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Inside the Black Box of Divisive Concepts and Difficult History: Introducing a Typology of Collective Trauma in Social Studies Education

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Trauma studies scholars emphasize naming or acknowledging trauma to promote healing. In response to the recent political and curricular whiplash in the Commonwealth of Virginia, this paper investigates the prevalence and nature of traumagenic events in Virginia's social studies standards. Data analysis suggests that conceptual insights from trauma studies literature are broadly applicable in the study of traumagenic events in social studies. The findings foreground the role of positionality in the study of traumagenic events and highlight the importance of active verbs and visible actors in acknowledging both trauma and healing in the standards. This paper concludes with a typology for examining collective trauma in social studies curricula and beyond.

Keywords: *difficult history, healing, history education, historical harm, social studies, trauma*

> The history of people of color, particularly Black Americans, in our country is a history of strength, perseverance, courageous struggle, agency, and hope. But we also know that history is marked by exploitation, oppression, disenfranchisement, and discrimination. As education leaders in the Commonwealth of Virginia, we have a responsibility to recognize and confront such racism and discrimination. The Virginia Board of Education is committed to ensuring that Virginia students learn and understand the complex and often untold history of Black Americans in Virginia and our nation (Virginia Board of Education, 2020, para. 3).

> Political indoctrination has no place in our classrooms. Inherently divisive concepts, such as critical race theory and its progeny, instruct students to view life only through the lens of race and presume that some students are consciously or unconsciously racist, sexist, or oppressive and that other students are victims. This denies our students the opportunity to gain important facts and core knowledge, formulate their own opinions, and think for themselves. Our children deserve far better from their education than to be told what to think (Youngkin, 2022, p. 1).

The clear interplay between recent political rhetoric and curricular changes in the Commonwealth of Virginia provides a powerful case study of the role that trauma plays in social studies curriculum. The two statements in the epigraph reflect opposing viewpoints for how U.S. public education should address content related to racism and other forms of oppression. Virginia's governor, Glenn Youngkin, and other Republican politicians call such topics "divisive concepts" in an attempt to discredit honest efforts to acknowledge trauma. By contrast, scholarly literature refers to "complex and often untold history" (Virginia Board of Education, 2020, para. 3) as difficult knowledge, difficult history, or hard history (e.g., Gross & Terra, 2019; Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018). The common denominator among historical and contemporary narratives involving discrimination and violence is the presence of traumagenic events—episodes that have caused or are likely to "cause trauma reactions for the majority of those who are targeted, perpetrators, and witnesses" (Anderson Hooker & Czajkowski, 2013, p. 14). Although the two statements in the epigraph provide different visions for addressing traumagenic events in Virginia schools, they each name dynamics that explain why "teachers tend to struggle with teaching difficult history, and as a result, secondary students lack nuance and sophisticated understandings of topics that are considered difficult history" (Journell & Halvorsen, 2023, p. 520). Trauma studies scholars use the term *historical trauma* to refer to historical events that caused harm and remain traumagenic, resulting in this kind of ongoing impact and struggle (Brave Heart, 2000; DeWolf & Geddes, 2019; C. Yoder, 2020).

This study is informed by the racial reckoning and global pandemic of 2020, which revealed that Americans—including educators and students—need better tools to address the collective trauma that we continue to experience at societal and community levels. A growing body of empirical research on the trauma students bring to the classroom (e.g., Naff et al., 2022; Oliveira & Segel, 2022; Thomas

et al., 2019) has led to essential literature on how teachers can respond most effectively (e.g., Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021; Sondel et al., 2018). However, policymakers in many U.S. states have recently maligned and even banned the very curricular and instructional resources that are intended to better acknowledge and address the trauma present in our world.

As a society, we need a better understanding of our current and historical trauma so that we can describe what we are experiencing with sufficient granularity to identify commonalities instead of simply talking past or vilifying each other. As educators, we similarly need thicker conceptual tools and language to more accurately name and acknowledge the trauma that students are experiencing and that we collectively encounter in the K–12 (social studies) curriculum (e.g., Stowe, 2017; Williams & Johnson, 2020; Zembylas, 2014). The need to acknowledge trauma is particularly relevant and challenging for social studies teachers who increasingly find themselves between the rock of honest, meaningful instruction and the hard place of disparaging political rhetoric and curricular bans (e.g., Darragh & Petrie, 2019; Dunn et al., 2019; Gibbs & Papoi, 2020).

In this study, I draw on conceptual insights from the field of trauma studies and the emerging literature on a pedagogy of political trauma (Sondel et al., 2018). I operationalize this knowledge base by analyzing the K–12 social studies state standards from Virginia, a state that has experienced significant political and curricular whiplash since 2020. The purpose of this study was to contribute a more "nuanced and sophisticated understanding" (Journell & Halvorsen, 2023, p. 520) of traumagenic events in Virginia's social studies curriculum to reframe the conversation around difficult and divisive topics. For this analysis, I employed C. Yoder's (2020) definition of trauma involving a threat to one's bodily safety, "producing terror and feelings of helplessness" and "challenging a person's or a group's sense that life is meaningful and orderly" (p. 7). I investigated the following research questions:

1. How prevalent are traumagenic events in Virginia's social studies standards?
2. What is the nature of the traumagenic events embedded within Virginia's social studies standards?

In the following section, I provide a brief summary of the context in which this analysis took place, providing a rationale for interrogating notions of difficult history and the divisive concepts inherent in the K–12 social studies curriculum.

Political Whiplash

Traumagenic history and stories figure prominently in U.S. political and educational discourse. Unfortunately, politicians often garner support by avoiding or even prohibiting the acknowledgment of trauma, decrying any references to race as critical race theory (CRT). Such anti-CRT rhetoric and policies remain prevalent even though researchers, educators, and journalists have documented that CRT is taught in law schools and graduate programs, not in K–12 classrooms (e.g., Ransaw, 2022; Schwartz, 2024). Rather than teaching children to feel guilty, scholars employ CRT to examine the structural nature of racism in fields such as education to pursue more just and equitable systems (e.g., Jones, 2022; Vickery & Rodríguez, 2022; Virginia Board of Education, 2020).

Virginia offers a visible case study of the way traumagenic histories in the K–12 curriculum are used as a political football. Under the administration of Governor Ralph Northam, Virginia's Board of Education (2020) issued a statement explicitly naming both discrimination and "courageous struggle, agency, and hope" in the history of the Commonwealth, committing the Board of Education to both "confronting such racism and discrimination" (para. 3) and "ensuring that Virginia students learn and understand the complex and often untold history of Black Americans in Virginia, and our nation" (para. 4). Later in 2020, the Virginia Board of Education accepted a report from the Virginia Commission on African American History Education in the Commonwealth, which Governor Northam had established in 2019. The implementation of the report included "technical edits" or revisions to Virginia's K–12 social studies standards, which were implemented in December 2020 (African American History Education Commission, 2020).

On Governor Youngkin's first day in office, January 15, 2022, he signed Executive Order 1, focused on "ending the use of inherently divisive concepts, including Critical Race Theory" (Youngkin, 2022). The order accused Virginia's schools of using CRT to "instruct students to only view life through the lens of race" while paradoxically asserting

> We must equip our teachers to teach our students the entirety of our history—both good and bad. From the horrors of American slavery and segregation, and our country's treatment of Native Americans, to the triumph of America's Greatest Generation against the Nazi Empire, the heroic efforts of Americans in the Civil Rights Movement, and our country's defeat of the Soviet Union and the ills of Communism, we must provide our students with the facts and context necessary to understand these important events. Only then will we realize Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream that our children "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." (pp. 1–2)

Executive Order 1 also laid out plans for Virginia's superintendent of public instruction to rescind several equity-focused resources and superintendent's memos (Balow, 2022). The "Interim 30-Day Report on Inherently Divisive Concepts" explicitly targeted references to CRT, concluding that "we must continue to ensure that no student in Virginia is taught to judge or treat others differently solely on the

basis of their race, skin color, ethnicity, sex or faith" (Balow, 2022, p. 1). Dickenson et al. (2023) chronicled how later in 2022 the Youngkin administration commissioned a secret rewrite of Virginia's social studies standards, a move that spurred coalition building among Virginia educators, historians, and community groups.

Although Governor Youngkin attested to the power of trauma—invoking the "ills of Communism" and "being judged by the color of their skin"—his administration's political rhetoric and policy initiatives appear to exemplify the ways in which "a troubled past can engender the construction of historical accounts designed to manage trauma, guilt, and ambivalence by distorting the collective memory in support of present-day political and social ends" (Reich & Corning, 2019, p. 224). By contrast, the creation of Virginia's African American History Education Commission and the 2020 statement of the Virginia Board of Education provide examples of confronting racism and the resulting trauma (D. Simmons, 2020). Such an approach not only provides curricular tools for "facilitating difficult conversations" (Virginia Department of Education, 2022, p. 17) but also provides essential historical context for meaningful discussion and compelling social studies instruction.

Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical perspectives from trauma studies serve to frame the present study of official social studies standards. Building on years of experience as a licensed counselor and trauma studies scholar, C. Yoder (2020) defined *traumagenic events* as "producing terror and feelings of helplessness" and "challenging a person's or a group's sense that life is meaningful and orderly" (p. 7). Examples of historical trauma (e.g., colonialism, genocide, and slavery) and current events (e.g., the Israel–Hamas war, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and school shootings) routinely introduce K–12 students to traumagenic content. Yet, even as educators are increasingly encouraged to respond to student experiences and behaviors through trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive approaches (e.g., Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021; Dutro, 2019; Thomas et al., 2019; Venet, 2021), the role of traumagenic events in social studies curricula remains opaque at best.

Building on the analysis of Dutro and Bien (2014) and Alvarez and Farinde-Wu (2022), I draw on trauma studies literature as the theoretical basis for this study. The focus on social studies curricula adds an additional layer to Dutro and Bien's study of trauma experiences individual students bring to the classroom and the positioning of students within the school community. At the same time, this study employs a holistic trauma framework that acknowledges the racialized nature of the U.S. context (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022).

In short, a growing body of interdisciplinary literature reveals both the individual and the communal implications of trauma (Ginwright, 2016; Love, 2019; van der Kolk, 2014; Volkan, 2001; C. Yoder, 2020). This literature reflects the work of Menakem (2017) and fellow trauma studies scholars and practitioners (e.g., Levine & Frederick, 1997; Lipsky & Burk, 2009; van der Kolk, 2014) who seek to educate on common physiologic responses to trauma (i.e., fight, flight, or freeze). This research also finds that secondary trauma can occur through hearing the stories of others (Levine & Frederick, 1997; Lipsky & Burk, 2009; van der Kolk, 2014), an insight that directly relates to encounters with traumagenic content in social studies classrooms.

Analysis of collective trauma is particularly relevant to this study. For example, Brave Heart (2000) identified historical trauma response as a concept central to the Lakota (Teton Sioux) experience. The family-based racial reconciliation work of *Coming to the Table* similarly seeks to acknowledge and transform historical trauma (DeWolf & Geddes, 2019) by naming historical harms or "modern day effects or manifestation of historical trauma" (Anderson Hooker & Czajkowski, 2013, p. 8). This relational approach speaks to the deep understanding reflected in Schweber's (2019) description:

> Historical traumas outlive their times, for they are not only historical events, but emotional ones, bodily experienced, identified with or rejected, and either way, epigenetically passed on from generation to generation. Violence doesn't necessarily beget violence, but when history goes unexamined, when its victors cherish its spoils, and when its victims remain victimized, difficult histories bequeath conflict. (p. xii)

Schweber alluded to the essential concept of transgenerational trauma or intergenerational trauma that is passed on from generation to generation (e.g., Atallah, 2017; Menakem, 2017; Volkan, 2001). The pattern of victors and victims reflects *chosen trauma*, which Volkan (2001) defined as "the shared mental representation of a massive trauma that the group's ancestors suffered at the hand of an enemy" (p. 79). The term *chosen trauma* does not indicate that a group is "choosing" trauma in real time but rather acknowledges that some historical traumas (i.e., chosen) continue to be relevant to a group's identity while others do not (Lederach, 2005; Volkan, 2001).

In applying these rich conceptual understandings to social studies education, I seek to operationalize the potential of conscientization (Freire, 2018; Sondel et al., 2018), or the belief that "people are knowledgeable about, capable of naming, interacting with, and responding to their own realities in dynamic ways" (Lederach, 1995, p. 112). Although trauma healing can and must be addressed at an individual level (e.g., van der Kolk, 2014; C. Yoder, 2020), the goal of transforming collective trauma and pursuing liberation requires communal engagement (Atallah, 2017; DeWolf & Geddes, 2019; Menakem, 2017).

Review of Literature

Recent political discourse on trauma in K–12 education highlights the need for deeper understandings of trauma within the curriculum. In this section I review three areas of literature that provide important insights into the teaching and learning of traumagenic content. I first review literature on difficult knowledge and difficult history. I then examine emerging research on political trauma. Finally, I describe research on the teaching and learning of racialized trauma in the U.S. context.

Difficult Knowledge and Difficult History

The terms *difficult knowledge* and *difficult history* reflect the challenges associated with controversial and divisive content. Pitt and Britzman (2003) initially identified difficult knowledge with feelings of disappointment and being misunderstood. Gross and Terra (2019) explained that difficult history is difficult because facing historical trauma often requires a community to confront state-sanctioned violence or other collective traumas. Harris et al. (2022) concluded that "asking students in a social studies classroom to explore the direct and ongoing dehumanizing effects of oppression, violence, and trauma on individuals and societies is difficult and often unpopular" (p. 5). Topics such as slavery and war—as well as current events such as separation of immigrant families and COVID-19 (Naff et al., 2022; Oliveira & Segel, 2022)—bring death to the forefront in a way that forces educators to "recognize the powerful cognitive affects and bodily affects that death and grief have on students, teachers, and the learning environment" (Christ et al., 2022, p. 34).

Research indicates that teachers find topics related to trauma difficult to address in the classroom. Gibbs and Papoi (2020) found that positionality is an important component of this equation because teachers felt less comfortable teaching about war to the children of soldiers or teaching about lynching in a rural southern community (p. 107). Zembylas (2014, 2017) emphasized the role of emotional well-being in the learning of difficult knowledge. Zembylas (2017) described this as the "emotional burden carried by learners' affective investments to particular public discourses or ideologies, especially when the desire for empathizing with the Other seems to be rejected or eroded" (p. 669). Based on research among Israeli teachers and high school students, Goldberg (2017) similarly concluded that learning about the victimhood of others constituted the difficult part of difficult history. This research highlights the need for additional conceptual tools for cracking open the black box of difficult knowledge and difficult history.

A Pedagogy of Political Trauma

Scholars initially developed literature on political trauma among K–12 students in response to the "Trump effect" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016, p. 1) documented among students of color and other marginalized groups (e.g., Brownell, 2022; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Based on a survey of teachers from 43 states, Sondel et al. (2018) articulated a pedagogy of political trauma based on three principles: (1) attending to students' emotional experiences and well-being, (2) nurturing civic knowledge and skills among students, and (3) cultivating students' critical consciousness and activism. Subsequent research in social studies education has emphasized the importance of addressing trauma within a trusting classroom community (Payne & Journell, 2019; P. J. Yoder, 2020).

Emerging research additionally has demonstrated how content connections provide opportunities to enact a pedagogy of political trauma within the social studies context. A fifth-grade teacher from the Southwest described attending to emotional responses of her students when they started booing a video of Trump. The teacher reported pausing the video to specifically address student concerns and explain that students were more effective communicators when they stated what they found objectionable instead of simply hurling insults (Payne & Journell, 2019). Studies with first- and second-grade African American males (Johnson, 2019), Mexican American and Muslim American middle school students (P. J. Yoder, 2020), and a racially diverse sample of high school students (Parkhouse & Arnold, 2019) have documented ways in which students have employed their burgeoning "politicized funds of knowledge" (Gallo & Link, 2015, p. 357) to name and resist political trauma. In sum, the literature on a pedagogy of political trauma suggests that education is a tool for addressing trauma and promoting resistance and resilience.

Teaching and Learning Racialized Trauma

Racialized trauma features prominently in the literature on political trauma and difficult history in the U.S. context. Studies investigating student perspectives unearth narratives of Europeans killing, enslaving, displacing, and disenfranchising African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants of color (Epstein, 2000, 2009; VanSledright, 2008; P. J. Yoder, 2021). In her analysis of Virginia's state standards, Jones (2022) examined portrayals of Black and white fear. She found that while fear is attributed to white people, the standards omit fear of Black figures even in the context of suffering (i.e., lynchings, segregation, and slavery) and thereby dehumanize Black people (for a summary of racial violence in Virginia, see Jones, 2022, p. 439). Racialized trauma in the United States led Carter G. Woodson to call out the discrimination that African American students faced in the curriculum and establish the first Negro History Week as an act of resistance in 1926 (Givens, 2019). The continued relevance of these realities led Duncan and Neal (2022) to chronicle a "brief history of

Black-led protests and rebellion" (p. 154), both reporting on and further illustrating the importance of pairing trauma with resistance and resilience.

Emerging literature provides empirical and theoretical insights into addressing racial trauma. In detailing a vision for abolitionist teaching, Love (2019) emphasized the importance of intersectional justice. She contended that "we must struggle together not only to reimagine schools but to build new schools that we are taught to believe are impossible: schools based on intersectional justice, antiracism, love, healing, and joy" (p. 11). King (2019, 2020) advocated for a Black historical consciousness, concluding that "White epistemic logic provides for a curriculum that teaches *about* Black history and not *through* Black history" (King, 2019, p. 390; emphasis in the original). In research with preservice teachers, King found schematic narratives of heroes/messiahs, oppression, and empowerment. In a subsequent study, King's research team found that engaging Black historical consciousness empowered white teachers to more fully engage difficult histories (G. Simmons et al., 2022). Love's notions of abolitionist teaching and King's Black historical consciousness map onto the *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery* resources from the Southern Poverty Law Center (2018), which report that social studies curriculum and instruction on slavery frequently lack detail and sufficient contextualization. This study seeks to address this need through drawing on concepts and language from the field of trauma studies.

Methods

In this study, I examined the portrayal of traumagenic events in social studies curricula for the purpose of deepening educators' understanding of the content students encounter. I chose to analyze Virginia's Standards of Learning for several reasons. First, the current political and curricular whiplash in Virginia presents a compelling case, particularly given that Virginia's 2015 state standards were updated in December 2020 based on recommendations from the African American History Education Commission (for analysis of controversy over Virginia's standards, see Dickenson et al., 2023; van Hover et al., 2010). Second, my own experience teaching and conducting social studies research in Virginia schools has indicated that social studies teaching and learning are closely aligned with the state standards (i.e., Jaffee & Yoder, 2024; P. J. Yoder, 2020, 2021, 2024; P. J. Yoder & van Hover, 2018). Third, Virginia's standards have been included in previous social studies education research and therefore carry currency within the field (e.g., Anderson & Metzger, 2011; Busey & Walker, 2017; Jones, 2022; Kolluri & Young, 2021; Shear et al., 2015). The following research questions guided the analysis:

1. How prevalent are traumagenic events in Virginia's social studies standards?
2. What is the nature of the traumagenic events embedded within Virginia's social studies standards?

Data and Analysis

To address the research questions, I printed and analyzed the 2015 History and Social Science Standards of Learning Curriculum Framework for each grade from the Virginia Department of Education website. Unfortunately, the Youngkin administration removed several documents (e.g., Virginia Board of Education, 2020; Virginia Department of Education, 2015) from the Virginia Department of Education website. Although the 2020 updates remain accessible on the Virginia Department of Education (2020) website, the versions I first analyzed can only be found on several Virginia school districts' websites (e.g., Virginia Department of Education, 2015).

I employed critical discourse analysis to "describe the ways discourses maintain and legitimize social inequalities and power relations in society" and interrogate "not only what is said but how it is said and its consequences" (Jones, 2022, p. 442; see also Kolluri & Young, 2021). The coding began with careful reading of each lettered standard within Virginia's Social Studies Standards of Learning ($n = 749$). I examined the standards as well as the detailed descriptions that accompanied each set of standards (i.e., essential skills, essential understandings, and essential knowledge). During this initial round, I coded for a priori terms based on the literature on traumagenic events: historical trauma, transgenerational trauma, chosen trauma, acknowledged/explicit trauma, reconciliation/healing, race, slavery, terrorism, the Holocaust, and war (see Table 1). I also recorded whether each code reflected elementary, middle school, or high school standards and which of the standards' disciplinary categories best applied: social studies skills, history, geography, economics, or civics. I simultaneously open coded for emerging themes (Creswell, 2009), noting key phrases, representative excerpts, and analytic memos in a separate column of the coding spreadsheet (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Following implementation of the African American History Education Commission's (2020) technical edits in December 2020, I accessed the updated Curriculum Framework documents (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). I then compared the 2015 and 2020 Curriculum Framework documents as I executed a second round of coding, accounting for the revisions and adjusting several codes based on the code definitions that I clarified following the first round of coding. In particular, I removed codes for a few standards in which traumagenic events may be expected to emerge in the course of a lesson but are not explicitly included in the Curriculum Framework. For example, although kindergarten students may be likely to uncover incidents of historical trauma while "listening to or talking with citizens from the local community about life in the past"

(K1.a), I removed my first-round code for historical trauma for this standard given that the text does not directly name traumagenic events. Conversely, I added codes for chosen trauma or historical trauma while examining standards related to voting (i.e., CE.1h, GOVT.6f), noting that grievances concerning the electoral college and beliefs about U.S. election fraud have significantly shifted public discourse on what used to be considered dry procedural knowledge. Once I had concluded all coding, I tabulated results by the categories listed in Table 1, preparing graphs and computing percentages in response to the research questions.

Researcher Positionality

The above-mentioned data-analysis description exemplifies the notion of researcher as instrument (Creswell, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2001). I recognize that my own positionality as a former Virginia social studies teacher and current teacher-educator who directly experiences the shifting sociopolitical landscape informs this analysis. I further recognize that the questions I ask, the way I applied the codes in this study, and the meaning I make from them all reflect my position of privilege as a member of the dominant U.S. culture (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; Love, 2019; Shear & Hawkman, 2020; P. J. Yoder, 2020). In particular, my identity as a formally educated, white, monolingual, heterosexual, cisgender male informs my experiences with and understandings of systemic oppression. At the same time, my identity as a member of a small Christian tradition that traces its roots to religious persecution in Europe (e.g., Menakem, 2017) first helped me to understand the relevance of learning about trauma and being receptive to the testimony of others. My journey has included participating in both levels of the week-long Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) seminar, which have inspired me to imagine and pursue trauma healing and transformation (Ginwright, 2016; Menakem, 2017; C. Yoder, 2020). I am also indebted to scholars of color whose examinations of traumagenic content in social studies education (e.g., Johnson, 2019; Stowe, 2017; Williams & Johnson, 2020) and deep theoretical work (e.g., Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; King, 2019, 2020; Love, 2019) feed the "moral imagination" (Lederach, 2005, p. ix) that fuels this analysis.

Results

In this section I present findings from the first research question: How prevalent are traumagenic events in Virginia's social studies standards? In short, the qualitative critical discourse analysis suggests that trauma is ubiquitous in Virginia's social studies standards. Overall, I coded for one or more elements of trauma in 385 of a total of 749 subpoints across the K–12 standards, meaning that fully half (51.4%) of Virginia's social studies standards contained traumagenic events. As shown in Figure 1, the majority (61.2%) of the 385 standards coded for trauma are taught in high school (n = 236), whereas high school standards account for about half (50.6%) of 749 Virginia's K–12 social studies standards overall. The remaining codes for trauma were fairly evenly split among elementary (20.3%) and middle school (18.4%) standards, reflecting a lower prevalence of traumagenic events among the 217 elementary standards (35.9%) compared with the 153 middle school standards (46.4%). By comparison, 62.2% of the high school standards (n = 379) contain traumagenic events.

Data analysis revealed the significant prevalence of historical trauma and race within Virginia's K–12 social studies standards. As shown in Figure 1, the next most common types of trauma dealt with transgenerational trauma, acknowledged or explicit examples of trauma, chosen trauma, and war. By comparison, the specific topics of slavery, terrorism, and the Holocaust (including other examples of genocide) were all less prevalent. I also identified a total of 46 standards that depicted reconciliation or healing.

Figure 2 shows the prevalence of traumagenic events according to the five content categories labeled within the standards. Most trauma codes were applied to historical content (60%) at a rate higher than the overall prevalence (46.2%) of history-related standards (n = 346) across the entire K–12 curriculum. The findings reflect the growing literature on difficult history (e.g., Gross & Terra, 2019; Harris et al., 2022) and indicate the prevalence of historical trauma within Virginia's standards.

I next addressed the second research question: What is the nature of the traumagenic events embedded within Virginia's social studies standards? In the following subsections I detail three findings. First, data analysis suggests that conceptual insights from trauma studies literature provide a peek inside the proverbial black box of difficult history and divisive concepts in the curriculum. Second, the process of analyzing the standards and the resulting codes foreground the role of positionality in the study of traumagenic events. Finally, I found that active verbs and visible actors serve as key linguistic tools for acknowledging both trauma and healing in the standards.

Trauma Opens the Black Box of Divisive Concepts and Difficult History

The prevalence of trauma in Virginia's social studies standards provides conceptual insights into the divisive concepts and difficult history in social studies curriculum. Two of Virginia's standards help to illustrate the central paradox that makes some content divisive or difficult. The following appears in Virginia's second-grade standards:

TABLE 1

Definitions of types of trauma and examples of traumagenic events

Term	Definition	Examples from curriculum framework		
		Elementary	Middle school	High school
Historical trauma	Traumagenic events from the past	Describe how the relationship between diseases and weapons of the English settlers impacted the Virginia Indians. (1.1f)	Technology and information flows permit people to work across international borders. This structure creates competition from foreign workers for United States jobs but also may create opportunities for United States workers to work for companies based in other countries. (CE.14d)	European diseases, such as smallpox, killed more than half of American Indians. (WHII.4d)
Transgenerational trauma	Ongoing legacy of traumagenic events from the past	The Virginia colony turned to enslaved labor to make money and expand their resources. This dependence lasted for more than two hundred years, until the end of the Civil War. (VS.4a)	The Three-fifths Compromise perpetuated slavery in the United States. (USI.7b)	Colonial governments structured many national economies to become mineral or commodity exporters. (WG.9c)
Chosen trauma	Traumagenic events that inform group identity	Powhatan saw the settlers as invaders of his people's land. (VS.1f)	While many Japanese Americans served in the armed forces, others were treated with distrust and prejudice, and many were forced into internment camps in the United States. (USII.7c)	[The Crusades] left a legacy of bitterness among Christians, Jews, and Muslims. (WHI.14b)
Acknowledged (explicit) trauma	Traumagenic events with a named trauma response or problem	Many [Jamestown] settlers died of starvation and disease. (VS.3f)	Life on the [Civil War] battlefield and on the home front was extremely harsh. Many soldiers died from disease and exposure. (USI.9f)	Write a letter of support on behalf of the United States for a U.S. ambassador of a region in turmoil due to movement and increases in the refugee population. The letter should acknowledge the social, political, economic, and geographic conditions of the region, how the region has been affected by the recent population increase, and the support the United States would be willing to provide. (WG.1j)
Reconciliation or healing	Repairing relationships or redressing harm from traumagenic events	Juneteenth is traditionally the day that celebrates the end of the enslavement of African Americans in the United States. It is observed on June 19th. (1.4)	Harriet Tubman led hundreds of enslaved African Americans to freedom along the Underground Railroad. (USI.8e)	Colonized people resisted European domination and responded in diverse ways to Western influences. (WHII.9e)
Race (explicit) trauma	Any reference to group identity using ethnic or racial labels	Abraham Lincoln helped to free African American slaves. (2.4c)	Discrimination against immigrants: Chinese, Irish, Jewish, Italian, and Polish. (USII.4b)	Lynching was the illegal killing of people by gangs of violent vigilantes. It intensified following post-Reconstruction to restrain African Americans from advancing in society and from becoming active and participating citizens. (VUS.8g)
Slavery	Any reference to slavery, including the legacy of slavery or the end of slavery	With the forced arrival of these Africans, Virginia would create a system of people treated as property based on their skin color. (VS.3e)	Human resources: farmers, enslaved African Americans, indentured servants. (USI.5b)	Development of the practice of slavery within most cultures in the ancient world, taking various forms. (WHI.3b)
Terrorism (9/11)	Traumagenic events in which a person or group without power purposefully caused fear through violence	John Brown was trying to start a slave rebellion. He was captured and hanged. (VS.7a)	Public safety in the event of an act of terrorism. (CE.10c)	The United States has confronted the increase in international terrorism by formulating domestic and international policies aimed at stopping terrorism. (VUS.14b)
Holocaust	Any reference to the Holocaust or other genocides	None identified	American Indians were forcibly removed from their land and in many cases massacred. (USI.1g)	Germany's decision to exterminate the Jewish population through genocide was referred to as the "Final Solution." (VUS.11e)
War	Any references to war or the ability to make war	Memorial Day is a day for recognition of and respect for Americans who died in wars while they were serving their country. (2.5c)	African American troops participated in the Spanish-American War although their contributions were ignored. An example was the credit the Rough Riders were given in taking San Juan Hill when it was the 24th Infantry and the 9th and 10th Cavalry units that helped to take the hill. (USII.5a)	American migration into Texas led to an armed revolt against Mexican rule and a battle at the Alamo. (VUS.6b)

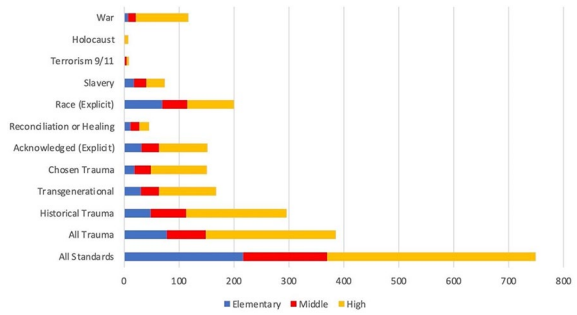

FIGURE 1. *Number of coded standards by code and grade level band.*

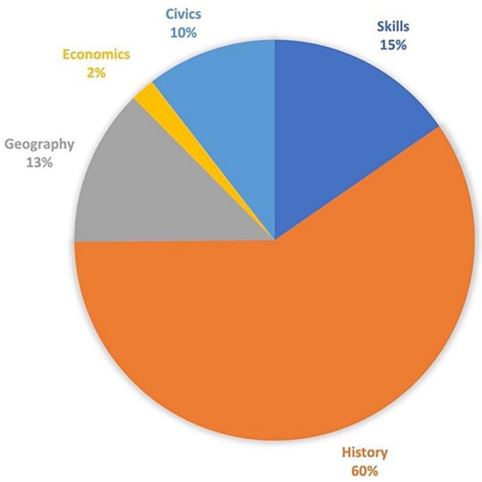

FIGURE 2. *Number of coded standards by social studies content area.*

> The American people have different ethnic origins and come from different countries but are united as Americans by the basic principles of a republican form of government, including the individual rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as well as equality under the law. (2.12a)

This standard reflected the civic ideals that served as a baseline for the Virginia standards. However, the following high school standard explicitly says that the United States has not always lived up to these ideals: "American colonial reliance on a cheap, enslaved labor force eventually conflicted with the founding principles established in the Declaration of Independence" (VUS.3c). In short, the people and government of the Commonwealth of Virginia and the United States have failed to both have different ethnic origins and enjoy equality under the law, leading to the majority of the traumagenic events contained in Virginia's social studies standards.

Table 1 provides definitions of each of the coded terms and examples from the Curriculum Framework documents. The focus on race includes the enslavement of African Americans and genocide of American Indians as well as other examples of violence and discrimination against African Americans, American Indians, Jews, Asian Americans, and some European immigrants (i.e., Irish, Italian, and Polish). All standards coded for transgenerational trauma also were coded for historical trauma. The primary difference between the two is the ongoing structural or communal trauma that marks such transgenerational trauma as the legacies of slavery and colonialism (see Virginia Board of Education, 2020). A few standards pointed to the existence of transgenerational trauma explicitly, such as articulating that Virginia's legalization of slavery led to "dependence that lasted for more than two hundred years" (VS.4a).

Overall, Virginia's social studies standards reflect a view that students are more developmentally prepared to engage traumagenic events as they age. For example, there is a lower prevalence of explicitly traumatic events (i.e., terrorism and war) in the elementary standards. The nature of the descriptions is notably varied across grade-level bands. References to terrorism are limited to John Brown's rebellion in the elementary standards and conceptual knowledge in the middle-school standards. There is no mention of the Holocaust in the elementary standards. References to war are similarly sparse in the elementary standards, with the focus on commemorating the fallen.

One important finding is that few standards directly mention gender in any form. One exception that serves to confirm the rule is found in high-school Virginia and U.S. history standards: "'Glass ceiling' (perception that career advancement for women is not equal to men)" (VUS.13g). The use of the word *perception* is striking because the glass ceiling refers to both fact and theory. The phrasing appears to undermine the very concept being communicated. An equally troubling finding is that the overall silence on gender and other topics serves to reinforce an understanding that "sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, classism, mass incarceration, and the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are protected systems" (Love, 2019, p. 7). In the following subsection I address the role of positionality in relationship to Love's statement.

Positionality Informs Responses to Traumagenic Events

The data-analysis process and the findings illustrate the role of positionality in response to traumagenic events. By definition, traumagenic events may induce a range of (trauma) responses from various stakeholders (Anderson Hooker & Czajkowski, 2013), just as "a carcinogenic substance has the potential to cause cancer but may not" (C. Yoder, 2020, p. 7). In particular, I found that my analysis focused on race, which mirrored the social and political context in which I conducted the study, as evidenced by the formation of the African American History Education

Commission (2020) and Youngkin's focus on CRT. By contrast, neither my own positionality as the researcher nor the standards themselves drew attention to sexism, homophobia, or other traumagenic content that Love (2019) identified. The following analytic memo documents how I similarly noted that my blind spots for other protected systems influenced the analysis: "I feel like I am more likely to 'explain away' the potential triggers in civics and economics because they reflect the norms of our society" (analytic memo).

The codes I did apply also were informed by my positionality. Some of the tension I felt when deciding how to apply codes stems from the ambiguity in terms such as "human resource" (3.1g) and "conflict" (VS.1c). I recognize that these terms may elicit instruction on slavery or war, respectively, but may be interpreted differently depending on the teacher and other contextual variables. The question of whether the concept of humanism is traumagenic in standards about the Renaissance (WHI.15c) is also illustrative. While noting that "humanism may reflect a chosen trauma [analytic memo]" to some religious conservatives, I ultimately chose not to add a trauma code for this standard. Comparing notions of humanism in WHI.15c with the many codes applied to the Crusades (WHI.14b) helped to clarify that WHI.15c did not need to be coded for trauma because its connections to the present felt comparatively removed and abstract.

Consideration of audience positionality also drew my attention to the varied experiences of students in Virginia's public schools. To again refer to Love's (2019) list of "protected systems" (p. 7), I recognize that students who have experienced mass incarceration or Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention may find references to legal procedures and immigration policy traumagenic (e.g., Brownell, 2022; Kolluri & Young, 2021). The same is true for students who have experienced poverty and scarcity (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022), particularly because several economic standards contrast the concepts of wants and needs (e.g., 1.7 and 2.10). A standard that asserts that "government protects the rights and property of individuals" (3.12c) may not simply be a guiding principle but also raise questions regarding whose rights are protected and which individuals are entitled to property (Love, 2019). Similarly, an awareness that students may relate a sitting president to political trauma (Dunn et al., 2019) begs the question of whether every reference to government structure and political actors may be traumagenic for some students.

Active Verbs and Visible Actors Acknowledge Trauma and Healing

Finally, data analysis revealed the power of active verbs and visible actors as linguistic tools for acknowledging both trauma and healing in Virginia's social studies standards. A middle school standard provides a rich passage with both an example and a nonexample: "Westward expansion destroyed ways of life that American Indians had practiced for centuries and dispossessed them from their homes" (USII.4a). The standard explicitly names trauma with strong active verbs (e.g., *destroyed* and *dispossessed*) yet obscures the actors who perpetrated these human rights violations. Many of the revisions the African American History Education Commission (2020) recommended introduced verbs that more accurately acknowledged trauma. For example, a 2015 standard stated that "American Indians were displaced from their land" (USI.1g) but was updated to read "American Indians were forcibly removed from their land and in many cases massacred" (p. 53). Although this revised standard still omits the explorers or settlers as the ones who committed the action of massacring Indigenous peoples, other standards—including those revised by the African American History Education Commission—do identify the actors in traumagenic events.

Many of the standards that explicitly acknowledge trauma name the historical actors. An important tool for doing so involves illustrating abstract concepts (e.g., the stock market crashing; VUS.10b) in concrete terms (e.g., the rise in homelessness; VUS.10c). An example from an elementary standard identifies the state government as the actor: "With the forced arrival of these Africans, Virginia would create a system of people treated as property based on their skin color" (VS.3e). Although this corporate naming hides the fact that not all Virginians (i.e., enslaved African Americans) approved of the system of racialized chattel slavery, the statement does accurately convey that the state government made the decision. A middle school standard describing the context that led to the Civil War identifies racial communities as the actors:

> In the South, white people argued that the Bible sanctioned slavery and that slaveholders acted as Christian protectors of enslaved people.
>
> Black southerners saw themselves as a people held in bondage like the Israelites in the Bible and had faith [that] they would one day be delivered from slavery. (USI.9a)

This approach serves to disentangle the causes of the Civil War and the historical trauma, transgenerational trauma, chosen trauma, and sources of resilience embedded within the standards. The excerpt is but one example of significant changes the African American History Education Commission (2020) recommended for USI.9a (pp. 55–56). Analysis suggests that the Commission's edits focused on U.S. domestic policy and racial history, principally African American history with a lesser focus on American Indian history. In addition to acknowledging trauma, the changes to Virginia's standards also increased the number of trauma healing and reconciliation codes.

The standards that provide explicit examples of trauma healing and reconciliation focus attention on examples of

resisting traumatizing systems, changing dehumanizing policies, and celebrating resilience. A key example from the early elementary grades is the inclusion of Juneteenth celebrations, which Governor Northam named as a state holiday in Virginia for the first time in 2020: "Juneteenth is traditionally the day that celebrates the end of the enslavement of African Americans in the United States. It is observed on June 19th" (K.11d, 1.4, and 2.5). The focus on commemorating the end of historical injustice exemplifies a trauma healing approach, particularly because the event acknowledges transgenerational trauma (Menakem, 2017; C. Yoder, 2020). Another example from an elementary standard describes the power of resistance as Jackie Robinson "helped to break the color barrier. . . . His actions helped to bring about other opportunities for African Americans" (2.4h). In this example, the color barrier is explicitly named, and then Robinson's individual actions are contextualized in the broader fight for systemic change in pursuit of equality. Several secondary standards acknowledge the agency of individuals (e.g., Harriet Tubman; USI.8e) and groups (e.g., "Colonized people resisted European domination"; WHII.9e) who resisted systemic oppression in a way that fostered trauma healing. A few standards also identify systemic approaches to addressing traumagenic events, such as formation of the League of Nations (WHII.10c) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (WHII.11e), and positive outcomes following trauma, including peaceful independent movements in West Africa (WHII.13b) and the adoption of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments (VUS.7e). A few standards additionally illustrate how students can critically analyze data on topics such as immigration and civil rights (CE.1b) and advocate for change by writing a letter in support of refugees (WG.1j). These findings provide insights into not only the harms that trauma has caused but also the steps historical figures have taken to resist injustice and promote resilience (e.g., Duncan & Neal, 2022; King, 2020).

Limitations

This study has the potential to complexify our understanding of traumagenic events in the K–12 curriculum. Although the findings cannot be generalized beyond Virginia's social studies standards, the themes and conceptual insights may be transferred and applied to future teaching and research (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Creswell, 2009). The primary limitation of this study is its focus on the official curriculum rather than the enacted curriculum as experienced by teachers and students in K–12 classrooms. Another important limitation is the influence my own blind spots and positionality had on the data-analysis process. I recognize that other scholars and educators who examine Virginia's state standards—and other social studies curricular materials—undoubtedly will reveal new and essential insights into the nature and breadth of traumagenic events in the curriculum. Therefore, I invite future research into classroom instructional practice and a range of social studies curricular resources (e.g., state standards, textbooks, and children's literature) both as a critique of the present study and as an extension of the findings.

Discussion

In examining the traumagenic events in Virginia's social studies standards, I found that a nuanced conceptualization of trauma provides an opportunity to look inside the black box of divisive concepts and difficult history. I contend that the findings from this study speak directly to the concerns that politicians have raised about divisive concepts (e.g., Schwartz, 2024; Youngkin, 2022) and the challenges with difficult history that scholars have named (e.g., Gross & Terra, 2019; Harris et al., 2022). Both conversations suffer from a lack of understanding regarding trauma. This study introduces a typology of trauma for analyzing the K–12 curriculum (see Table 1) as well as findings that reinforce the centrality of positionality and the need for active verbs and visible actors in the curriculum.

Inside the Black Box of Divisive Topics and Difficult History

The findings from this study provide an important peek inside the black box of divisive topics and difficult history in social studies curricula. By beginning to define the types of trauma that are ubiquitous within social studies content, educators and researchers can demystify traumagenic events that Governor Youngkin and others seek to exclude. I recognize that the current political climate has made even the status quo in social studies education contentious (Darragh & Petrie, 2019; Dunn et al., 2019). Therefore, I invite policymakers and educators alike to engage the "moral imagination" (Lederach, 2005, p. ix) needed to help us see our shared humanity. In particular, I contend that the social studies curriculum can acknowledge racialized trauma in ways that respect human dignity rather than viewing such topics as divisive concepts to be avoided.

Trauma studies scholars teach that attempting to avoid trauma only perpetuates trauma (e.g., Brave Heart, 2000; Menakem, 2017; C. Yoder, 2020). The findings of this study foreground both the need to name the human dignity of each person and to acknowledge that we must listen to each other if we want to fully understand others' experiences (DeWolf & Geddes, 2019; Goldberg, 2017; Zembylas, 2017). This is particularly true with traumagenic experiences, which reflect the systems of oppression at work in our society (e.g., Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; Love, 2019).

Acknowledging trauma requires addressing institutionalized racism and other forms of transgenerational trauma. As the Virginia Board of Education (2020) stated, "We have a responsibility to recognize and confront such racism

and discrimination" (para. 3). The task of engaging divisive concepts in social studies is a human and civic endeavor, not a partisan one. Traumagenic events are likely to cause trauma in both those who have benefited from oppressive systems and those who have been victimized (Anderson Hooker & Czajkowski, 2013; Menakem, 2017). The very notion of chosen trauma reflects the fact that each community has experienced historical harm at some point (Menakem, 2017; Volkan, 2001). The process of labeling certain topics divisive or difficult reflects the limitations of politicians and educators, not the needs of students (Journell & Halvorsen, 2023). In fact, given that "students need to feel that their schools are supportive, critical places where they can truly be themselves and feel safe in doing so" (Sondel et al., 2018, p. 183), students of all intersectional identities deserve to be equipped with the tools to confront collective trauma and change oppressive systems (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; Sondel et al., 2018; Venet, 2021).

Introducing a Typology of Collective Trauma in Social Studies Education

The findings presented in Table 1 introduce an emerging typology of collective trauma in social studies education (e.g., Gorski & Dalton, 2020). Given the curricular barriers that dominant Eurocentric narratives (Epstein, 2000, 2009; VanSledright, 2008), the typology has particular application to social studies education research on difficult history and related topics (e.g., Epstein & Peck, 2018; Gross & Terra, 2019; Jones, 2022). In addition, the typology of collective trauma may serve as a tool for further analysis and interrogation of the K–12 curriculum more broadly (e.g., Dutro, 2019; Dutro & Bien, 2014; Thomas et al., 2019; Venet, 2021).

The findings additionally indicate that linguistic features are key because standards and other curricular documents often portray African Americans, American Indians, and immigrants in problematic ways that "trivialize the systemic institutional contexts of slavery and racial hierarchy" (Anderson & Metzger, 2011, p. 401; see also Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022). A focus on active verbs and visible actors is essential if the curriculum and instruction are to avoid a "tone of detachment" (Shear et al., 2015, p. 90). Perhaps the most conceptually rich examples are the standards that acknowledge or make explicit references to trauma or provide evidence of reconciliation and trauma healing. These findings reflect the goals of remembrance and acknowledgment of suffering discussed in both the difficult history literature (Epstein & Peck, 2018; Goldberg, 2017; Gross & Terra, 2019; Harris et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2014) and trauma studies literature (DeWolf & Geddes, 2019; Menakem, 2017; Volkan, 2001; C. Yoder, 2020). Collectively, the findings provide insights into possibilities for and need to teach "*through* Black history" (King, 2019, p. 390, emphasis in original), centering the voices and experiences of African American actors not simply as victims of injustice but as humans who feel fear (Jones, 2022), exhibit resilience (Brave Heart, 2000), and experience "love, healing, and joy" (Love, 2019, p. 11) even in the face of trauma.

The findings on positionality also foreground the importance of intersectional justice (Love, 2019). Research suggests that positionality informs how teachers and students engage challenging topics (Brownell, 2022; Love, 2019; Shear & Hawkman, 2020; Zembylas, 2017). The "emotional burden carried by learners' affective investments to particular public discourses and ideologies" (Zembylas, 2017, p. 669) is similarly shouldered by policymakers, researchers, and educators (Menakem, 2017; Schweber, 2019). As such, the framework for engaging political trauma that Sondel et al. (2018) have articulated is essential because conceptualizations of curriculum and pedagogy must address the emotional well-being of students. The literature from educational scholars (e.g., Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; Christ et al., 2022; Schweber, 2019) and trauma studies scholars (e.g., Brave Heart, 2000; Menakem, 2017; van der Kolk, 2014) on the nature of trauma responses speaks to the need to extend the definition of emotional well-being beyond notions of cognitive or affective feelings to include more embodied responses, including responses many educators would associate with panic attacks (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; Sondel et al., 2018). The findings also suggest that a more nuanced understanding of trauma can nurture civic knowledge and skills as well as promote critical consciousness as part of a pedagogy of political trauma (Sondel et al., 2018), particularly because acknowledging trauma can provide students with examples of resisting oppression (e.g., Parkhouse & Arnold, 2019; Sondel et al., 2018; P. J. Yoder, 2020) and tools for advocating for intersectional justice (e.g., Brownell, 2022; Payne & Journell, 2019). A focus on positionality also speaks to the fact that even young children will encounter death and reminds educators that loss and other forms of trauma exist not only in the past but also in the lived experiences of students, their families, and their communities (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; Dutro & Bien, 2014; Thomas et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper reflects a belief that naming and acknowledging trauma can empower politicians and educators alike to think beyond the existing polarized discourse. The purpose of acknowledging trauma is not "political indoctrination" or telling students "what to think" (Youngkin, 2022, p. 1); rather, naming trauma is essential because it provides the conceptual tools that policymakers, educators, and students need to "address complicated and uncomfortable topics in ways that support critical thinking and vigorous

classroom discussions" (Virginia Department of Education, 2022, p. 17). Although I recognize that some politicians will be tempted to dismiss explicit descriptions of trauma as "CRT and its progeny" (Youngkin, 2022, p. 1), I invite policymakers to consider the full range of trauma that exists among both the citizens who have voted for them and those who have not.

If the goal is to "equip our teachers to teach our students the entirety of our history—both good and bad" (Youngkin, 2022, p. 1)—we must examine the types of collective trauma described in this study. Doing so will also equip us to better tell our stories and understand the stories of others. In other words, naming and acknowledging trauma in (social studies) education is an important step toward empowering students and teachers alike to more fully realize the vision of "being united as Americans" (2.12a).

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