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Promoting historical empathy with a local history research project about the pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – We examined how high school students demonstrated historical empathy through conducting local history place-based research to create an exhibit and companion book about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their community. The majority of existing historical empathy scholarship focuses on classroom-based inquiry of historical events, people and time periods. We contend that broader examination of how historical empathy can be promoted beyond school-based instruction can contribute to the field by examining how student analyses of historical contexts and perspectives, and making affective connections to historical topics of study are needed when engaging in placed-based local history projects.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative case study methodology was implemented for this study. A Likert-scale survey with a questionnaire was distributed to 30 high school study participants. Thirteen students gave follow-up interviews. Students' responses on the surveys, interviews and questionnaires were organized into three categories that aligned to the theoretical framework – identification of historical contexts of the sources that students collected, analysis of how contexts shaped the perspectives expressed in the collected sources and expression of reasoned connections between the students' emotions and experiences during the pandemic. A rubric was used to examine how students' writing samples and reflections reflected demonstration of historical empathy.

Findings – Students responded that their local history research about the pandemic contributed to their displays of historical empathy. Students displayed weaker evidence of historical empathy while examining archival resources to explain the historical contexts of the pandemic. Student demonstration of historical empathy was stronger when analyzing community-sourced documents for perspectives and making reasoned affective connections to what they learned about the historical significance of the pandemic. The place-based aspects of this project were strongly connected to the students' engagement in historical empathy because the sources they analyzed were relevant to their experiences and identities as citizens in their community.

Originality/value – Documenting the diverse human experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic is crucial to preserving the history of this extraordinary time. Every person around the globe experienced the pandemic differently, hence riding out the same storm in different boats. At some point, the pandemic will appear in historical narratives of the social studies curriculum. Therefore, now is an opportune time to ascertain whether place-based local history research about the contexts, perspectives and experiences of community members and children themselves, during the pandemic can foster historical empathy.

Keywords Place-based learning, Local history, COVID-19, Historical empathy, Historical inquiry

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Documenting the diverse human experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic is crucial to preserving the history of this extraordinary time. Every person around the globe experienced the pandemic differently, hence riding out the same storm in different boats. As a result, engaging students in conducting local history research about community members' diverse experiences during the pandemic may serve to promote "authentic place-based investigations—a practice that lies at the heart of place-based education" (Demarest, 2015, p. iv). Preserving insights about how community members were affected by COVID-19 with student-led, place-based local history research may serve as a vehicle to promote historical empathy among youth

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through analyses of how the contexts in which the pandemic impacted stakeholders shaped their perspectives and affective responses to the historical significance of this event.

Purpose of study and research questions

Through a partnership with a local historical society, a student leadership non-profit organization, and a college of education, we sought to examine how high school students' place-based local history research about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in their community could promote historical empathy. Historical empathy refers to the process of examining the historical contexts of past events and the perspectives of people in the past to make reasoned emotive responses to historical content (Endacott and Brooks, 2018; Perrotta, 2018a; Perrotta, 2018b; Barton and Levstik, 2004; Foster, 1999). Much of the existing scholarship focuses on middle and high school students' demonstration of historical empathy through curricular examinations of historical events such as the Holocaust (Metzger, 2012), ethical dilemmas such as the dropping of the atomic bomb (Endacott, 2014), and underrepresented historical figures (Perrotta, 2022a). However, Endacott and Brooks (2018) contend that future historical research must focus on the "potential to impact prosocial civic behavior as an extension of the process of classroom-based exercise" (p. 220). Specifically, expansion of historical empathy research hinges upon how students can engage in perspective taking about contemporary events that will become historical events from the past (Endacott and Brooks, 2018). At some point, the pandemic will appear in historical narratives of the social studies curriculum. Therefore, now is an opportune time to ascertain whether place-based local history research about the contexts, perspectives, and experiences of community members, and children themselves, during the coronavirus spread can foster HE.

Funded in part by an internal university seed grant and a Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources grant, the questions that frame this study is as follows:

> How high school students' engagement in a place-based local history research project about the diverse experiences of community members during the COVID-19 pandemic promote their demonstration of historical empathy?

As cultural institutions, museums, curriculum makers, and extracurricular programmers begin to address the historical ramifications of the pandemic on teaching, curricular design, and civic life, we contend that broader examination of how historical empathy can be promoted through placed-based local history projects can contribute to the field by examining how "students are developing identities relating to their sociohistorical location in society" (Horsford *et al.*, 2019, p. 202).

Literature review

Place-based education and social studies

According to Sobel (2004), place-based education is "the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum" (p. 6). Although the definition of PBE is broad, Deringer (2017) argues that such a definition is needed for place-based education to "be adaptable enough to fit any community but specific enough to have meaning" (p. 335). Many place-based education studies focus on environmental and outdoor education (Deriger, 2017; Calderon, 2012; Semken *et al.*, 2017; Smith, 2007, 2013; Semken and Freeman, 2008; Woodhouse and Knapp, 2000). However, place-based education is relevant to social studies education. Morris (2017) notes that "the social studies curriculum provides a link between civics, history, and economics and geography in solving community problem by providing content on how to find community leverage in order to work community players to seek solutions" (p. 76). According to Resor (2010), "some place-based projects fall almost completely in the realm of

social studies and the humanities" (p. 185) that include investigations of indigenous cultures in Alaska (Barnhardt, 2007; Clark and Glazer, 2004), community-based problems in Alabama (Seneschal, 2007), and mapmaking with walking tours in Michigan (Whitlock, 2020).

Additionally, Vander Ark *et al.* (2020) emphasize how place-based education connects to historical empathy and social studies education through engaging students in "local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences" (pp. 1-2). Brown and Woodcock (2009) state that local history "enquiry that pupils engage with [has] ... immediate relevance to their own lives, their own families, their own street, and their own communities ... [and] informs pupils' own identity" (p. 134). Moreover, Stephens (1977) asserts that effective local history instruction "embrace[s] the spatial nearness of the child's environment" (p. 3). For example, Anderson and Krem (2022) case study of how the use of naturalist and civics investigations of the role of plants and trees could foster connections between the "natural and human-made local places" at the Cottonwood School of Civics and Science in Oregon (p. 2). This example emphasizes how "the interdisciplinary nature of historical and social studies research through geographic analysis and civic engagement in local history investigation" (Perrotta, 2017, p. 35) can foster place-based education as students and teachers worked on an awareness and protection campaign to prevent the tree from potential removal by the city.

There are several benefits of implementing place-based education in social studies. Sobel (2004) argues that "this approach to education ... enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens" (p. 6). According to the State Education and Environmental Roundtable (SEER) Report, urban schools that participated in place-based education showed improved reading and math scores, increased engagement in science and social studies, and decrease in discipline problems (Sobel, 2014). Consequently, effective approaches to place-based education in social studies are entrenched in experiential learning and critical pedagogies where students engage in their local environment to identify problems and participate in active learning to address issues in the community.

Place-based education and historical empathy

While not explicitly stated, much of the success of place-based education, particularly in social studies, depends upon the level of empathy students can demonstrate when conducting local history research. Beam and Schwier (2018) state that students can demonstrate empathy while conducting place-based historical research when they can make "connections to their communities, their regions, and the other people" that are familiar to them as seen in archival sources such as photographs and diary entries (p. 13). Deringer's (2017) review of the literature on place-based education found overlaps with mindfulness, or "a person's experience of place [that] is likely to be enhanced by an improved sensitivity to context, thus there is a need to examine the two concepts and look for areas of commonality or overlap" (p. 334). Langer (2000) defines mindfulness as the process in which a person makes decisions that can improve their awareness to contexts, perspectives, and ability to control aspects of life. Similarly, historical empathy is the process in which a person examines the historical contexts of a place, event, or experience to identify how contexts shape perspectives and make reasoned affective connections to said contexts and perspectives to their lives (Endacott and Brooks, 2018; Perrotta, 2018a).

Additionally, Barton and Levstik (2004) assert that engagement in historical empathy must involve care. Specifically, they argue that students must have a level of care about the past, care that past events took place, care for people in the past, and "care to change our beliefs or behaviors in the present based on what we have learned from our study of the past" (Barton and Levstik, 2004, p. 229). Without care, learners cannot be fully engaged in the goals

of place-based education and historical empathy when considering how to use what they learned to take informed action in the present (Brooks, 2011). For example, Sunassee *et al.* (2021) assert that place-based educational projects that engage students in studying the climate crisis, which is a contemporary issue, through naturalistic study and art promotes empathy because the inquiry is "relevant to real-world situations [and can provide] students with real-world experiences, thus making them better suited to take care of and protect their communities" (p. 230). This study may bridge the gap in place-based education and historical empathy scholarship by examining how mindfulness and care about people and places in the past and present can promote affective and cognitive tenets of historical empathy through local history research about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical framework

Endacott and Brooks' (2018) conceptualization of historical empathy serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Specifically, they posit that historical empathy involves "three interrelated and interdependent factors" that include:

(1) Historical Contextualization – understanding of the social, political, and cultural norms of the time period under investigation as well as knowledge of the events leading up to the historical situation and other relevant events that are happening concurrently.

(2) Perspective Taking – understanding another's prior lived experience, principles, positions, attitudes, and beliefs in order to understand how that person might have thought about the situation under investigation.

(3) Affective Connection – consideration for how historical figures' lived experiences, situations, or actions may have been influenced by their affective response based on a connection made to one's own similar yet different life experiences. (p. 209)

The practice of conducting a place-based local history investigation about a contemporary issue through the lens of historical empathy runs the risk of engaging students in presentism. According to Wansink *et al.* (2018), multiperspectivity, or consideration of diverse perspectives when studying a historical object or event, occurs in a temporal sense when students examine history as subjects (1) in the past during the same time period, (2) between past and present when multiple contexts and time periods are analyzed, and (3) in the present when someone imposes a "contemporary position towards a historical object" (p. 498). As such, appropriate engagement in presentism when examining contemporary events and perspectives can occur when "informed reflexivity, that is, the realization that perspectives are personal" is practiced (Wansink *et al.*, 2018, p. 499).

Miles and Gibson (2022) argue that presentism can be a beneficial aspect of history education that can provide "useful methods for analyzing the past, it makes history more relevant for students, and it nurtures ethical understanding." (p. 521). Specifically, Miles and Gibson (2022) contend that perspectival presentism, which focuses on contemporary events instead of the distant past, can serve as "a historical approach to current problems and issues can make history more relevant, meaningful, and interesting for students" (p. 522). Although COVID-19 is a recent global phenomenon, situating this pandemic in its historical context of the early part of the 2020s is critical in preparing for another pandemic by "maintaining the well-being of our communities" (Mas, 2022, p. 25). As a result, documenting the lived experiences of diverse communities, people, and groups from a historical empathy perspective may provide a basis for which historians will write about the pandemic, and how practitioners of social studies education teach about the pandemic by engaging students in examining their own lived experiences through place-based local history research.

Study design

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative case study methodology was implemented for the design for this project. Qualitative research is an all-encompassing term referring to lines of inquiry aimed at "understand[ing] and explain[ing] the meaning of social phenomena" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). A case study is "a detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event" (Bogdan and Biklen, 2011, p. 59; Yin, 2017). In this case, 32 high school students attending four different high schools in a metropolitan region of the Southeast conducted local history and place-based research to demonstrate historical empathy through their examination of diverse experiences of community members during the COVID-19 pandemic as both a contemporary and historical event.

Several data collection and analysis protocols were employed. A 10-question Likert-Scale survey and five additional short answer questionnaire responses were distributed to study participants to ascertain insights into how their participation in this project contributed to their demonstration of historical empathy about diverse experiences and historical significance of the COVID-19 pandemic (Appendix 1). Five students, four girls and one boy, volunteered to give follow-up semi-structured interviews to provide additional insights about how their experience working on this project impacted their engagement in historical empathy (Appendix 2).

During the first round of coding, we engaged in thematic coding by organizing students' responses on the surveys into three categories that aligned to the theoretical framework – identification of historical contexts, analysis of how contexts shaped the perspectives, and affective responses to what students learned about the pandemic as a contemporary and historical event in their community. We referred to "community" in the survey to elicit whether students' engagement in place-based research was attributed more so to cognitive or emotive aspect of historical empathy. Due to the fact the survey responses were self-reported, we used Perrotta's (2022b, 2018a, b) Historical Empathy Measurement Rubric (HEMR) to determine students' demonstration of historical empathy while completing the curricular tasks of this project (see Table 1).

Level 1- needs improvement	Level 2- approaching	Level 3- Developing	Level 4- proficient	Level 5- Transformative
Students use stereotypes to view the past as inferior, lack of use of primary and secondary sources and does not make relevant affective connections to content	Students use some primary and secondary sources to make generalizations about historical context and perspectives and makes vague affective connections to content	Students use primary and secondary sources to identify historical perspectives and contexts with some explanation of how the past and present differ, and provides some relevant affective connections to content	Students use primary and secondary source evidence to explain how people in the past made decisions based upon the times they lived; describes how the past and present differ without a presentist lens; makes several affective connections to content	Students demonstrate all criteria in the previous level, plus explain how they can take informed action about an issue in the present

Source(s): Table created by Katherine Perrotta

Table 1. Historical empathy measurement rubric

We analyzed all the writing samples, such as reflections and document analysis protocols, from the curricular tasks of this project and organized them into the aforementioned categories during the first round of coding order to gain a holistic view as to how students demonstrated HE throughout the duration of the project. We conducted a second round of thematic coding after facilitating the follow-up interviews to ascertain the extent to which students' engagement in place-based research impact their displays of historical empathy.

Study site and participants

The students completed this project as part of their enrollment in an extracurricular leadership program that is sponsored by a non-profit organization aimed at promoting youth civic engagement in the city where this study took place. Acceptance into this leadership program is dependent upon grade point average, letters of recommendation, and students' potential for engaging in leadership in schools and community-based events. Part of the students' requirements to complete their participation in this program is to conduct a community service project. The students in this study chose conducting local history research about the impact of the pandemic on their community as their project.

There were 26 girls and 6 boys who participated in this project. Specifically, there were 10 white students, 17 Indian-South Asian students, 2 Black students, and 3 East Asian students. All demographic information was self-reported by the student participants. According to the 2022 US Census Bureau data, there are 82,543 people who reside in this city. Among these residents, 50.2% are white, 27.1% are Asian, 11% African American, and 6.2% Latinx. 95.5% of residents hold a high school diploma, and 69% of residents have a bachelors' degree or higher. Only 5.6% of residents do not have health insurance. The median household income is $153,882. As a result, this study took place in an affluent, upper-middle class area of the Southeast. None of the high schools, nor the elementary or middle schools in this city, are identified as Title I.

Curriculum design

The curriculum design for this project aligns with the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework Inquiry Arc (NCSS, 2013). The curriculum for this project begins with a Big Idea, Compelling Question, and Essential Questions that will spark inquiry and support students' research of multiple sources of evidence to examine the diverse experiences of community members during the COVID-19 pandemic as a contemporary and burgeoning historical event (see Table 2). This curriculum aligns with several History and Civics standards for grades 9–12 in Dimension 2 of the Inquiry Arc (see Table 3).

Students researched resources on the Library of Congress' growing archive to analyze the diverse experiences and perspectives of the COVID-19 pandemic as engagement in Dimension 3 of the Inquiry Arc- Evaluating Evidence. Students cited evidence from the Library of Congress' archives about the pandemic to write a collaborative essay outlining the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, and their arguments about the Big Idea of Uncertainty and the Compelling Question about whether we should remember times of uncertainty for the

Table 2.
C3 dimension 1: big idea, compelling and essential questions

Big idea:	Uncertainty
Compelling Question:	Should times of uncertainty be remembered for the historical record? If so, how? If not, why?

Source(s): Table created by Katherine Perrotta

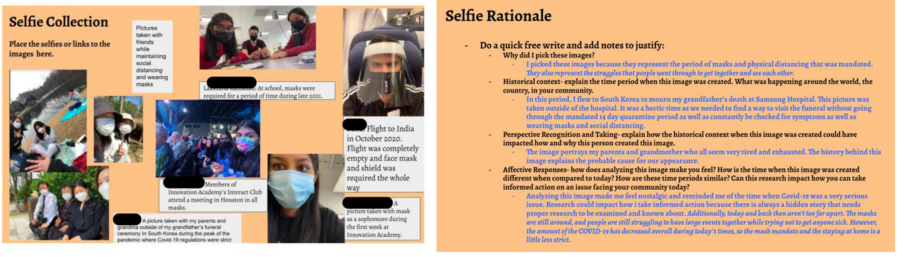
*D2.His.1.9–12.*Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts	*D2.His.3.9–12.* Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context	*D2.His.5.9–12.* Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives	*D2.His.6.9–12.* Analyze the ways in which the perspectives of those writing history shaped the history that they produced
*D2.His.7.9–12.*Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past	*D2.His.8.9–12.* Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time	*D2.His.11.9–12.*Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose	

Source(s): Table created by Katherine Perrotta

Table 3. C3 dimension 2: standards connection to history (grades 9–12)

historical record. Specifically, students examined documents from the Camillo Vergara photo collection, the Tori Lane portrait collection, the Amplifier poster collection, and the Library of Congress' crowd-sourced Flickr archive of photographs submitted by people across the country documenting ordinary life during the pandemic. Students implemented in source analysis strategies that were developed by the Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis tools, such as the zoom-in technique, to examine these sources as write their essay and begin their engagement in the process of HE through analyzing (1) historical contexts, (2) perspectives of people whose artifacts and documents are being examined, and (3) making reasoned affective connections to experiential knowledge and the historical significance and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives and community.

Next, students continued their local history research by using a Google Classroom to collect and examine artifacts sourced from community members to explain the diverse perspectives and experiences of community members during the pandemic and designed the exhibit and companion book. Students collected and analyzed locally sourced artifacts from their community in virtual notebooks where they were asked to identify the contexts in which their artifacts were produced, the perspectives expressed in these artifacts, and the affective connections or responses they had to these artifacts. Students worked in four groups finding photographs and images such as signs, texts and writings such as social media posts, audio and video sources such as home-movies of virtual birthday parties, and developing questions for oral history interviews of communities members such as health care workers, teachers and educators, elected officials, religious clergy, and small business owners (see Figure 1).



Source(s): Created by Student Leadership Johns Creek

Figure 1. Sample virtual notebook- source analysis of selfies during the pandemic

Students engaged in Dimension 4 of the Inquiry Arc by communicating their conclusions about times of uncertainty and the impact of COVID-19 on their community by curating their exhibit and companion book about their research (Muetterties and Swan, 2019). Students designed the layout, font, colors, and logo using Canva as seen on the exhibit panels and the book cover (see Figures 2 and 3).

Two community events were held at one of the participating high schools and the college of education where the first author works. Students shared their findings about why times

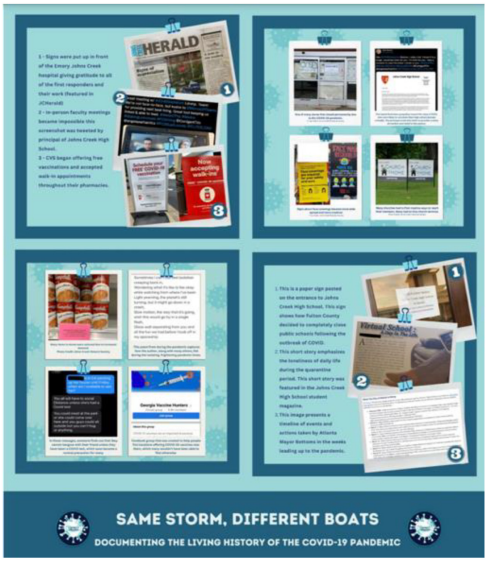


Figure 2.
Sample exhibit panel

Source(s): Created by Student Leadership Johns Creek



Figure 3.
Companion book cover

Source(s): Created by Student Leadership Johns Creek

of uncertainty should be documented for the historical record, and what they learned about the various ways community members coped with and survived the pandemic. The exhibit and book were donated to the school district's teaching museum where the students attend school.

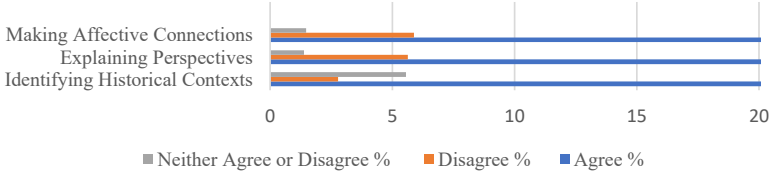
Findings

Several findings emerged from the survey, questionnaire, and interviews regarding whether students' experiences conducting this placed-based local history research project promoted their demonstration of historical empathy. Students overwhelmingly believed that their engagement in conducting this research about diverse experiences of community members during the pandemic contributed to their displays of historical empathy, as seen in Table 4:

Students believed that they had strong aptitude for identifying contexts in which the pandemic began and how peoples' perspectives were shaped by these contexts depending upon their occupation, socio-economic status, and age. One student said, "It is incredibly important to document people's experiences during a significant time in history like the COVID-19 pandemic. This documentation helps us understand the statistics and the impacts of the pandemic from different perspectives" (Reflection, October 29, 2022).

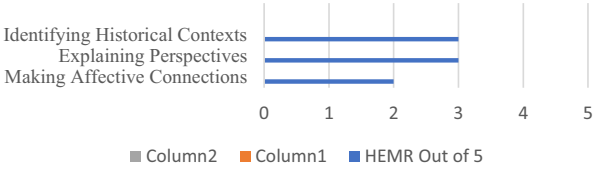
Although the survey results are positive, the responses were self-reported (expanded results of each survey question are in Appendix 3). As a result, we used the HEMR to evaluate students' levels of historical empathy on their initial reflection, collaborative essay, all virtual notebooks, and exhibit slides. Students demonstrated approaching levels of historical empathy when examining sources for historical contexts. Students displayed developing levels of historical empathy when explaining perspectives and making affective connections through conducting their place-based and archival research on the impact and historical significance of the pandemic on their community (see Table 5).

The findings suggest that students overestimated their abilities of demonstrating the cognitive and affective tenets of historical empathy. Consequently, we analyzed responses



Source(s): Author Survey; Created by Katherine Perrotta and Katlynn Cross

Table 4.
Survey results



Source(s): Author survey; Created by Katherine Perrotta and Katlynn Cross

Table 5.
HEMR results

from the questionnaires and interviews were needed to gain deeper understandings about how their involvement in a place-based local history fostered their displays of historical empathy.

Examining historical contexts

Students demonstrated approaching levels (HEMR Level 2) of historical empathy by analyzing the contexts in which the artifacts they collected were created and how those contexts shaped community members' perspectives about the pandemic. Many of the students' analyses of the contexts of the artifacts that were collected focused on adaptations that they and their peers made adjusting to "online class instead of face-to-face, use of new technology like teams and zooms, and so on" (Questionnaire, April 25, 2023). One student who analyzed a photograph of someone wearing a mask:

> The historical context could impact the pictures by viewers not knowing what was going on if it was taken away. For instance, with the mask one, viewers might not understand what was happening or why the author decided to make that image if the context was removed. However with context added, the image makes a lot more sense (Questionnaire, February 2, 2023).

Additionally, students noted that the lockdowns caused community members to get outside more. According to one student, their interview with a resident revealed this person's surprise that they "never had so many people taking a stroll [in the parks] as it did during COVID. The pandemic encouraged people to go outdoors and enjoy the fresh air, which helped to benefit some peoples' health, both mental and physical" (Collaborative Essay, October 2, 2022).

Moreover, the contexts in which students examined the impact of the pandemic from their community-based artifacts were not strongly connected to how other pivotal events such as social justice movements impacted the contexts in which people experienced life during the pandemic. Students wrote in the collaborative essay that the onset of the pandemic caused global economic downturns, use of apps such as TikTok and Instacart, and the development of the mRNA vaccine (Collaborative Essay, October 2, 2022). However, issues such as the political climate surrounding the 2020 presidential election, Black Lives Matter protests, and anti-Asian hate crimes were mentioned in the essay as peripheral events that did not directly impact their community. For instance, students stated that "Adding to the tension between already divided communities, racism became more prevalent, and the number of hate crimes increased, spreading fear and violence throughout the country. Many looked to blame China as the cause of the pandemic, ultimately leading to targeted attacks against Asian Americans, especially elders" (Collaborative Essay, October 2, 2022). However, only one student mentioned during the follow-up interviews that an Asian American doctor who they interviewed discussed being treated with hostility due to their race (Interview, June 2, 2023). As a result, students' analyses of the contexts of the pandemic were broad, and mostly tied to the impact on the pandemic on their specific community concerning business closures, remote schooling, recreating in outside spaces, and adjusting to online gatherings.

Exploring perspectives

Students displayed developing levels of historical empathy (HEMR Level 3) when analyzing the different perspectives of community members during the pandemic. Their work analyzing how learning about the experiences of people they interviewed and collected artifacts helped them to "understand that who I am and my opinions or outlook on something can be totally different from the person sitting right next to me" (Questionnaire, April 23, 2023). For example, a student shared concerning how age impacted perspectives of experiences during the pandemic:

> My grandparents live in a senior apartment and couldn't go anywhere . . . I felt it was really important as Gen Z to see how everyone experienced this, and seeking confirmation and validation that I wasn't the only one going through these things . . . (Interview, June 15, 2023).

Moreover, students' views concerning their privilege emerged during their analyses of different perspectives and experiences of community members during the pandemic. One student shared, "Although this project focused on our wealthier-than-average community, I felt a little detached from the rest of the world and that we didn't cover all of the issues and experience we could've if we explored outside our community" (Questionnaire, May 1, 2023).

Additionally, students expressed that their perspectives about community shifted throughout their participation in this project, realizing that there were stark differences between how they lived as compared to others only a few miles away. One student shared:

> Every Sunday, I saw the homeless in tents while dropping my brother off to college in [the city] and I made care packages with my dad with food, socks, and hats. [This city] is not my direct community, but I took initiative (Interview, June 12, 2023).

Overall, many students responded that this project helped them to gain greater awareness to how peoples' experiences during the pandemic varied greatly based on age, gender, race, and location, particularly regarding how other cities with socio-economic disadvantages "took longer to recover . . . all the way around the nation and world" (Questionnaire, April 30, 2023).

Making affective and place-based connections

The second round of coding revealed that data pertaining to place-based education and historical empathy largely connected to the affective connections category due to overlaps between how students made emotive responses to their research to their identities and affiliations with the places, social groups, and locations that they belong to in their community. Students demonstrated developing levels of historical empathy (HEMR Level 3) when making affective connections to what they learned about the contexts and perspectives about the pandemic. The affective tenet of historical empathy was the one aspect of this project where students demonstrated the greatest evolution in their consideration of how contexts and perspectives about the same event can vary depending on numerous factors. At the beginning of this project, students focused on how they personally experienced the pandemic, stating that they were initially excited about missing a few days of school. However, their excitement turned to sadness, boredom, confusion, and loneliness once they realized that in-school and extracurricular activities were canceled or shifted to virtual spaces. Once this project concluded, students showed greater empathy towards others by reflecting on how they felt shocked, sympathetic, intrigued, and astonished about how people they were not previously acquainted with experienced the pandemic in different ways in their own community. One student shared, "I recognized that because of my demographics (age, gender, race, etc.), I see things differently because I am exposed to different things in my home and in my community (Questionnaire, April 23, 2023).

Furthermore, the place-based component of this project was inseparable from the affective connections students made throughout their research. Students shared about how this project caused them to reflect on their own identities as community members and citizens during the pandemic. Smith *et al.* (2023) found that when students explore their identity in context of their place in community, they can foster greater civic action, dispositions, and knowledge. One student shared that "working on this project helped me to recognize various ways I could contribute to taking on an issue in my community, such as volunteering, researching, and sharing my findings and work with others" (Questionnaire, April 30, 2023). Sentiments such as this highlight how students' examination of historical contexts, perspectives, and affective connections to studying the pandemic impacted their engagement

in place-based education as they considered how their identities can impact their understanding of how "community leaders, organizations, and volunteers have been instrumental in mobilizing resources, advocating for community needs, and fostering a sense of solidarity in challenging times" (Questionnaire, May 1, 2023).

Discussion

The findings of this study show that a place-based research project about community members' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic can promote historical empathy among high school students. According to the HEMR, students demonstrated weaker engagement in historical empathy through their archival research from the Library of Congress about the historical contexts of the pandemic when it began in 2020. Students' investigations of challenges including masking, social distancing, racial tumult, and economic hardships were written about in the collaborative essay as periphery events that did not have a direct impact on their lives, families, and communities. Additionally, students' initial reflections about their experiences during the pandemic as a time of uncertainty were grounded in their own feelings of boredom, loneliness, and disappointment about missing out on social and school events. These findings show that students need considerable and consistent scaffolding of document analysis strategies both in this extracurricular program and in their regular social studies classes to gain stronger skills in examining the historical contexts of primary sources.

However, once students engaged in the local history research of photographs, texts, videos, and oral history interviews, their awareness of diverse perspectives of community members' experiences during the pandemic shifted as they realized that they possessed significant privilege living in a metropolitan region that did not suffer from major socio-economic upheaval as other areas of the state experienced. Students' affective connections were grounded in their awareness of how people in their community experienced the pandemic in both different and similarly ways that they did, particularly regarding feeling emotions such as loneliness during the pandemic. Particularly, students shared how they did not feel so alone when they spoke with their peers and other community members about ordinary things that had a large impact on their lives such as being separated from elderly relatives, missing out on family and school events, and being sad during the lockdowns.

The affective aspects of historical empathy were deeply connected to tenets of place-based education. Students shared in their questionnaires, interviews, and curricular tasks that they began to realize how their identities as citizens of their community impacted how they viewed civic engagement and why community involvement is important during times of uncertainty. According to Smith and Sorbel (2010), "In schools, however, children have experienced a growing disconnect between their lives in communities and what they encounter in their classrooms" (p. 39). By the conclusion of the project, students shared how their perceptions of community shifted as they realized how their community was connected to larger municipalities and state agencies that were responsible for keeping the public safe during the pandemic.

Limitations and implications for future studies

There were limitations to this study. Chief among them was the lack of collection and analysis of matters pertaining to social justice movements and undertones prevalent during the pandemic in the exhibit and companion book. Although social justice did not emerge as an aspect of the experiences and perspectives that the students highlighted in their exhibit and companion book, the geographical effect of this study includes the of proximity where an unarmed Black man was shot by police during a confrontation during the summer of 2020 in

addition to an incidence of anti-Asian gun violence in 2021. Nevertheless, some students in this study, while not directly affected by these movements, expressed an awareness of how matters such as race impacted people's experiences during the pandemic. One student, who identified as an immigrant from Africa, raised the issue of race, stating "Growing up in a homogenous country, I haven't … faced what African Americans have faced [in the US]" (Interview, June 12, 2023). Bringing greater attention to the Library of Congress' archival sources about social justice matters, such as the Vergara Collection, at the start of this project may have raised the students' awareness to collecting sources and asking interview questions about community members' perspectives and experiences with social justice issues that occurred during the pandemic. We contend that the lack of inclusion about social justice issues during the pandemic is a limitation to this study because matters concerning race that involved issues such as police violence and access to healthcare are issues that children in other parts of this area experienced. Had this study taken place in another community in this metropolitan region, the documents that were selected, analyzed, and displayed for the exhibit and book curation would probably been very different.

Another limitation to this study was that the artifacts collected in this project were locally sourced by students who are enrolled in a highly selective student leadership program whose parents or caretakers hold prominent professional positions in healthcare, education, and local and state government. Hence, the students had connections to interview high ranking public officials that other students who are not in this program or have ties to powerful people would not have access to. Moreover, the area where this study took place are starkly different compared to nearby cities in this urban area that suffered greater socio-economic and political tumult resulting in the lack of access to meals and other social services, healthcare, and employment during the COVID lockdowns of schools, businesses, and government offices. As a result, the contexts and perspectives documented in this project are not representative of the socio-economic and political diversity of this area in this metropolitan region of the Southeast.

Despite these limitations, there are several implications for future research. First, we suggest that future studies focus on how the passage of "anti-divisive concepts laws" in 17 states, including where this study took place, impacts how teachers can engage students in historical empathy through place-based local history research about the various socio-economic and political aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Woo *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the lack of social justice curriculum as a result of the anti-divisive concepts law may have impacted the ways in which student participants made meaning of their artifacts. Only furthering the need of social studies teachers, and all educators for that matter, need to be aware of how these laws impact what kind of curricular and instructional decisions that they make when teaching about controversial issues and hard histories such as the racial, political, and social ramifications of the pandemic. The students in this study interviewed several public figures, some of whom hold strong political opinions about how the pandemic was handled. Us as researchers cannot help but wonder if this project would have been possible to conduct as part of in-school social studies instruction because of topics that parents or other stakeholders could regard as "divisive," particularly regarding race (Bernstein, 2022). According to Woo *et al.* (2022), "we know little about whether, to what extent, and how these restrictions are affecting teachers' instruction across the nation in practice" (p. 3). As a result, we contend that there is a need to examine not only how teachers are responding to these legislations, but how these laws are impacting student learning about the socio-economic, political, and cultural aspects of the pandemic as a historical issue and contemporary event.

Second, further studies are needed to examine how students' identities shaped their demonstration of historical empathy by doing this local history research project. Some students shared how their identities impacted what they learned. One student replied,

> Working on this project contributed to my understandings of how my identity impacts how I analyze historical context because when examining and analyzing contexts, I recognized that because of my demographics like age, gender, race . . . I see things differently because I am exposed to different things in my home and in my community, so it was very interesting to observe the various lifestyles and how that impacts analyzation of historical contexts (Questionnaire, April 23, 2023).

Moreover, students' reflections about their identities and their role in this project helped them develop "understanding[s] of how historical contexts can impact and shape people's perspectives in the past because understanding the historical contexts in which we did during the project is crucial for gaining insights into how people in the past perceived and interpreted the world around them" (Questionnaire, April 20, 2023). As a result, we call for future studies that examine how students' social identities factor into how they display the cognitive and affective elements of historical empathy through place-based local history research (Endacott *et al*., 2023; Perrotta, 2018b; Savenije and de Bruijn, 2017; Epstein and Shiller, 2005).

Third, greater scholarship is needed on how instructional frameworks can be developed and implemented to foster the aims of place-based education and historical empathy when teaching about past and contemporary events that bear historical significance in social studies. For instance, the NCSS C3 Framework includes "place" in its K-12 curricular standards in Dimension 2 of its Inquiry Arc. For example, history standard "D2.His.1.9–12" states that by the end of grade 12, students should be able to "Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts" (p. 46). Moreover, the civics standard "D2.Civ.8.9–12" indicates that by the end of 12th grade, students should be able to "Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles" (p. 33). However, the term *empathy* only appears twice in the C3 Framework in the definition of personal values and in the section discussing "perspectives" in the history standards (pp. 109; 47). A working framework in which the tenets of place-based education and historical empathy are integrated could support teachers' implementation of local history research in a way that supports students' engagement in historical inquiry through examination of historical contexts and perspectives of local issues that can lead to informed action in communities (Endacott and Brooks, 2018; Smith and Sobel, 2010).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a time of uncertainty and an event that people around the globe experienced in vastly different ways. We found that high school students demonstrated historical empathy through conducting place-based local history research about how the pandemic impacted community members, as well as how youth participation in this place-based project can foster civic engagement. Promoting historical empathy through place-based research can provide students with "a more critical learning experience" in social studies through inquiry and critical thinking about a contemporary issue that also serves as a historical event (Journell, 2022, p. 8).

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Appendix 1

Part I: survey
Directions: Choose the response that best reflects your answers to each statement.

A. Strongly Agree B. Agree C. Neither Agree or Disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly Disagree

Participating in this project helped me . . ..

(1) Examine historical contexts that shape the past.

(2) Investigate how social, economic, and political factors shape historical contexts.

(3) Consider how historical contexts shape people's perspectives

(4) Analyze how people's experiences and perspectives are shaped by historical contexts

(5) Understand other people's perspectives, even if they are different than mine

(6) Consider how my identity shapes how I understand the impact of historical contexts on people's perspectives

(7) Think about how my own life experiences impacts how I conduct historical research

(8) Develop my awareness about how I feel about learning the history of my community

(9) Develop my awareness of others' experiences based on what I learned from my historical research the COVID-19 pandemic

(10) Think about how I can take informed action in my community based on what I learned from my historical research about the COVID-19 pandemic

Part II: questionnaire
Directions: Please respond to each question with as much detail as possible.

(11) What was the most important thing you learned about the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of working on this project?

(12) Did working on this project contribute to your understandings of how historical contexts can impact and shape people's perspectives in the past? If so, how? If not, why?

(13) Did working on this project help you gain awareness of other people's experiences and perspectives living in your community during the COVID-19 pandemic?

(14) Did working on this project help you think about how you can use this research to take informed action on an issue in your community?

(15) Is there anything else you would like to share about what you learned during your experience working on this project about the COVID-19 pandemic?

Source(s): Created by Katherine Perrotta and Katlynn Cross

Appendix 2

Interview questions
Directions: Please respond to each question with as much detail as possible.

(1) Why did you want to work on this project on conducting historical research about the COVID-19 pandemic in your community?

(2) Do you think your identity (i.e. religious, gender, age, race, ethnicity, etc.) impacted how you understood the historical contexts and perspectives of people who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in your community?

(3) Do you think your identity (i.e. religious, gender, age, race, ethnicity, etc.) impacted how you made affective connections (i.e. how you feel) to what you learned about the COVID-19 pandemic?

(4) Did working on this project impact your views on what it means to be a citizen in your community? If so, how? If not, why not?

(5) Is there anything else you would like to share about what you learned during your experience working on this project?

Source(s): Created by Katherine Perrotta and Katlynn Cross

Appendix 3

Participating in this survey helped me . . .	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Examine historical contexts that shape the past	77.78% 14	16.67% 3	0.00% 0	5.56% 1	0.00% 0	18
Investigate how social, economic, and political factors shape historical contexts	77.78% 14	11.11% 2	5.56% 1	0.00% 0	5.56% 1	18
Consider how historical contexts shape people's perspectives	77.78% 14	11.11% 2	5.56% 1	5.56% 1	0.00% 0	18
Analyze how people's experiences and perspectives are shaped by historical contexts	77.78% 14	22.22% 4	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	18
Understand other people's perspectives, even if they are different than mine	72.22% 13	16.67% 3	11.11% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	18
Consider how my identity shapes how I understand the impact of historical contexts on people's perspectives	64.71% 11	29.41% 5	5.88% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	17
Think about how my own life experiences impacts how I conduct historical research	70.59% 12	23.53% 4	5.88% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	17
Develop my awareness about how I feel about learning the history of my community	70.59% 12	29.41% 5	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	17
Develop my awareness of others' experiences based on what I learned from my historical research the COVID-19 pandemic	82.35% 14	11.76% 2	0.00% 0	5.88% 1	0.00% 0	17
Think about how I can take informed action in my community based on what I learned from my historical research about the COVID-19 pandemic	64.71% 11	17.65% 3	17.65% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	17

Source(s): Table created by Katherine Perrotta and Katlynn Cross

Table A1.
Survey results

About the authors

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