was provided related to the roles and responsibilities of a president, nor the characteristics of leadership. Likewise, mathematics activities involved counting or graphing American symbols, with minimal content beyond a "fun fact" or two about the respective symbols. In these attempts to integrate curriculum, social studies content appears to be an afterthought, such that

the American symbols were added to the resources as more of a design or thematic element, rather than a core academic focus.

Of the integration techniques embedded in the TpT resources, reading passages and booklets about American symbols included the most social studies content. However, as discussed previously, much of this content was fact-based, whitewashed, or oversimplified. Moreover, the integrative approach mostly ended with the content of the passage/booklet. Questions and activities that followed the readings generally focused on literacy-based learning objectives, such as summarizing the text, identifying story elements (e.g., characters or setting), and answering simple comprehension questions. In these instances, the literacy skills outweighed the social studies content, ultimately rendering it as second best.

The Holiday Pedagogical Approach

Similar to the way an additive approach detracted from the teaching of social studies, the teaching of American symbols was also minimized when the TpT materials encouraged pedagogy that was guided by patriotic holidays. Indeed, 18 resources were designed for use on or around a specific day such as Presidents' Day (n = 13), or other holidays/seasonal occasions (n = 5). The emphasis on holidays aligns with Shelton et al.'s (2021) finding in a web scrape of TpT that the TpT content model elevates "holiday activities … to the same level as established curriculum" (p. 1). Teaching about American symbols based on the topic coinciding with a holiday is problematic because it may foster the idea that social studies occurs only from time to time. In other words, patriotism is just something that citizens "do" on certain holidays – not a concept that has connections with everyday citizenship.

The holiday-centric TpT resources also relied heavily on games as a pedagogical approach. Resources touted "fun" games, such as American symbol bingo, memory match, crosswords, word searches, and other puzzles. Crafts were also a common counterpart to these holiday-focused TpT resources. Interestingly, several of these crafts are designed for students to "become" an American symbol. For example, Resource 11 featured a Statue of Liberty costume craft, complete with crown and torch. Another common craft for Presidents' Day featured in the TpT resources had students glue cotton balls to a printed photo of themselves to resemble a powdered wig, à la the early presidents (Resource 25). Alternative variations of this craft included students cutting and gluing a black top hat cut from construction paper onto a photo of themselves to bear semblance to Abraham Lincoln.

By engaging in these game- and craft-based activities void of context and complication, students may begin to think that patriotism is a game, costume, or seasonal persona citizens embody a few times each year. In other words, the emphasis on games and crafts may suggest to students the topic of patriotism is for leisure, as opposed to a critical aspect of citizenship.

Promising Possibilities

On the whole, the materials we analyzed were dominated by problematic content and pedagogical practices, lacked an emphasis on social studies specific skills, and perpetuated an unquestioningly patriotic vision of citizenship that was monocultural, monolingual, and monoracial. However, we did note promising possibilities within some of the resources, including the use of primary sources rather than clip art, inquiry-based questions, and the use of children's literature.

Fifteen resources included some primary source photographs or portraits rather than clip art, although none of the materials engaged in primary source analysis of those materials. Inquiry-based questions were evident in the form of KWL ("know," "want to know," and "learned") charts or science experiments focused on oxidation and the Statue of Liberty, both important activities, yet activities that do not further students' critical social studies knowledge. Finally, a handful of resources suggest a list of nonfiction children's books about American symbols that teachers could use to engage students in read-alouds. Given the possibilities of children's literature to open new insights for students, this is a promising practice that moves away from some of the more problematic pedagogy we identified.

Additionally, three of the 36 materials downloaded were part of larger units focused on government and democracy, which contextualized the American symbols lessons within both social studies standards and other related content. For example, Resource 30 featured a series of 10 lessons that covered topics such as citizen responsibilities, laws, and the branches of government, in addition to a lesson on American symbols. Moreover, these lessons were guided by social studies focused objectives (e.g., "students will study citizenship and determine what roles government officials play within a community"), vocabulary (e.g., citizen or responsibility), and essential questions (e.g., "What symbols are important to citizens in our community?").

Finally, some content creators included lesson plans, teaching ideas, and even videos explaining how to use their curricular products, which may be helpful for novice educators seeking guidance in how to teach. Ultimately, however, these promising possibilities were uncommon, and none were focused on a critical perspective toward citizenship, patriotism, or American symbols.

Discussion and Implications

As might be expected given what is known about the problematic materials found on TpT, the materials we analyzed in this study fall short of powerful, purposeful social studies education (NCSS, 2017). Moreover, they fail to live up to what research and theory suggest should be taught in terms of civics and patriotism, in general, and American symbols, more specifically.

The TpT resources analyzed here collectively illustrate an optimistic, single-sided, and minimalistic narrative about the United States, failing to showcase the expansive history of the United States in all of its diversity,

complexity, controversy, complication activism, striving and failing. This is not surprising, as Rodríguez (2018) pointed out: "American schools have generally ignored complex and inclusive renditions of citizenship and instead present narrow, simplified constructions that leave many students feeling detached and unrecognized" (p. 531). That these materials do not embrace complexity aligns with previous findings about the quality of social studies materials on TpT (Shelton et al., 2022; Harris et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2020), sites that Rodríguez et al. (2023) noted "cannot be viewed as venues for quality, justice-oriented instructional materials" (p. 1).

The materials analyzed here appear akin to what Paris and Alim (2017) suggested are "pedagogical quick fixes or 'best practices' that teachers can drop into the same old tired curriculum that deadens the souls of vast numbers of children of color in U.S. schools" (p. 12). These curricular resources fail to honor the presence, contributions, and resistance of women, immigrants, Indigenous peoples, enslaved people (and formerly enslaved people), Black Americans, LGBTQ individuals, or anyone who might complicate the notion that the United States is a nation of freedom, liberty, and justice. Taught through transmission-based pedagogy or what Freire (1970) called "banking" education, the pedagogies embedded in these materials promote acceptance and "blind fidelity" (Westheimer, 2009) to the nation, furthering an authoritarian patriotism that is dangerous to a democracy.

By merely printing and teaching fact-focused activities, opportunities for teachers to encourage dissent and embed students' backgrounds, knowledge, and interests are arguably few and far between. Teaching critical notions of citizenship and patriotism cannot happen within the margins of a worksheet or leveled reading passage.

Taken as a whole, the materials are colonizing, alienating, and dehumanizing. They force children to "negotiate White normative projections of citizenship" (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021, p. 161), an experience all too common for Black youth. The erasure of Black history from the teaching of American symbols furthers the dangerous notion that Black Americans are subpersons or that "to be human is to be distant from Blackness, and thus, to be citizens is also to be distant from Blackness (Grant et al., 2020)" (p. 155).

Similarly, a lack of representation of Asian Americans in these materials furthers what Rodríguez (2018) called an "experience common to many Asian Americans," that of "being viewed as perpetual or forever foreigners (Tuan, 1998)" (p. 531). Lacking complexity around symbols like Mount Rushmore and presidents who enslaved people or assisted in genocide of Indigenous peoples, the materials continue to colonize, asserting through an absence of Indigenous peoples in the materials a fundamental right of the settler to the land that would become the United States. The materials legitimate what is illegitimate through settler colonialism, which Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) defined as a "project of replacement, which aims to vanish Indigenous peoples and replace them with settlers, who see themselves as the rightful claimants to land, and indeed, as Indigenous" (p. 73). Finally, visions of cultural, community-based notions of citizenship (Vickery, 2016) are nonexistent, as the materials lack any

place-based grounding, something that could limit their salability on a nationwide, for-profit curriculum platform.

National identity, Aponte-Safe et al. (2022) argued, is based on "the false premise of sameness" (p. 86). Lessons in American symbols taught in the earliest grades of elementary school become "official history" as well as "exclusionary tools that question the belonging of students and families who are often racialized, labeled as problematic, and undergo violent processes of assimilation" (p. 86). Indeed, even the taken-for-granted nature and narrow use of the term "American symbols" is evidence of the lack of criticality in curricular resources available on TpT and raises concern for the way students learn about, develop, and understand national identity.

We are gravely concerned that these upbeat, positive materials, through their exclusionary representation and transmission-based pedagogies, "disconnect students from their histories and from intergenerational knowledge of mechanisms of power and mechanisms of resistance" (Aponte-Safe et al., 2022, p. 86). The lack of criticality, authentic representation, primary sources, high-quality children's literature, and social studies inquiry, coupled with an untroubled canon of white Founding Fathers and cheerful representations of monuments and other symbols negates the potential for American symbols to be seen as "living" as Libresco (2013) recommended, things that can be debated, interpreted, or seen from different angles.

Given the primacy of American symbols in the early elementary curriculum, it behooves the field to empirically critique these popular materials and, crucially, to take action in the quest to popularize more meaningful, critical materials that offer a counternarrative of what an actual full range of "American symbols" might include. If "a critical civic education wants children to understand the current and undesirable world they do inhabit, while also having the skills and dispositions to consciously produce the desired society," (Wheeler-Bell, 2014, p. 469), young people must be able to grapple with the limitations of U.S. history and how the traditional canon of American symbols have failed to live up to the ideals of liberty and justice for all.

Implications for Research

The findings of this study offer various implications for research and practice. Future research may explore how teachers take up these materials in their teaching, including if and how they make adaptations. On the other side of the coin, future research may also examine how content creators envision the materials being used in classrooms. This line of research may investigate why the TpT resources are designed the way they are, including creators' considerations for selling to a nationwide audience and any barriers or legal issues that exist for the infusion of primary sources or children's literature into online materials that are copyrighted and sold.

Additionally, the prevalence of simplistic, noncontroversial content in this study's dataset begs investigation into why the creators of these TpT materials chose to highlight these particular symbols, narratives, and

pedagogical approaches. Given the rise of anticritical race theory laws and narratives in the United States (Schwartz, 2021; Waxman, 2023), future research may examine the role sites like TpT play in exacerbating or disrupting this rhetoric.

Findings of this study also revealed that while the majority of the TpT resources featured the integration of social studies content and skills with at least one other subject area, the quality of this integration was largely lackluster. The potential and challenges of integrative elementary social studies have been explored in the scholarly literature (e.g., Boyle-Baise et al., 2008; Hinde, 2015); however, there is a dearth of research on integrative pedagogies present in online curricular resources. Future research may investigate how TpT resources integrate social studies with other subject areas, which may have implications on the integrity of elementary social studies in practice.

Future research may also examine other curricular materials and pedagogies teachers use to teach American symbols in their classrooms. For example, the findings of this study suggest a place-based component was generally missing from the TpT resources. A place-based pedagogical approach to teaching American symbols, including teaching about symbols in local communities, may offer insight into alternative pedagogies that center, or recenter, community and students' identities in the curriculum (Vickery, 2016).

Implications for Practice

When given the opportunity, elementary students are able to take up critical perspectives of American symbols. In a study of pr-service teachers enacting a critical inquiry about Confederate monuments with students in first, second, and third grade, Muller (2018) found that the students were able to take up critical perspectives about the monuments. While the students initially associated the people on monuments as "good" people who "helped our country" (p. 19), upon engaging in the critical inquiry facilitated by the preservice teachers, students were able to identify issues of injustice among Confederate monuments and take informed action by writing letters to their legislators about removing the racist statues. Evidence suggests, then, that elementary students *can* develop a critical lens to analyze American symbols, monuments, and people (Johnson, 2019), and curricular examples of how to develop that critical lens are present to a limited extent in social studies practitioner journals.

However, we see a need for additional easily accessible, high-quality materials to teach about American symbols from an inclusive and critical perspective. New materials should be created that support teachers to teach in ways that complicate and expand visions of citizenship and patriotism so that the canon of symbols students come to know and view as distinctly "American" is widened. For example, monarch wings are an important symbol to undocumented community organizers in the United States. The National Museum of American History explains, "Each year, monarch butterflies take flight across the North American continent to survive. The butterflies' journey speaks to migration, survival, transformation, and the power of communities" (Bercaw & Arteaga, 2020, n.p.). As a result, the museum is collecting monarch wings as an important

symbol of this group of individuals who play a large role in shaping American history.

Additionally, the Carousel on the National Mall stands as a symbol of the long journey towards equal rights in the United States. Standing originally in the Gwynn Oak Amusement Park in Baltimore, Maryland, the carousel was integrated on the same day that Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech (PBS Newshour, 2013, n.p.). The children's book *A Ride to Remember: A Civil Rights Story* by Sharon Langley and Amy Nathan could be used to teach about this important monument to Civil Rights alongside lessons about the Statue of Liberty or the Liberty Bell, a pairing of symbols that would encourage students to grapple with the concepts of freedom and liberty.

Many other curricular ideas exist in *Social Studies for the Young Learner* or in one-off spaces on the Internet, found through an exhaustive search that teachers simply may not have the time in which to engage. Given the many reviews and followers that online teacherpreneurs (Shelton & Archambault, 2019) have on sites like TpT, it is evident that teachers seek out materials in spaces that are designed for ease of access (Shelton et al., 2022).

We should certainly meet teachers where they are. Thus, we encourage scholars of elementary social studies education, critical elementary teachers, and other foundations, museums, and institutions who design curriculum to leverage social media and sites like TpT for this same purpose. Imagine if the many, sometimes costly, materials that exist on TpT to teach in whitewashed, monocultural ways about the symbolism of the United States were matched by just as many critical, meaningful, inquiry-based materials available for free. What might teachers choose?

Teachers should not stop teaching about the canonical symbols we outline in the findings. In fact, we encourage teachers and teacher educators to teach about them in more depth and detail, to engage in the controversy around them. This may require that teachers, themselves, are versed in the controversies around the symbols. Methods instructors and those who develop professional learning experiences for teachers could engage in this work. In our own elementary social studies methods courses, we teach a mini-unit about American symbols. We take three hour-long class sessions to first engage in a critique of TpT curricular resources about American symbols after reading Westheimer's (2009) article, "Should Social Studies be Patriotic?" During their analysis, we ask students to consider the following questions:

1. What kind(s) of patriotism are present in the resources? Provide an example that supports your response.

2. Are multiple perspectives on the symbols present or is the resource one-sided? Provide an example.

3. Does the student get to form their own opinion about the symbols (i.e., is there inquiry present) or is only one truth represented?

4. How might students from historically marginalized backgrounds who have not had the same access to "liberty and justice for all view" these materials? Support your reasoning.

5. What social studies skills are present in the materials? Explain how you see them. Use the social studies skill chart to support you as you answer this question.

6. Do students spend more time on learning academic content and skills or creating a craft?

7. What is your overall assessment of the materials?

Students use a social studies skill chart developed using our state standards and the NCSS (2017) Position Statement, *Powerful, Purposeful Pedagogy in Elementary School Social Studies*. Students readily notice that the TpT materials foster an authoritarian patriotism and do not engage students in many (or sometimes any) of the social studies skills required by the state standards. To follow up this activity, we form small groups and preservice teachers read short articles or watch videos about the history and controversy around one of three symbols: the Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore, and the American Flag. In jigsaw-style, members from each group fill in a graphic organizer to teach other groups about the symbol they were assigned. The following class period, we engage students in an inquiry into the Statue of Liberty using primary sources, modeled after the activity outlined in the article "Reexamining the Statue of Liberty" by Maguth et al. (2013).

We conclude the mini-unit by asking students to consider ways they could adapt the inquiry for the younger grades and sharing our own ideas, such as comparing and contrasting using children's literature or with guest speakers who share different understandings of the symbols. Tying this kind of mini-unit together with lessons about patriotism, trends in citizenship education, and the *College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) help to support the larger goals of the methods class.

Conclusion

Given the limited symbolic representations in these 36 TpT resources, we see these materials fostering a "civic estrangement" (Tillet, 2012; Vickery, 2016), wherein historically excluded groups "continue to be marginalized in how they are represented in the American citizenship narrative and memory that promote an American identity" (Vickery, 2016, p. 29). Moreover, limiting the representation of people of color in the texts contributes to "a practice of settler colonial erasure" (Sabzalian, 2019, p. 2). Busey and Walker (2017) noted,

There is a need in social studies education to continually trouble and reimagine the intersection of race and citizenship, as it has implications not just for curricular standards, but also for students' perceptions of themselves and their communities in the larger social world. (p. 481)

Curricular materials available to elementary teachers on TpT related to the topic of American symbols contribute to a fundamental misunderstanding of American history. This misunderstanding eventually impacts how adults view society, politics, and the boundaries of citizenship. Thus, seemingly harmless lessons about George Washington and the American flag taught in the elementary grades come to have a much larger impact on society and the future of democracy. The social studies field should consider where teachers might be better supported to turn to explore American symbols in a more inclusive and critical way. We question (and dream of) what might happen if the canon of symbols we outlined here were to no longer exist. Might we begin to weave a new tapestry of patriotism and civic belonging, more colorful, complex, and textured than before?

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