



# Evaluating Students' Argumentation About Historical Events in a Trial of the Word Generation Curriculum

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**Evaluating Students' Argumentation about Historical Events in a Trial of the Word  
Generation Curriculum**

Qualifying Paper

Submitted by

Timothy J. Matthews

December 14, 2018

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## Literature Review

During the middle grades, children typically first encounter discipline-specific instruction delegated to specialist teachers, and teachers incorporate “close reading” of increasingly complex texts to achieve the goal of preparing students for what they will encounter in secondary school and beyond (Brown & Kappes, 2012; Snow & O’Connor, 2014). Because educators are “at a time when new forms of text and new literacy practices seem to abound” and students will encounter a vast array of “texts” in different domains, Moje (2008) stresses the importance of integrating literacy teaching and learning across disciplinary instruction (p. 96). *Disciplinary* literacy must be approached thoughtfully by practitioners in order to allow for a pedagogy that “critiqu[es],” “challeng[es],” and “construct[s]” knowledge (Moje, 2007). This is particularly true for history texts, for which understanding requires skills beyond simple reading comprehension. Among young teens in particular, understanding the motives and points of view of “historical others” may be difficult, especially when the historical events are distant in time, space, or identity. To this end, history curricula of late have been designed to facilitate student understanding of history *in context*, avoiding “presentism,” which is “the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present” (Wineburg, 2001, p. 19) and allowing students’ academic vocabulary, historical perspective taking, and complex reasoning skills to be fostered in service of deep reading comprehension (Duhaylongsod et al., 2015; LaRusso et al., 2015).

The Catalyzing Comprehension through Discussion and Debate (CCDD) project represents one recent effort aimed at improving literacy in middle grades by implementing a curriculum that integrates these three elements and aims to foster engaged classroom discussion. One primary purpose of CCDD was to understand the extent to which students’ social perspective taking skills can be fostered in tandem with a growing base of academic language

and complex reasoning among upper elementary and middle school students, in particular as they are promoted in the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP) Word Generation curriculum, which was designed to foster deep reading comprehension in part by promoting a diversity of perspectives on engaging issues (WordGen: Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009).

WordGen offers fourth to eighth grade students opportunities to build their *academic language*, *perspective taking*, and *complex reasoning*; more broadly, it allows these students to grapple with notions of social justice. One purpose of the WordGen design is to promote a diversity of perspectives on engaging issues. WordGen leverages relevance to students' personal experiences and their developing cognitive, language, and social skills to foster reading, writing, and debate activities that target salient and contentious current issues. The experiences and skills derived through participation in the social studies component of the curriculum are also grounded in the promotion of students' historical understanding skills, which constitute a distinct application of social perspective taking ability.

For history instruction, perspective taking encompasses an inherent tension between past and present. Some research has examined how students learning history can grasp 'otherness' from their own temporal framework and avoid applying contemporary frames to historical figures and events; other analyses have focused on the extent to which a child can put him or herself in another's shoes while approaching historical texts (Wineburg, 2001; Barton & Levtsik, 2004). In the context of social studies education, Endacott and Brooks' (2013) model posits that *historical empathy* results from the complex inter-linkage among multiple building blocks of children's social development related to perspective and argumentation about historical events, while other scholars use different terminology to refer to similar concepts: Barton and Levtsik's *perspective recognition* (2004), Lee and Ashby's *rational understanding* (2001), and Yilmaz's

*historical imagination* (2007) all refer to similar (though not identical) ideas. I would argue that developing the “values and habits of mind” envisioned by Anderson et al. (1998, p. 172) as a way to choose one’s own position in a competing marketplace of ideas and arguments represents a first step on the road to historical perspective taking. Indeed, in research among a sample of urban eighth graders, Kuhn and Udell (2003) identified classroom-level discourse as a “social scaffold” that allows more complex forms of argumentation to emerge and blossom (p. 1258).

In the United States, the widely-embraced goal of pre-collegiate education is to prepare prekindergarten through grade 12 students for success in college or career; American schools also attempt to create engaged citizens who participate in the country’s civic life. However, students educated in districts with a lower median socioeconomic status often receive lower levels of access to volunteer or service learning opportunities (Lin, Lawrence, & Snow, 2015). Similar disparities exist for these students, particularly those of color, in access to effective literacy instruction and in opportunities for civic education and engagement. Since literacy skills are a precondition for full participation in civic life, a focus on such skills through targeted curriculum could help address these deficiencies, particularly among students most at-risk.

As “a novel approach to vocabulary teaching and academic language development that comprises 15-minute daily activities organized in a five-day cycle” (Word Generation, 2014), the original Word Generation (WordGen) curricular units were designed with the goal of fostering student engagement with civic and moral issues and opportunities to improve vocabulary and literacy skills. Results of a randomized controlled trial evaluating the initial curriculum in two districts showed a notable increase in the quality of classroom discussion, which were stronger for discussions in science and mathematics classes than for social studies or ELA classes; small, significant effects were noted on learning of vocabulary taught to students, partially mediated by

the quality of classroom discussion (Lawrence, Crosson, Paré-Blagoev, & Snow, 2015). A subsequent collaboration between researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) and SERP, funded through a grant from the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) at the US Department of Education under the aegis of their Reading for Understanding Initiative, expanded the curriculum. This enhanced curricular intervention was designed to augment skills fostered by classroom discussion, in particular, perspective-taking and academic language as ways of improving deep reading comprehension. Evaluation of this enhanced WordGen curriculum showed improvements in multiple student outcomes, including academic language skills, perspective articulation, and reading comprehension over two years (Jones et al., in press).

By secondary school, academic writing is an essential component over which students should gain mastery; it contributes to success in adulthood across both academic and professional spheres (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Persuasive essays are a prominent genre of academic writing. In the United States, persuasive essays are introduced as an essential part of writing instruction and assessment beginning in middle school; they also can be integrated in an interdisciplinary way (rather than in an explicit context of English/Language Arts instruction), as they are in Word Generation's science and social studies units. For older students, particularly those in seventh and eighth grade, WordGen focuses on the ability of students to engage with academic language and produce well-argued persuasive essays related to content taught in science and social studies units, building upon the more general topics that form the curriculum's sole units in earlier years. We know that effective classroom-based vocabulary learning is necessarily context-dependent and usage-based (Berman, 2004; Ninio & Snow, 1996; Ravid & Tolchinsky, 2002; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). However, efforts at attaining English proficiency often focus on the use and learning of words in undifferentiated contexts, despite the fact that

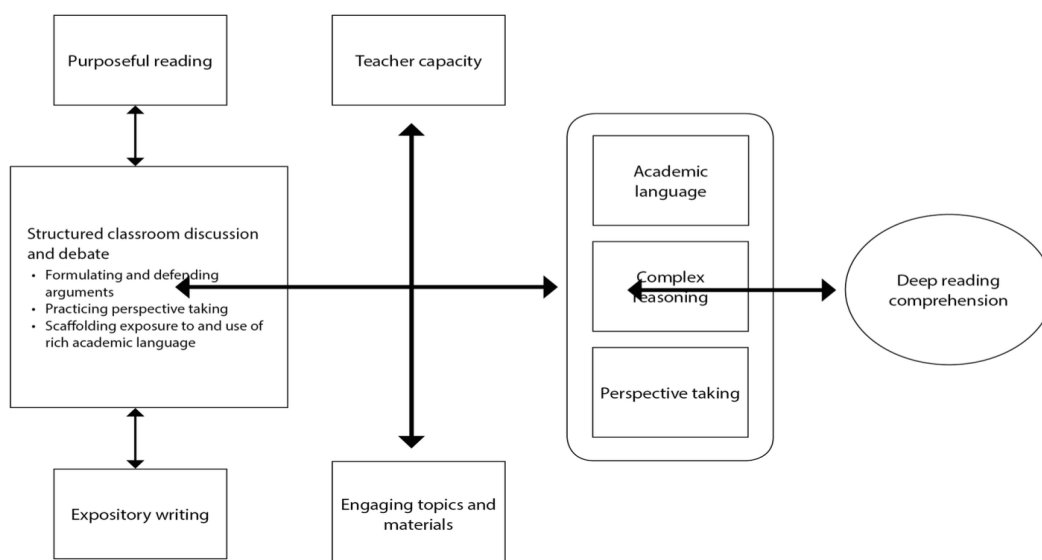
lexical processing depends on context (Lucas, 1999). By integrating vocabulary teaching into learning across multiple content areas, the WordGen approach attempts to provide context for language and literacy skills that students can then carry into their interaction with language across multiple domains.

Why is understanding argumentation grounded in historical text important? It can be used as a lens that empowers children from different ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds to understand better current events and societal issues through the lens of the past (Boix-Mansilla, 2000); it can induce some sense of emotion or empathy toward the stigmatized or marginalized (Batson et al., 1997); it can also help a student identify more with an ‘other’ and—at the very least begin to—ascribe an other’s characteristics to the self (Davis et al., 1996). Beyond a classroom’s walls, argumentation might lead to a student developing perspectives that make commitment to positive social change on behalf of others who have been subjected to historical harm more likely (Berndsen & McGarty, 2012).

### **Context for Present Study**

Classroom interventions involving discussion and debate typically emphasize the need to acknowledge and assume other students' perspectives, and such interventions subsequently translate into improvements in written argumentation (e.g., Reznitskaya, Kuo, & Anderson, 2007). More specifically, in the middle school social studies classroom, strategies for engaging students’ interest in historical events—while still previewing the complexities inherent in historical scholarship—must be implemented. (Duhaylongsod, Snow, Selman, & Donovan, 2015). An evolution of the WordGen curriculum offered week-long units focused specifically on social studies topics and designed for use in the social studies classroom, for students in grades six to eight; this suite of curricular resources, named Social Studies Generation (SoGen), was

available to schools for use in combination with similarly intensive science units (SciGen) as well as the traditional, briefer cross-content units (WordGen Weeklies). The Theory of Change for SoGen, shown below in Figure 2, shows how argumentation, perspective taking, and academic language are designed to work together, mediated by teachers' adeptness at facilitating discussion and curricular materials' ability to capture the interest and imagination of students, in order to facilitate students' development of deep reading comprehension. Because of the crucial role discussion plays in the effective implementation of SoGen, it bears noting that teacher preparation and facility at fostering high-quality conversations both remain key factors with the capacity to further the curriculum's overall effectiveness (Lawrence, Crosson, Paré-Blagoev, & Snow, 2015; Duhaylongsod, Snow, Selman, & Donovan, 2015).



*Figure 2. Theory of Change for Social Studies Generation (SoGen)*

My intention with the present study is to extend prior research by evaluating examples of historical argumentation in the late middle school classroom, focusing on the *content* and *quality* of arguments when students are called upon to write essays in response to scaffolded prompts on topics related to race and racial equality in the United States. Using data collected from students



participating in two districts' school-based trials of the Social Studies Generation (SoGen) curriculum, I focused on a sample of eighth grade students' argumentation as demonstrated in their written essays. These essays are written at the end of each one week long unit in the curriculum, after students have progressed through four other daily foci: first, readings and discussion to launch a topic, with the introduction of "focus words" to build students' academic vocabulary; second, perspective taking activities that challenge students to plumb the depths of their own beliefs; third, reading to build background knowledge on the topic; and fourth, a scaffolded debate among students and facilitated by (the) teacher(s) to promote argumentation skills. As a natural extension of the prior day's debates, students' fifth-day essay writing across the WordGen curriculum helps them to consolidate argumentation and expository writing skills, by asking them to take one of two positions. My examination of the content of students' arguments allows a rich picture of the diversity of experience and belief within this sample of students.

The primary goal of this research is to explore student experiences with historical topics covered in the eighth grade WordGen units. The curriculum was designed to be used in fourth through eighth grades; the essays examined for this study represent the latest available developmental stage in the data collected as part of the CCDD trial. With a view toward understanding students' perspectives on themselves and their place in the world, the present study will explore students' argumentation in essay writing. Argumentation is a logical first step to understanding the ways in which eighth grade students may engage with the social studies units to build perspective taking skills through their academic writing. Ultimately, these are the kind of skills practitioners and researchers hope to cultivate—and from which middle school students benefit.

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of the arguments eighth graders produce after four days of scaffolding across two different WordGen topical units. The key research questions for this study are: first, **what arguments do students offer for the position they take in response to each Word Generation (WordGen) essay prompt regarding topics related to race and equality?** and second, **what is the variability of argumentation presented within individual classrooms?** Broadly, addressing these questions is the first step towards understanding how argumentation may reflect a student's historical understanding, especially historical empathy, agency, and perspective taking. Because eighth graders represent the oldest group of students with whom the WordGen curriculum was used—and because, arguably, the most potentially 'sensitive' and contemporaneous topics were written by the curriculum's authors for this group—they are also the most likely to have demonstrated examples of a nascent, more sophisticated form of argumentation in their essays.

### **Research Design**

***Participants.*** Working with the CCDD research team in the summer of 2015, before the completion of data collection for the randomized trial, I obtained all available student essays across classrooms in two districts which had fully implemented and completed two specific units of the eighth grade social studies curriculum—one a supplemental, weekly WordGen unit designed to scaffold students in advance of a deeper, more potent and probably more challenging discussion of race—and the other from the SoGen civics curriculum explicitly tackling the history and legacy of race and civil rights in America. A total of 121 argumentative essays, collected from two school districts and eight classrooms, were included in this analysis. **District A** is in a racially and linguistically diverse community with urban characteristics and close to a major U.S. city; the district educates a population of predominantly Latino English Language

Learners (ELLs) within the schools that implemented the WordGen curriculum. **District B** sits in a suburban location outside of a major metropolitan area with a majority Caucasian student population. My intention in reviewing essays from two districts, each of which had multiple classrooms participating in the eighth grade curriculum trial, was to identify possible potential thematic variation in student argumentation among a sample of students exposed to WordGen and SoGen.

***Topics.*** Beginning in fourth and fifth grade, Word Generation introduces students to the idea of discussion and debate by presenting a series of topics on which students can take differing opinions based on facts and experience. By sixth grade, while the curriculum continues to offer general topics, it also branches out into two other series of units called “Science Generation” (SciGen) and “Social Studies Generation” (SoGen). SciGen and SoGen allow for this curricular approach to meet state content standards. Typically, at this developmental stage, specialist teachers with domain-specific knowledge begin to provide instruction in science and social studies; however, the need to integrate this disciplinary knowledge to reach deep comprehension and understanding becomes more salient as high school and college draw closer.

Essays from two units of the WordGen curriculum were included in this analysis. Topic 1, focused on the civil rights legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Topic 2 focused on the Washington Redskins’ name. For each topic, the student essays were written in response to specific prompts focusing on the role of race in American history and life:

- [Topic 1] Grade 8, Unit 5: **“The United States has taken great steps to achieve racial equality” or “The United States has not confronted its past and still suffers from institutional racism.” Defend your position, which may be one of these or something in between.**

- [Topic 2] Grade 8, Supplemental: **Should the NFL require the Washington Redskins to change its name?**

In Topic 1, students were asked to write a blog post to defend their position on whether the United States had “confronted its past” and improved racial equality or whether institutional racism still exists in the current era. Students were directed to use their information from readings and from classroom discussions about Martin Luther King Jr.; the blog was meant to “update” Dr. King on the current state of racial equality in the U.S. For Topic 2, students were asked to discuss whether the Washington Redskins should be required to change their name. For each prompt, students were asked to present and justify their position. I chose to focus on these two eighth grade essay prompts because they both invite students to share their perceptions of progress toward racial equity in the United States through the lens of two particular historical experiences: first, America’s civil rights legacy, and second, its treatment of Native Americans. Because students who write arguments learn related words faster—or perhaps the presence of focus words leads to crystallization in the quality of argumentation these students offer--the academic language offered in each unit is crucial. The keywords that students were encouraged to use in their response to Topic 1 were: *position, articulate, institutional, reconcile, complicit, confront, compensate, and apathy*; for Topic 2, keywords were: *derogatory, stereotype, connotation, slur, and stigmatize*. Across essays written by students in classrooms testing the WordGen curriculum, word usage varied from what I might characterize as a “forced” usage, which either makes no sense given the word’s definition or is at best an uncomfortable fit, to a definitionally correct usage in the right context.

Each of the units were intended to give participating teachers a reasonable way to discuss race and racial epithets in the context of their classroom and salient national events at the time.

(In particular, discussion of the Trayvon Martin shooting in Florida prevailed during news cycles at the time these essays were written.) WordGen curriculum writers developed a supplemental unit on the Washington Redskins with the intention of creating a safer space for teachers to initiate a conversation about race, racial differences, racial stereotypes, and racial epithets within their classrooms; the curriculum writers thought that starting the units on race by tackling more freighted issues, such as racial differences in incarceration rates or who has the right to use racial epithets, ran the risk of eliciting strong emotions, uncovering entrenched points of view, and leading to classroom conflict.

Not all units were uniformly used across the various classrooms participating in the study, so the sample for each was limited; the number of essays from each of the two districts and classrooms is noted in Table 1 (below).

<b>District</b>	<b>Classrooms for Topic 1 (n)</b>	<b>Essays for Topic 1 (n)</b>	<b>Classrooms for Topic 2 (n)</b>	<b>Essays for Topic 2 (n)</b>
District A	2	13	4	50
District B	3	43	1	15

*Table 1: Student WordGen essays with a focus on race by classroom and topic.*

**Description of sample of students and essays.** Across both Districts A and B, 56 essays were written in response to Topic 1 (Martin Luther King, Jr.); 65 essays were written in response to Topic 2 (Redskins). Demographically, these classrooms had similar gender balance, yet differed in composition based on race/ethnicity, with the nearly all District B students being Caucasian and the majority of District A students being Latinx. The essays from District A (the more diverse, urban district) were shorter than those produced in District B across all classrooms. Students in District A wrote an average of 30.6 words, while students in District B wrote an average of 70 words. District A has a higher proportion of English Language Learners (ELLs)

than District B, which has more monolingual English speakers. When looking at findings derived from thematic coding, then, it is important to recognize that the opportunities to present *any* arguments—as well as multiple arguments in a single essay—are more plentiful in the essays by students from the suburban district.

***Data-Analytic Plan.*** Qualitative analysis using thematic coding was employed for the two sets of essays. Two codebooks were developed, starting first guided by an emic approach rooted in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005), with the ultimate goal of undertaking thematic coding as described by Boyatzis (1998). Boyatzis’s approach balances the positivist and constructivist schools of thematic qualitative analysis, arguing for a methodologically rigorous process that allows codes to emerge from the data, then be condensed and categorized to optimize understanding of what the research participants are telling a researcher. As this thematic coding centers on identifying the emergent arguments from students’ essays and focusing on the content of their argumentation, I developed, revised, and tested for reliability a separate codebook specific to each essay prompt. Creating these codebooks—and coding with them—presented a variety of interpretative challenges due to the differing length of student essays from each district, and the number of essays available. Essays ranged from sentence fragments containing only a few words to extended, multi-paragraph arguments taking up more than the allotted space in the WordGen unit workbooks. The codes developed described student argumentation for each of the essay prompts and were categorized as reflecting pro, con, or neutral views on the particular question. Qualitative analysis initially focused on describing the content and variation of student argumentation for each essay topic. The primary unit of analysis is each student essay within a classroom. Intra-class variability is described, particularly focused on the presence of dual-perspective argumentation and argumentation from individual students

that is counter to the majority opinion within an individual class. As there was only a limited set of classrooms sampled, inter-class variability was not explored.

For Topic 1, twelve codes were developed; seven for content arguing that the U.S. had taken steps to achieve racial equality and five for content arguing that the U.S. still suffers from institutional racism. For Topic 2, seven codes were developed; two for content arguing that the Redskins should change their name, four for content arguing the contrary, and one for content presenting a neutral argument. Each of the codes with examples from the essays are shown in Table 2; the complete codebooks are included as Appendices A and B.

Topic 1 Codes	Example quote
<b><i>The U.S. has taken great steps to achieve racial equality.</i></b>	
[Pro] 1 - Increased economic security	"We have taken steps to be equal because in 1950 blacks made much less than whites but now it is basically equal"
[Pro] 2 - Greater physical freedoms	"We allowed blacks to sit and do what they want in the South."
[Pro] 3 - Improved access to education	"One thing our country has done to achieve racial equality is we have de segregated schools and other public buildings. "
[Pro] 4 - Racially diverse achievement	"Now we have more black worker and more in the goverment."
[Pro] 5 - Mention of other racial or ethnic minority groups	"We have also helped other countries too."
[Pro] 6 – Non-specific improvement for groups historically discriminated against	"We have stopped a lot racism that has been going on."
[Pro] 7 - Assertion of improvement without specific evidence	"I feel that the USA is moving forward"
<b><i>The U.S. still suffers from institutional racism.</i></b>	
[Counter] 8 - Continued economic disparity	"Even now women and black people don't make as much income as the white man."
[Counter] 9 - Continued educational disparity	"Still suffers from institutional racism because it says each race that graduated high school and it was 50% white and 30% black."
[Counter] 10 - Racially-motivated crime	"In some states the color of your skin will get you questioned by a police officer."
[Counter] 11 - More progress needed for groups historically discriminated against	"Though schools and public places aren't segregated anymore and thats a great thing, we still have racism going on."
[Counter] 12 - Assertion of racism without specific evidence	"Here, at school, I always see racism in the hallways here at school."
Topic 2 Codes	Example quote
[Pro] 1 - Name is derogatory	"The NFL team the "redskins"should change their name because it is a derogatory statement and racial slur to Native Americans."
[Pro] 2 - Name reflects inequality	"One reason is that it stereotypes Native Americans based on their skin color."
[Counter] 3 - The name is historical and is not currently derogatory	"Sure the actual term "Redskin" must have been used in the past to

	stigmatize an ethnic group but now we have gotten over seeing it as a slur and see this certain Indian tribe as honorable."
[Counter] 4 -The cost of changing the name is prohibitive	"They would lose so much money having to take back and redesign their merchandise."
[Counter] 5 - Singling out one team is unfair	"Why do only the Redskins have to change their name, why don't the Braves, Indians, or the Chifes have to change their name?"
[Counter] 6 - The intent of the name is to honor the past	"The connotation of Redskins mean pride, courage, and bravery."
[Neutral] 7-The choice should be made by a vote of the population	"I think that we should have a poll for all the Native Americans."

*Table 2: Coding framework with exemplar quotations drawn from student essays.*

Initial reliability coding was first conducted using twenty-six student essays from each of the two essay topics; thirteen were taken from each participating district. To establish the codebook for Topic 1, in one district, all thirteen available essays were used, while in the other district, thirteen essays were selected randomly by the researcher from the 43 available. Each of the 26 sample essays was coded for emergent themes by two coders. Coding was done at the whole sentence level, as compared to the whole essay level, with an eye on increasing the ultimate rate of agreement between coders. Given the nature of the codebook, some sentences received more than one code, either because the student made more than one argument in the same sentence, or because s/he expressed mixed feelings or used contrasting evidence and presented a dual perspective argument. For example, one student asserted that "[t]he U.S. has taken great steps to achieve racial equality, but there is still racism in this world." This was coded using both codes 6 and 11.

Stein and Miller (1993) posit that children as young as seven years old can identify an argument's building blocks and determine which is their own preferred position relative to a question of interest. In developing their theory of argumentation across the developmental spectrum, the authors ultimately situate argumentation as a social act. Therefore, in conducting this analysis, I developed a codebook by focusing not simply on the pro or con position that each



student took within an individual essay, but also on the content of the argument(s) offered in support of the student's chosen position.

Alignment between the two coders for the two initial essay subsamples was measured by generating kappa scores within the NVivo software. The earliest kappa scores obtained after this initial round of reliability coding were lower than typically accepted parameters (below 80% on all codes, with a range from 22% to 73%). The codebook was subsequently revised through discussion with the reliability coders to include tightened definitions and better exemplars drawn from student work prior to full coding of all essays. This led to improvement in inter-rater reliability, with % agreement ranging from 77-100%. For the final codebook used for analysis of the student essays, kappa scores were in the moderate range (62% to 83%) for the most prevalent codes.

## **Results**

The prevalence of the codes identified across each of the two essay topics is shown in Tables 3 and 4. Additionally, word clouds were generated and demonstrate at a glance what key words were used most frequently by students who completed essays at the conclusion of each WordGen unit considered in this study. (Figures 2 and 3). McNaught and Lam (2010) characterize word clouds as a "fast and visually rich" tool for researchers to grasp the import of their data; within the context of WordGen, where focus words were present for each of the two units and students are asked to take a pro or con position on the essay topic, it also allowed the researcher an initial glimpse at the data independent of codebook development.

[illegible]

**Topic 1 Argumentation.** Table 3, below, offers a view of the frequency of each code as identified in students' essays. For Topic 1, the most prevalent arguments for the view that racial equality has improved included descriptions of advances in equality for multiple racial/ethnic

groups, discussion of greater physical freedoms for minorities, and examples of racially diverse achievement (i.e. a black President or successful athletes). For the essays taking the opposite position, the most common arguments were that more progress was needed despite some success, as well as references to current areas of ongoing racism such as racially motivated crime. Students contending that racism still was present seemed to argue more about what was “still” happening in the United States—namely persistent racism. Among the majority of students who took a position that the US had achieved racial equality, the preponderance cited the differences between today’s society and that of the past in their writing. Specifically, several students reasoned that racial equality had been achieved as the U.S. had stopped school segregation and had improved the economic standing of African Americans. In addition, many essays cited the election of an African American as President as a sign that racial equality had been achieved. The overall theme of these essays was that US society had changed through policy and that the historical challenges of the civil rights era had been overcome. They cited current events, such as the presidential election, as confirmation that the country had moved beyond its past.

Interestingly, in one of the classrooms, the majority of students presented dual-dimensional argumentation, stating that although some progress in racial equality had been achieved there was still much work to be done. Historical events such as desegregation were included as positive examples of change in these essays. In these dual-dimensional arguments, however, current events were then used as support for a mixed view. In particular, students cited examples of episodes of racism in professional sports, criminal cases, or even from their own personal experiences at their school.

In the District A classrooms, the majority of students defended a position that institutional racism still exists, a few provided a dual-dimensional argument, and only a handful of essays took the view that racial equality had been achieved. The essays focused almost entirely on current events and cited continued experiences with racial slurs, racial profiling, and police brutality. Although several students cited the election of an African American president, they felt that this event in isolation did not change overall societal racism. The outlier arguments in these classrooms, namely the ones taking a position that progress in racial equality has been achieved, cited historical events from the civil rights movement, rather than current events, in their essays.

Code	Frequency in Suburban District	Frequency in District with Urban Characteristics
<b>Number of Essays</b>	43	13
<b><i>The U.S. has taken great steps to achieve racial equality.</i></b>		
[Pro] 1 - Increased economic security	3	0
[Pro] 2 - Greater physical freedoms	7	0
[Pro] 3 - Improved access to education	4	1
[Pro] 4 - Racially diverse achievement	5	2
[Pro] 5 - Mention of other racial or ethnic minority groups	10	0
[Pro] 6 – Non-specific improvement for groups historically discriminated against	1	1
[Pro] 7 - Assertion of improvement without specific evidence	11	6
<b><i>The U.S. still suffers from institutional racism.</i></b>		
[Counter] 8 - Continued economic disparity	0	1
[Counter] 9 - Continued educational disparity	1	0
[Counter] 10 - Racially-motivated crime	2	6
[Counter] 11 - More progress needed for groups historically discriminated against	8	3
[Counter] 12 - Assertion of racism without specific evidence	11	7

*Table 3. Frequency of arguments found in essays for two districts for Topic 1, coded at sentence level.*

**Topic 2 Argumentation.** Essays for Topic 2 were written in response to the specific question “Should the NFL require the Washington Redskins to change its name?” Table 3, below, offers a view of the frequency of each code as identified in students’ essays in response to Topic 2. Within these essays, the most prevalent argument in favor of changing the Redskins

team name was that the name represented a racial slur and was insulting to Native Americans. In contrast, amongst students arguing that the team name should not be changed, the most prevalent argument was that the name had historical significance and the term “Redskin” was no longer considered derogatory in society. Other arguments for this position included the potential high cost of a name change, the argument that the intent of the name was to honor a heritage, and a discussion that a wider variety of sports teams could also be similarly controversial yet are not subject to the same scrutiny.

Code	Frequency in Suburban District	Frequency in District with Urban Characteristics
Number of Essays	15	50
[Pro] 1 - Name is derogatory	0	10
[Pro] 2 - Name reflects inequality	0	4
[Counter] 3 - The name is historical and is not currently derogatory	5	17
[Counter] 4 -The cost of changing the name is prohibitive	7	3
[Counter] 5 - Singling out one team is unfair	9	0
[Counter] 6 - The intent of the name is to honor the past	3	7
[Neutral] 7-The choice should be made by a vote of the population	0	8

*Table 4. Frequency of arguments found in essays for two districts for Topic 2, coded at sentence level.*

Although the majority of essays across all classrooms argued for the idea that the Redskins should not change their team name, the reasoning provided by students to support this viewpoint varied from classroom to classroom. In essays advocating against changing the name of the Redskins, the arguments presented were generally divorced from the history of the name and the offense it may have caused in the past; the focus instead rested on present day issues or interpretation. These present day arguments often focused on the cost incurred in the event of a name change, current intent, and by saying that in some ways an individual can pay respect to

Native Americans by an assertion that they can control the meaning behind words describing their historical group.

In one District B classroom, there was no intra-class variation; 100% of the essays stated that the team should not change their name. The argumentation provided in these essays included fairness, cost, and the intent of the team name. Several students noted that other sports teams with names derived from Native American culture were not being asked to change their names, so singling out the Redskins for a name change felt unfair. In addition, some students noted that the team name “Yankees” used a term that historically was intended as a racial slur but that in the current era nobody was questioning the use of that name. Some students cited the cost of changing the name as a reason, feeling that a high cost did not justify a change. In discussing the intent of a team name, some students in this classroom remarked that the term “Redskins” was honoring Native Americans and cited the source of a Native American tribal leader who stated that the name was not offensive to him.

In the other classrooms, there was greater intra-class variability in the argumentation presented in the essays. The prevailing opinion in these classrooms remained that the team name should not be changed, yet the reasoning provided differed. Many of these students cited as their primary reasoning a perception that “Redskins” had a certain historicity after use over a long period of time and therefore no longer had a derogatory connotation because it spoke to a different time in America’s past. Also, students indicated that because of the fact that the Redskins are an NFL team with a record of “winning,” it was inappropriate to change their name at this juncture in the team’s lifecycle. Another commonly used argument for this position was that other teams with potentially offensively termed names are not also being asked to find new names. The examples of names such as “Chiefs”, “Indians”, and “Braves” are specifically cited

as terms that refer to Native Americans as well, but they argue that teams with those names are not facing the same calls for change. This argumentation may be interpreted as a view that a single team should not be held to a different standard, or alternately, that all teams with any potentially offensive names should be asked to change terms. However, this defense may also reflect a viewpoint that no teams should be asked to change names at all.

Interestingly, in one of the urban district classrooms, a plurality of students did not express an opinion on the question, rather concluding that a vote should be held, either within the Native American population or the population of Washington, DC, where the team is based, to decide on the question. Such argumentation was only seen in this classroom, suggesting that the in-class discussion during the unit may have introduced these themes.

In evaluating intra-class differences in the content and direction of argumentation, the minority viewpoint in most classrooms was that the Redskins name should be changed. All examples of this type of argument were found in essays from classrooms within the urban district. Within these essays, the reasoning for this argument focused on the following themes: the team name as a stereotype or racial slur, the historical derivation of the team name, and the framing of the name in context of other racial inequality.

### **Discussion**

To an American middle school student, historical events spanning a broad swath of time from Ancient Greece to the American civil rights movement, can seem removed from and irrelevant to life in the twenty-first century. However, delving into the past remains a staple of social studies curricula nationwide; these curricula attempt both to encapsulate the experiences of the world's varying cultures across thousands of years and to imbue children with historical understanding. As development progresses, students learn increasingly more about how the

meaning of historical events can echo across the vastness of time and place. Their ability to differentiate the beliefs and ideas they themselves hold from those that historical actors hold has been shown to start when students are still in their early elementary years in some classrooms (Lee & Ashby, 2000). The present analyses highlight how components of a specific curriculum (WordGen/SoGen) elicit varying beliefs about these issues and argumentation of varying levels of sophistication within a middle-school cohort as well.

The essays evaluated in this study responded to specific questions about the relation of historical events to the current era. Two distinct issues were explored in the essays – one based on the impact of the civil rights movement on improving racial equality and the second based on the historical legacy of naming sports teams using terminology describing Native American populations. Overall, the responses presented by the students for both topics reflected broad argumentation themes. In general, students expressed mixed *general* opinions on whether the United States had experienced improvements in racial equality. Dual-dimensional argumentation, particularly in the essays on progress in racial equality, was quite common in many classrooms, highlighting the ability of students to take a nuanced approach to a topic, at leasts after access to information about it and experience in debating it with classmates. Intra-class variation in argumentation was also generally present, but the degree of variability differed by classroom. In classrooms where students were racially/ethnically homogeneous, there tended to be less intra-class variability in the position takes or the supportive evidence offered in the essays. However, the essays from classrooms with a more diverse student composition demonstrated a greater heterogeneity of opinions. This suggests that a student's argumentation in response to topics of relevance to both historic and current events may be somewhat affected by the diversity of world knowledge or experience (or lack thereof) within their classrooms.



**Limitations.** The primary limitation of this analysis is its relatively small sample size. In particular, this limits the ability to evaluate inter-class variability in argumentation. Such inter-classroom variation could in part rely on various factors related to the teacher: quality of instruction, depth of interrogation of the provided SoGen units, strength of scaffolding, discourse, or implementation of the classroom debates intended to be conducted prior to essay writing. These classroom differences could be a rich resource for future study. In addition, we do not know what points were made or themes were surfaced during classroom discussions, and how such differences could lead to variation in student argumentation. It may be that the manner in which a teacher in an individual classroom presents and facilitates the curriculum, for example whether the teacher's emphasis is on historical facts or participants' emotional experiences, may greatly influence student perceptions and thinking. Without knowing how a teacher led the curriculum in each classroom, one can only speculate about the sources of these observed differences.

### **Implications**

Within social studies curricula such as SoGen, fostering argumentation skills is a key step towards the development of historical perspective taking and empathy. The essays evaluated in this qualitative analysis highlight student argumentation on questions introduced via a curriculum meant to foster historical perspective taking. Whether the curriculum achieves this goal would be an important future analysis, particularly since the role of historical perspective taking and historical empathy in social studies instruction subject to debate: first, the extent to which "ethical judgment" (Bellino & Selman, 2012) should be a part of instruction covering historical events; and second, if, indeed, historical perspective taking is integrated into the middle school classroom (and beyond), how this term should be defined (e.g., Endacott &

Brooks, 2013). Davis, Yeager, and Foster (2001) identified historical empathy as a term possessing a “problematic and contested” definition. Additionally, there is substantial variability in researchers’ use of this term and the overarching concept of perspective taking (Bellino & Selman, 2012; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Gehlbach, 2004). Definitional confusion derives from the concepts’ positioning at the intersection of three disparate literatures: first, social psychology, which attempts to understand the cognitive and emotional implications of putting oneself in another’s shoes; second, education practice research, which focuses on these concepts’ classroom use; and third, work on the civic and social justice impact of discourse centering on history or current events in the context of children’s education. Moreover, a debate continues over whether historical empathy is a cognitive, emotional, or dual-dimensional (i.e., integrating both dimensions) construct. Endacott and Brooks (2013) argue for historical perspective taking’s dual-dimensionality as having “the potential to promote both proximate goals (i.e. those that are related to immediate curricular objectives in the classroom) and ultimate goals (i.e. those that deal with understandings, skills, and dispositions that an individual might benefit from for a lifetime)” (p. 44).

This descriptive, qualitative study represents an initial step toward understanding how student argumentation within two social studies-focused units from the Word Generation program may lead to improved perspective taking skills. The two sets of essays evaluated in this study provide an example for application of the framework for evaluating student argumentation. Future work, including a broader sample of essays and essay topics, would help address this question. Expanding the sample analyzed, by obtaining more student essays over multiple academic years—and by continuing to create codebooks for additional prompts where (even nascent) historical perspective taking and empathy may be perceptible—would also prove

fruitful. Fundamentally, a curriculum intended to scaffold students' developing argumentation skills may allow us to better understand how perspective taking and historical contextualization unfold and evolve in the middle school years.

### Appendix A: Codebook for Topic 1 (MLK and Civil Rights)

Code Name	Definition	Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria	Anchors
<i>The U.S. has taken great steps to achieve racial equality.</i>			
<b>(1) Increased economic security</b>	The student states that African-Americans have achieved gains in racial equality as manifest by the fact that their economic circumstances have improved since the Civil Rights era.	Includes anything related to income, savings, jobs, or housing.	“They've had a better income”
<b>(2) Greater physical freedom or security</b>	The student states that African-Americans have access to (more) equal public accommodations when compared with the Civil Rights era.	Includes any mention of the effects of desegregation in public spaces, but does not include any mentions of changes in educational opportunity or access.	“Segregation has ended.” “Sit and do what they want” “We have no special places for races”
<b>(3) Improved access to education</b>	The student states that African-Americans’ access to educational opportunity has improved v. the Civil Rights era.	Does not include purely economic disparities.	“Higher percentage of graduating college”  “Lastly more black people are now graduating high-school it was more than a 100% increase in black graduation rate.”
<b>(4) Racially diverse achievement in American society</b>  <i>(Subcode 4A) Black President</i>  <i>(Subcode 4B) Athlete of color</i>	The student states that African-Americans have achieved positions of power in American society.  The student specifically mentions the election or term in office of Barack Obama as the first African-American presidential office holder.  The student specifically mentions the existence of or prevalence of people of color in professional or college sports.	Includes politics, sports, public affairs.	“We've also allowed blacks to participate in government.”  “We even have a black president and I believe that this has effected peoples [opinions] on racial equality in a good way.”  “blacks are in famous sports leagues” <i>or</i> “most teams are mostly black”

<p><b>(5) Specific improvements for groups historically discriminated against</b></p> <p><i>(Subcode 5A) Specific improvements for racial-ethnic groups – African-Americans</i></p> <p><i>(Subcode 5B) Specific improvements for racial-ethnic groups – Other groups</i></p> <p><i>(Subcode 5C) Specific improvements for racial-ethnic groups – Not specified</i></p> <p><i>(Subcode 5D) Specific improvements for religious groups</i></p> <p><i>(Subcode 5E) Specific improvements for women</i></p>	<p>The student mentions <i>improved</i> opportunities for 1+ group that faced discrimination in American history (e.g., Native Americans, Latinos, women, religious groups).</p>	<p>Student’s assertion must be a mention of (perceived) <i>positive</i> progress.</p>	<p><i>[see examples below]</i></p> <p>“blacks aren't being thrown in jail if they don't follow what they're told”</p> <p>“we are working on changing the name of the Washington Redskins because it was used as a racial slur.”</p> <p>[code chosen to mirror 10C, below; not yet observed]</p> <p>[code chosen to mirror 10D, below; not yet observed]</p> <p>[code chosen to mirror 10E, below; not yet observed]</p>
<p><b>(6) Non-specific improvement for groups historically discriminated against</b></p> <p><i>(Subcode 6A) Non-specific improvements for racial-ethnic groups – African-</i></p>	<p>The student mentions that a group facing discrimination is doing better, but does not provide specific evidence.</p>	<p>If specific evidence is offered, it must be coded using code 5 above.</p> <p>If the assertion does not mention a specific racial/ethnic group, then it must be coded using code 7 below.</p>	<p>“Blacks have all the same rights as whites!”</p>

<i>Americans</i>			
<b>(7) Assertion of improvement without specific evidence</b>	The student makes an assertion in support of the idea that "the U.S. has taken great steps to achieve racial equality," but does not provide specific evidence.	Any miscellaneous sentiment in favor of the proposition.	"The U.S. has taken great steps to achieve racial equality"
<i>The U.S. still suffers from institutional racism.</i>			
<b>(8) Continued economic disparity</b>	The student mentions that economic gaps still exist between Caucasian individuals and those of other races.	Does not include purely educational disparities.	"Whites make more than any other race"
<b>(9) Continued educational disparity</b>	The student makes mention of facts that illustrate the continuing gap in access to education for non-white individuals.	Does not include purely economic disparities.	HS graduation rate is "60% white and 30% black"
<b>(10) Racially-motivated crime</b>	The student states that some crimes are motivated in part or solely by race.	Code should be applied regardless of how student characterizes the extent to which either party is 'at fault.'	Any mentions of Trayvon Martin or George Zimmerman, or another example of crime with racial controversy/overtone
<b>(11) More progress needed for groups historically discriminated against</b>  <b>(Subcode 11A)</b> <i>Discrimination based on race-ethnicity – African-Americans</i>  <b>(Subcode 11B)</b> <i>Discrimination based on race-ethnicity – Other group</i>  <b>(Subcode 11C)</b> <i>Discrimination</i>	The student mentions <i>continued challenges</i> for 1+ group that faced discrimination in American history (e.g., Native Americans, Latinos, women, religious groups).	Student's assertion must be a mention of (perceived) <i>challenges</i> or a <i>lack of progress</i> .	<i>[see examples below]</i>  "Even now black people don't make as much income as the white man."  "Yes, America has done very bad things (Native Americans being killed in the thousands.)"  "In some states the color of your skin will

<p><i>based on race-ethnicity – Not specified</i></p> <p><i>(Subcode 11D) Discrimination based on religion</i></p> <p><i>(Subcode 11E) Discrimination based on female gender</i></p>			<p>get you questioned by a police officer. Even racial profiling occurs.”</p> <p>“When ever they see a [Muslim] they think [they’re] going blow up something too.”</p> <p>“Even now women don't make as much income as the white man.”</p>
<p><b>(12) Assertion of racism without specific evidence</b></p>	<p>The student makes an assertion in support of the idea that "the U.S. still suffers from institutional racism," but does not provide specific evidence.</p>	<p>Any other sentiment counter to the proposition.</p>	<p>“but there is still racism in this world”</p>

### Appendix B: Codebook for Topic 2 (Washington Redskins)

Code Name	Definition	Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria	Anchors
<i>The Washington Redskins should change their name.</i>			
<b>(1) Name is derogatory</b>	The student states that the current team name represents a racial slur or is a term describing Native Americans in a negative way.	Includes anything describing the team name as a negative term / racial slur	“it is an ethnic slur”
<b>(2) Name reflects inequality</b>	The student states that the current name identifies Native Americans in a manner that demonstrates racial inequality	Includes references to the team name being a signal of racial differences	“bias to Native Americans”
<i>The Washington Redskins should not change their name.</i>			
<b>(3) The name is historical and is not currently derogatory</b>	The student suggests that the historical use of the term is not relevant in the current era.	Includes comments on the historical meaning of “Redskins” that are not relevant today	“it’s not a racial slur anymore”
<b>(4) The cost of changing the name is prohibitive</b>	The student argues that the financial implications of a name change are too great.	Includes comments about the cost of changing the name, including impacts on the fans/customers	“they would lose so much money”
<b>(5) Singling out one team is unfair</b>	The student argues that other teams also have potentially troublesome names that might need to be changed	Reflects comments that other teams have equally problematic names grounded in history/legacy	“a bunch of teams have derogatory names”
<b>(6) The intent of the name is to honor the past</b>	The student presents an argument the current name is a reflection of strength/power for Native Americans	Comments that the terminology reflects strength, courage, or spirit of Native American populations, particularly in the past	“Redskins are tough”
<i>[Student expresses a neutral position, neither pro nor con.]</i>			
<b>(7) The choice should be made by a vote of the population</b>	The student argues that only the population should have a say in the decision, through a vote/democratic process	Comments that the majority should decide on whether to change the name based on a vote	“the decision should be made by what is popular”



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