

Educational Hegemony and Culture Wars: Reframing Patriotic Education as Epistemic Control in Trump-Era U.S. Schooling

Idarianty Idarianty^{1*}, Dion Ginanto¹, Felix Peter Umeana²



AFFILIATIONS

1. UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia
2. Attwood New Tech Magnet School, USA

*Correspondence:
idarianty@uinjambi.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This critical qualitative research examines the discourse and policy of patriotic education during the era of Donald Trump's administration in the United States as a form of epistemic control within culture wars. The study analyzes how this hegemonic project is operationalized through three interconnected levels: the articulation of an official narrative in The 1776 Report, the migration and reincarnation of its core logic into state-level legislation such as Florida's Individual Freedom Act, and its implications and contestations in the classroom. The research findings indicate that The 1776 Report functions as a blueprint for standardizing a "state epistemology" that excludes critical narratives, while threats to abolish the Department of Education and defunding policies aim to weaken the institutional capacity for counter-knowledge. These control efforts, which metamorphosed into state law, ironically triggered epistemic fragmentation and gave birth to various forms of pedagogical resistance. Using a comparative perspective, this study places the U.S. case within the global map of nationalist education politics. It concludes that educational culture wars represent a fundamental struggle over the production of collective memory and the legitimation of knowledge, with serious implications for the shared knowledge foundation required for deliberative democracy.

KEYWORDS

Epistemic Control, Patriotic Education, Culture Wars, The 1776 Report, U.S. Education Policy.

INTRODUCTION

Patriotic education in the United States has long been an ideological battleground. The presidency of Donald Trump (2017-2021) intensified this conflict into a real "culture war" within the school system. Policies such as the establishment of the 1776 Advisory Commission and the publication of The 1776 Report marked systematic efforts by the federal government to promote a specific national history narrative (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021; Exec. Order No. 13958, 2020). These efforts received legislative responses in various states, such as Florida with the Individual Freedom Act (2022) and Texas with laws restricting the teaching of certain concepts related to race (Tex. Educ. Code § 28.0022, 2021). On the other hand, movements like The 1619 Project and Black Lives Matter at School offer counter-frameworks emphasizing the central role of slavery and racial injustice in the formation of America (Hannah-Jones, 2021; Black Lives Matter at School, n.d.). This conflict is not merely a curriculum debate, but a struggle for hegemony over how to understand the social reality and history of the nation, a battle to control the epistemology of the classroom. Reframing this struggle as a project of epistemic control, rather than as a discrete episode of CRT-ban

policymaking or an expression of Christian nationalism, redirects the analytic question. Where prior scholarship asks which doctrines are prohibited (Kelly, 2023) or which actors drive the prohibition (Perry, Davis, & Grubbs, 2023), an epistemic-control lens asks how the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge is drawn, codified into binding law, and reproduced across jurisdictions, an emphasis that the present study makes its central object of analysis.

Literature Review

Research bodies have mapped the battlefield of U.S. educational culture wars, often focusing on policy dimensions. Studies show a shift from the Obama to the Trump era, characterized by greater delegation of authority to states and federal withdrawal from enforcing equity-oriented education policies (Wong, 2020; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2023). Flanagan and Wong (2025) contextualize this within the framework of the “administrative presidency.” This shift created space for conservative states to pass legislation restricting the teaching of controversial topics related to race and identity. Tabron and colleagues (2024) reveal how this curriculum war is framed as protecting “individual freedom” from divisive ideologies, as seen in Florida’s Individual Freedom Act (2022). These policy narratives, as analyzed by Filimon and Ivănescu (2023), often employ political “dog whistles.”

Beyond policy mechanisms, scholars identify ideological and religious forces. Perry, Davis, and Grubbs (2023) link the push for mandatory patriotic education with the rise of Christian Nationalism. For its proponents, controlling the past is a prerequisite for controlling the nation’s future. Juzwik et al. (2024) deepen this analysis by exploring how biblical literacy is used by white Christian nationalists to justify conventional patriotic curriculum frameworks. This perspective is reinforced by the findings of Arrenius, Shook, and Audette (2025), which show the influence of religion in driving educational content regulation. Together, these studies reveal the culture war in the classroom also as a theological battle over the meaning of America.

Conceptually, this conflict is a struggle for “literacy” and the formation of the national mind. Tröhler (2020a) positions education as the central engine of the nation-state for generating cohesive collective consciousness. His work on “national literacies” shows how education systems are designed to create ways of thinking aligned with the national project (Tröhler, 2020b). In the context of the Trump-era U.S., this project took a specific form through the promotion of The 1776 Report, which was labeled as propaganda (American Historical Association, 2021). Hodgson and Harris (2022) trace the genealogy of “cultural literacy,” showing how definitions of knowledge for full citizenship have always been contested territory, often excluding marginalized groups. The question of “proper” historical literacy is at the heart of epistemic control. This concept of “cultural literacy” provides a lens for understanding how an agreed-upon canon of knowledge is used as a tool to unify while also limiting public discourse.

Meanwhile, counter-movements develop alternative epistemologies. The 1619 Project is an effort to shift the center of gravity of America’s national narrative (Hannah-Jones, 2021). Such efforts challenge the knowledge structure itself, a form of “epistemic resistance.” Similarly, ethnic studies curricula, such as California’s Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (2021), offer analytical frameworks emphasizing the perspectives of marginalized groups. Welton, Diem, and Lent (2023) argue that despite anti-CRT rhetoric, “the racial politics are always

there” in education policy implementation. This struggle is about the validity of certain ways of knowing and the right to integrate knowledge from marginalized experiences.

A comparative perspective clarifies the universality and uniqueness of the U.S. context. Studies show countries across the political spectrum use education to foster specific national loyalties and values. In post-invasion Russia, patriotic education has turned into militaristic indoctrination facing quiet resistance (Alava, 2025). In Brazil, an ultra-conservative and neoliberal alliance attacks public universities as centers of critical knowledge in their own culture war (Accioly et al., 2025). In Poland, informal patriotic books for children emphasize ties to homeland, history, and citizenship (McDermid, 2020). In Kazakhstan, a “design thinking” approach is proposed as an innovative method in patriotic education (Mukhanova et al., 2025). These studies, along with examples from China (Li & Schulz, 2025) and Indonesia (Mukodi et al., 2020), confirm that nationalist education politics is a global phenomenon. However, as Hussain, Knijnik, and Balram (2024) show in their review of the UK and Australia, dynamics in liberal democracies involve a battle between conservative nationalist visions and more progressive multicultural ones. In the U.S., the distinctive features are the intensity of the culture war, its deep entanglement with racial history, and its rapid institutionalization into often conflicting state laws, creating a highly fragmented educational landscape. Kleinig (2021) questions whether the patriotism promoted in the “Age of Trump” is a critical love of country or an uncritical loyalty to ideology.

The administrative death of The 1776 Report in 2021 marked an important metamorphosis. Its rescission by President Biden formally ended the federal initiative (Flanagan & Wong, 2025), but its ideological logic did not die. The years 2022 to 2024 witnessed a “resurgence” of its ideas through state legislative channels. Waves of legislation in Florida, Texas, and Tennessee operate as successor vehicles, adopting the core narrative of “patriotic education” against “un-American” teaching (Tabron et al., 2024; Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023). This process demonstrates the resilience of certain epistemic frameworks. Hazel (2025) sees a coherent strategy behind it, moving the battle from a vulnerable federal document to many more resilient state laws. Thus, the “spirit” of the 1776 Report lives on in the decentralized education ecosystem.

Research Gap

The analysis above deepens the research gap. Existing literature has mapped state legislation and its ideological roots (Tabron et al., 2024; Perry, Davis, & Grubbs, 2023). However, there is still a lack of analysis that explicitly and systematically traces the epistemic lineage from the “formally dead” 1776 Report to various “ideologically alive” state laws. Furthermore, existing comparative analyses are often isolated from the U.S. context. This research aims to answer: How are the key concepts and logic of control in that federal document adapted and re-institutionalized at the state level? How does this process of ideological reincarnation strengthen mechanisms of epistemic control? Moreover, how does this U.S. dynamic converse with or diverge from global patterns of nationalist education, including the use of innovative approaches like “design thinking” or the mobilization of collective memory? In other words, the gap to be filled is an analysis of the metamorphosis of hegemonic strategy and its unique position in the global map of curriculum wars.

Aims and Contribution

Aiming to address these gaps, this study's main objective is to reframe the discourse and practice of Trump-era patriotic education as a form of institutionalized epistemic control. Using a critical qualitative approach, this research analyzes how this hegemonic project is operationalized through three related levels: national policy narratives, their translation into state legislation, and their implications in the classroom. The contributions of this research are theoretical and substantive. Theoretically, it offers the "epistemic control" framework as a tool for understanding educational culture wars, highlighting the fundamental struggle over the production and legitimation of knowledge, while enriching it with insights from memory studies and cultural literacy. Substantively, it provides an integrated mapping of the conflict landscape, connecting presidential rhetoric, grassroots movements, state legislation, and social justice movement resistance, while placing the U.S. case in broader conversation with global manifestations of nationalist education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Type and Data Sources

This research uses a Critical Qualitative Research approach (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011) and is designed as a critical policy study that is descriptive-analytical and comparative. The chosen paradigm views social reality as a product of power relations, history, and ideology, making it suitable for uncovering how patriotic education discourse functions as an instrument of epistemic control in culture wars. This approach enables analysis that not only describes phenomena but also critiques inherent structures of domination and opens space for possibilities of social transformation. It analyzes policy as active texts that produce meaning, affirm certain identities, and suppress alternative narratives (Ball, 1993). Primary data sources consist of two types: (1) primary document data including policy documents such as The 1776 Report, executive orders, and state laws (Florida, Texas, Tennessee); counter-curriculum documents such as The 1619 Project and Black Lives Matter at School resources; and public statements and discourse articulations from key actors (e.g., statements from the American Historical Association, opinions from think tanks like The Heritage Foundation [Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020], and op-eds such as from Rufo [2021]). (2) Secondary academic data from available literature is used for contextualization, triangulation, and in-depth analysis. Specifically, comparative literature on Brazil, Russia, Poland, and others will be used as a reflective comparative lens, not as direct case studies, to highlight the uniqueness and similarities of the U.S. context.

The primary corpus was assembled by purposive selection and comprises eleven core documents organized into three strata. The federal stratum (four texts) contains the foundational policy instruments of the initiative: Executive Order 13958 (2020), The 1776 Report (2021) and its 2021 rescission, together with two closely associated advocacy texts (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020; Rufo, 2021). The state stratum (three texts) contains the statutes that carry the framework into binding law: Florida's Individual Freedom Act (Fla. Stat. § 1000.05, 2022), Texas SB 3 (Tex. Educ. Code § 28.0022, 2021), and Tennessee HB 580 (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-1019, 2021). The counter-discourse stratum (four texts) contains the principal alternative frameworks and professional responses: The 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones, 2021), California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (2021), the American Historical Association's 2021 statement, and Black Lives Matter at School resources. Selection followed

three criteria: (a) centrality to the federal-to-state migration of the patriotic-education framework, (b) binding or canonical status within the relevant jurisdiction or field, and (c) explicit articulation of competing claims about what counts as legitimate national-historical knowledge. Texts that commented on the controversy without enacting or directly contesting policy were excluded from the primary corpus and used, where relevant, as secondary literature for contextualization and triangulation.

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

Data collection is conducted through systematic documentary research and historical discourse analysis. Documents are collected and organized thematically and chronologically to trace the discourse flow from the federal center to the states. Data analysis integrates two main approaches. First, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) following Fairclough's model (1995) is used to uncover three dimensions: (1) Text: analyzing lexical choices, metaphors, and argument structures in policy documents (e.g., the recurrence of "identity politics," "protected classes," "national renewal," and the affective vocabulary of "guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress"). (2) Discursive Practice: examining how these texts are produced, disseminated, and consumed within specific political contexts. (3) Social Practice: linking discourse to broader power shifts, such as devolution of authority and culture wars. Second, this research conducts conceptual thematic analysis to trace the journey and transformation of key concepts such as "patriotism," "cultural literacy" (Hodgson & Harris, 2022), "collective memory" (Young, 2023), and "constructive ignorance" (Tobias-Lauerman, 2025) across the data corpus. Comparative analysis will be done reflectively by juxtaposing findings from the U.S. context with insights from comparative studies to identify universal patterns and specificities. Specifically, this reflective comparison is operationalized through three analytical criteria that systematically juxtapose the U.S. findings with the international cases: (1) regime type and political-institutional context (e.g., liberal democracy with decentralized federalism versus authoritarian regime, or unitary versus federal state); (2) policy mechanism employed (e.g., centralized state indoctrination through curriculum directives, decentralized legislation through subnational law, or informal cultural socialization through textbooks and youth literature); and (3) the character and strategies of pedagogical resistance (e.g., institutional defense by professional associations, classroom-level "gap pedagogy," or silent everyday resistance). These criteria function as a heuristic grid through which the U.S. case is read alongside Brazil, Russia, Poland, Kazakhstan, China, the UK, and Australia, allowing the analysis to identify both shared logics of nationalist epistemic control and the distinctive configuration of the American case.

Within the textual dimension, analysis proceeded through a coding framework applied segment by segment to the primary corpus. Each document was read closely, and passages were coded under four recurring discursive moves. The first, boundary-marking, captures language that partitions legitimate from illegitimate knowledge, as when rival accounts are cast as "false theories" or citizens are sorted into "protected classes." The second, canonization, captures language that fixes a preferred account as settled truth, as in the appeals to "the self-evident truths of our founding" and to "national renewal." The third, affective regulation, captures language that prescribes or proscribes emotion, exemplified by the statutory clause forbidding instruction that makes an individual feel "guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress." The fourth, enforcement, captures language that attaches consequences to prohibited content, as in the operative verbs "espouses, promotes,

advances, inculcates, or compels.” Coded segments were then mapped onto the three Faircloughian dimensions and onto the federal-to-state sequence, so that a lexical feature at the textual level could be traced to its discursive circulation and its social effects. The worked examples presented in the Findings demonstrate this procedure rather than exhaust it; each interpretive claim is anchored to a quoted textual feature rather than asserted in the abstract.

Researcher Positionality and Critical Validity

As critical research, the researcher’s position and biases are acknowledged reflexively. The researcher proceeds from a commitment to epistemic justice and concern about the repressive impacts of nationalist hegemonic projects in education. Validity in this research is not measured by false objectivity, but through credibility, authenticity, and critical validity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; on validity criteria in critical inquiry, see Carspecken, 1996). Credibility is achieved through rigorous data triangulation (federal vs. state policy, dominant vs. counter discourse, academic sources) and analytical perseverance. Authenticity is pursued by providing nuanced and in-depth representation of the complexity of the contested field. Critical validity is tested through the analysis’s ability to reveal hidden power relations, empower marginalized voices, and contribute to emancipatory discourse in education.

FINDINGS

The 1776 Report as an Epistemic Blueprint and the Culmination of Defunding and Deregulation Projects

The first finding of this research reveals that The 1776 Report functions as much more than an alternative history curriculum; the document serves as an epistemic blueprint that deliberately constructs an official framework of truth about the American nation. By asserting the 1776 Founding Principles as “timeless truths” that must be the foundation of citizenship education, this report actively constructs an irreconcilable knowledge dichotomy (The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021). In this dichotomy, critical historical interpretations, especially those rooted in Critical Race Theory and The 1619 Project, are categorized not as academic differences, but as destructive forms of “revisionism” that are inherently unpatriotic. This process of delegitimation is a central mechanism of epistemic control, where the boundary between legitimate and forbidden knowledge is firmly drawn. A close reading of the report’s own lexicon makes this boundary visible. The document does not engage competing scholarship so much as reclassify it: it lists “identity politics” alongside slavery, fascism, and communism as one of the recurring “threats” to the republic, and recodes demands for racial equity as a regime that sorts citizens into “protected classes,” thereby moving rival accounts out of the domain of legitimate debate and into the domain of national danger (The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021). Its closing call to pursue “national renewal” by “rekindling a brave and honest love for our country” positions a single affective-historical disposition as the precondition of citizenship, against which alternative accounts register as “false theories” tending “to tyranny.” This is canonization in Fairclough’s textual sense: a lexical closure that converts an interpretive position into settled truth. Trollinger (2025) reaches a parallel reading, treating the report as an attempt to elide the distance between the founders’ professed ideals and the realities of slavery, while Watts (2021) and Grossman (2021) record how the same text was received within the history-

teaching profession as propaganda rather than scholarship. The American Historical Association (2021) explicitly condemned the report as a propaganda effort ignoring scholarly methodology, an assessment underlining the political nature of its truth claims. Thus, The 1776 Report emerges as an instrument to standardize a “state epistemology,” a closed canon designed to win the narrative competition in the culture war.

However, deep contextual analysis shows this report is not an isolated entity. It is the most visible expression of a broader, interconnected policy logic defining the Trump administration’s approach to education. This logic is manifested through repeated threats to disband the federal Department of Education and through a series of concrete actions in the form of defunding and deregulation, especially in higher education. The threat of dissolution, as analyzed in studies of education policy of that era (Androszczuk, 2025), reflects a deep ideological suspicion of the federal government as an agent perceived to promote progressive social change agendas and liberal “indoctrination.” These policies align with efforts to freeze or divert funds from programs supporting diversity, inclusion, and critical research, as well as severe restrictions on foreign students from certain countries. These actions function as a form of fiscal and administrative discipline against educational institutions seen as breeding grounds for counter-knowledge, a pattern also observed in attacks on public universities in Brazil by an ultra-conservative and neoliberal alliance (Accioly et al., 2025).

Thus, there is a symbiotic relationship between The 1776 Report and defunding-deregulation policies. If the report seeks to control the content of knowledge (what is known about American history), then defunding policies aim to weaken the institutional capacity for knowledge production (where and by whom critical knowledge can be generated and disseminated). Together they form an institutionalized architecture of ignorance, a concept articulated by Tobias-Lauerma (2025). In this architecture, a specific ignorance, namely the neglect of the complexity of slavery history, structural injustice, and the role of race in nation-building, is not a passive lack, but a condition actively maintained and reproduced through state policy. The 1776 Report provides a pleasing substitute narrative, while defunding cripples institutions that might challenge it.

Migration, Localization, and Hyper-Legalization of the 1776 Framework into State Law

The second finding of this research shows that the withdrawal of The 1776 Report at the federal level was not the end of that epistemic project, but the beginning of a phase of more effective adaptation and radicalization. The report’s conceptual framework migrated and found its reincarnation in the form of scattered and binding state legislation. Waves of laws like Florida’s Individual Freedom Act (2022) and similar regulations in Texas, Tennessee, and other states represent a process of localization and hyper-legalization of the 1776 Report’s core narrative. This process transforms abstract ideological rhetoric about “patriotic education” and “un-American teaching” into specific, punishable procedural prohibitions against certain concepts associated with critical race analysis (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023; Tabron et al., 2024).

Critical discourse analysis of these legal texts reveals significant conceptual continuity. The concerns expressed in The 1776 Report about “divisive” narratives are manifested in clauses prohibiting teaching that could make individuals feel “guilt, anguish, or other psychological distress” due to past actions by members of their race (Fla. Stat. § 1000.05, 2022). This is a concrete example of how epistemic control expands its scope to the affective

and psychological realm of learning. The statute's operative grammar reinforces the point. It does not prohibit a topic outright; it prohibits instruction that "espouses, promotes, advances, inculcates, or compels" belief in eight enumerated concepts, a cascade of verbs that stretches the prohibition from explicit advocacy to the subtler registers of emphasis and framing. A savings clause then permits the same concepts to be raised "in an objective manner without endorsement," which relocates the decisive judgment from what is taught to how it is taught, and lodges that judgment with administrators and reviewers rather than with teachers. Kelly's (2023) content analysis of these so-called critical race theory bans confirms the pattern across states: the statutes seldom name CRT and instead enumerate proscribed propositions, governing classroom knowledge through lists of forbidden beliefs rather than through outright curricular bans. The state not only regulates ideas but also regulates legitimate emotions to be felt in pedagogical space, a form of "affective governance" also observed in patriotic education contexts in other countries (Li & Schulz, 2025). This transformation shows the hegemonic project's ability to adapt, shifting from persuasion through national narrative to coercion through local law.

The effectiveness of this strategy is reinforced by the structure of American educational federalism. As identified by Wong (2020), the Trump era was marked by an "administrative presidency" that strategically withdrew from enforcing federal equity policies and delegated greater authority to states. This decentralized policy environment created an ideal regulatory laboratory. States with conservative governments became testing grounds for refining curriculum control mechanisms, creating a regulatory patchwork far more difficult to overturn as a whole than a single centralized federal policy. What may seem like a series of chaotic political reactions, as revealed by Hazel (2025), actually has a coordinated "method": moving the battlefield from a single point of vulnerability in Washington D.C. to many defensive fortresses in state capitals, thereby consolidating epistemic control through multiplicity and dispersion.

Epistemic Fragmentation, Matrices of Resistance, and the U.S. Position in the Geopolitics of Nationalist Education

The third finding reveals that epistemic control efforts do not produce a national monolith, but rather an epistemically fragmented educational landscape, while simultaneously triggering a complex matrix of resistance. On one hand, state legislation has created a palpable "climate of fear" and chilling effect, narrowing the discourse space available to many educators and affecting policy implementation at the district level (Welton, Diem, & Lent, 2023). This pattern is corroborated beyond any single study. Jamnah and Zimmerman (2022) frame the period as an open contest over how the national past should be taught, and Kelly's (2023) cross-state reading of the bans shows how loosely worded prohibitions generate the very uncertainty that educators must then navigate. Reported district-level effects documented in this literature, including withdrawn texts, paused ethnic-studies offerings, and disciplinary exposure for individual teachers, register the chilling effect in concrete administrative practice rather than in rhetoric alone. Yet, on the other hand, this hegemonic pressure has given birth to various interconnected forms of epistemic resistance.

This resistance operates at several levels. At the formal curriculum level, there is open adoption of counter-frameworks like The 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones, 2021) and California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (2021), affirming the validity of marginalized perspectives.

At the professional and institutional level, organizations like the American Historical Association (2021) defend the epistemic authority of the history discipline by rejecting the 1776 Report's claims. At the everyday pedagogical level, the most significant responses are the tactical strategies developed by teachers, what might be called "gap pedagogy." These educators, as documented by Welton et al. (2023), find and exploit ambiguities in the law, use literary texts to discuss forbidden themes, and build solidarity networks to support critical teaching. Ribet and Bunnage (2023) explicitly advocate such pedagogy teaching about white nationalism as a counter-hegemonic act. The result of this tug-of-war is not victory for either side, but an increasingly deep cleavage of America's pedagogical public space, creating what can be described as "epistemic federalism" where truth about the nation depends on geographic jurisdiction.

Read through the three comparative criteria set out in the methodology, the U.S. configuration becomes sharper than a simple roster of national cases would suggest. On regime type, the American project unfolds within a liberal democracy organized as a decentralized federation, which sets it apart from the unitary authoritarian setting in which Russian patriotic education has hardened into militaristic indoctrination met by quiet, individualized resistance (Alava, 2025), and from the informal cultural socialization that carries patriotic content through children's literature in Poland (McDermid, 2020). On policy mechanism, the United States relies on neither a centralized curriculum directive nor informal socialization alone; it works through binding subnational statute, a legislative route that converts contested history into enforceable rule and has no close analogue among the comparators, even where the affective management of patriotism is visible, as in the Chinese case (Li & Schulz, 2025). On the character of resistance, the American pattern is distinctive in combining institutional defense by professional associations, formal counter-curricula, and classroom-level gap pedagogy, a layered repertoire that more centralized or more informal systems tend to foreclose. The family resemblance to the curriculum wars documented in the UK and Australia (Hussain, Knijnik, & Balram, 2024) is therefore real but partial: the U.S. case is set apart by the intensity of the conflict, its entanglement with racial history, and the speed with which the dispute is institutionalized into law. Where some systems experiment with pedagogically inventive forms of patriotic education, such as the design-thinking approach proposed in Kazakhstan (Mukhanova et al., 2025), the dominant American move is restrictive and defensive, oriented more to prohibiting discourse than to pedagogical innovation.

DISCUSSION: A HEGEMONIC CYCLE OF EPISTEMIC CONTROL

Overall, these findings illustrate an adaptive and resilient hegemonic cycle in the American political ecology. This cycle begins with the articulation of an official epistemic canon (The 1776 Report) supported by policies weakening the infrastructure of counter-knowledge (defunding). When facing political obstacles at the federal level, this canon does not die; it metamorphoses, migrates to lower levels of government, and crystallizes in the form of scattered state laws. Ultimately, these consolidation efforts actually result in the fragmentation of epistemic space and trigger diverse forms of resistance, thus perpetuating the cycle of conflict itself. Table 1 summarizes this five-stage hegemonic cycle, mapping each stage to its key instruments, main actors, and primary epistemic effect.

Table 1. The Hegemonic Cycle of Epistemic Control in Trump-Era U.S. Patriotic Education

Stage	Key Instrument	Main Actors	Primary Epistemic Effect
1. Articulation	Executive Order 13958; The 1776 Report; defunding and deregulation of higher education	Federal executive (Trump White House); 1776 Advisory Commission; conservative think tanks (e.g., Heritage Foundation)	Establishes an official “state epistemology” and an architecture of ignorance that delegitimizes counter-narratives
2. Migration	Adaptation of the 1776 framework into model bills and state legislative agendas after federal rescission	Conservative state legislators; movement intellectuals; advocacy networks	Relocates the battlefield from a vulnerable federal document to dispersed state arenas
3. Hyper-Legalization	Binding state statutes (Florida Individual Freedom Act; Texas SB 3; Tennessee HB 580) with punishable prohibitions	Governors, attorneys general, state education agencies, district administrators	Converts ideological rhetoric into enforceable rules; extends control over affective and pedagogical space
4. Fragmentation	Diverging state curricula, chilling effects, and a patchwork of permissible and forbidden knowledge	School districts, teachers, students, parent and community publics	Produces “epistemic federalism” in which the national past is taught differently by jurisdiction
5. Resistance	Counter-curricula (e.g., The 1619 Project, Ethnic Studies); professional statements (AHA); “gap pedagogy”	Teachers, historians, professional associations, civil society movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter at School)	Re-opens marginalized epistemologies and feeds back into renewed articulation, perpetuating the cycle

Source: Author’s synthesis from analysis of *The 1776 Report*, state legislation, and the literature reviewed; informed by Hazel (2025), Tabron et al. (2024), and Welton et al. (2023).

This discussion leads to several profound theoretical implications. First, this conflict provides a new historico-political context for the concept of “cultural literacy” (Hodgson & Harris, 2022). The culture war is essentially a war to define American cultural literacy what list of knowledge, symbols, and narratives must be mastered to be considered a “culturally literate” and legitimate citizen. The 1776 Report project is an attempt to narrow that list to a triumphalistic, conflict-free version that hides the nation’s fundamental tensions. Second, these findings affirm the classroom as a primary site of struggle over collective memory (Young, 2023). The history taught is the history remembered; by controlling the historical narrative in schools, actors in the culture war seek to shape the future national memory, determining which events and perspectives will be remembered, which will be forgotten, and which will be misunderstood.

Finally, and of broader consequence, this research highlights a deep paradox in contemporary liberal democracy. A central threat to such a democracy, as the preceding analysis of epistemic federalism suggests, may lie less in overt authoritarianism than in institutionalized, polarized epistemic fragmentation. When a nation loses the possibility of having a shared foundation of facts and historical interpretation, the foundation needed for rational public deliberation, political compromise, and national solidarity also crumbles (Kleinig, 2021). Epistemic control through education, therefore, transcends mere threats to individual academic freedom; it is a threat to the very condition of possibility for deliberative democracy itself. By mapping the strategies, migratory pathways, and fields of contestation

of this hegemonic project, this research aims to provide the critical understanding necessary to defend the classroom not only as an ideological battleground, but as a space opening possibilities for critical inquiry, recognition of diverse experiences, and the co-discovery of a more honest and inclusive national story.

Research Implications

The findings of this research have profound implications, both theoretical and practical, extending beyond the specific U.S. context. Theoretically, this research enriches understanding of how hegemony operates in decentralized and polarized political landscapes. By tracing the conceptual journey from The 1776 Report to state legislation, it shows that contemporary hegemonic projects no longer rely on a single centralized master narrative, but on the ability to migrate, adapt, and crystallize in dispersed forms of law and discourse. The proposed concept of “epistemic control” proves to be a powerful analytical tool for connecting high-level ideological struggles with micro-regulatory mechanisms in the classroom. Furthermore, this research expands literature on memory studies and cultural literacy by empirically demonstrating how struggles over collective memory and legitimate knowledge canons are embodied in concrete education policies with material consequences for educators and students. Consequently, educational political theory must better account for the dynamics of “hegemonic metamorphosis” and institutionalized “architectures of ignorance” as formative forces in democratic societies.

Practically, the implications of this research are serious for the future of citizenship education and democracy itself. The documented epistemic fragmentation where students in different jurisdictions are taught contradictory national narratives threatens the shared knowledge foundation necessary for healthy democratic functioning. For policymakers, educators, and advocates, these findings call for the need to develop and defend pedagogical spaces that can accommodate historical complexity and diverse experiences, while countering the chilling effects of restrictive legislation. Research on the tactical resistance strategies, or “gap pedagogies,” employed by teachers provides a valuable roadmap for field practice. Additionally, the presented comparative perspective offers warnings and lessons: cases like Brazil and Poland show that attacks on public education and critical knowledge are a global trend, thus requiring solidarity and advocacy strategies that are also transnational. Ultimately, this research underscores that defending the classroom as a site of critical inquiry is not merely a curriculum issue, but an essential defense against social fragmentation and the erosion of a nation’s collective capacity to understand itself and confront its future challenges.

Research Limitations

As with all research, this study has several limitations to acknowledge. The main limitation lies in its methodology based on policy document and discourse analysis. While this approach allows comprehensive tracking of idea journeys and legal formulations, the study does not incorporate direct empirical data from key actors, such as in-depth interviews with state legislators, school administrators, teachers, or students. Their voices and lived experiences in navigating, implementing, or resisting these policies could provide additional nuance and depth about the micro-impacts of epistemic control. The second limitation is the temporal

focus primarily on the peak period and early impact (2017-2024). Educational culture wars are dynamic processes; the long-term effectiveness of state legislation, the evolution of resistance strategies, and potential backlash at the federal level require further longitudinal research. Finally, although this research offers a reflective comparative perspective, in-depth analysis of specific mechanisms in other countries is beyond its scope. Systematic comparative studies between the U.S. case and other countries like Brazil or Hungary could further clarify conditions that facilitate or hinder decentralized epistemic control strategies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated that the Trump-era patriotic education project constitutes a sophisticated and resilient effort of epistemic control, operating through a cycle of articulation, migration, and contestation. From the attempt to establish an official history canon through The 1776 Report and weaken higher education infrastructure, to its metamorphosis into a network of state legislation restricting discourse, this strategy aims to shape collective memory and limit the horizon of legitimate knowledge about the American nation. However, these findings also reveal the incompleteness of hegemonic control; control efforts actually trigger epistemic fragmentation and give rise to a complex matrix of resistance at various levels. The deepest implication of this conflict is not merely which version of history will win, but whether American democracy can maintain a public space where citizens, equipped with a critical understanding of their complex and often painful past, can contemplate and build a shared future. Thus, the classroom remains the a central battleground, where the war for knowledge is essentially a war for the possibility of democracy itself.

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