

## “Common Sense” and Issues of Social Justice in History Education

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“ISN’T THIS JUST COMMON SENSE? I don’t see the point of having to read this,” a student in a pre-service introductory methods class groaned. In another class, a student questioned why so much space in an article was devoted to race, stating that it seemed unnecessary and was “common sense.” While the pre-service teachers recognized the value of readings that help students think critically, conduct historical inquiry, and become informed citizens, they struggled with the concept of social justice, particularly when it came to race-related issues. From their unnoticed privileged positions, they failed to recognize that their perspectives were socially constructed, and what they viewed as “common sense” was not universal. At the end of class, a student asked, “What can I do?” This article attempts to answer such questions.

Central to my argument are the issues of effective pedagogical knowledge and practice. By centering and infusing inclusive materials and alternative narratives in history teaching pedagogy, one can better address the needs of historically marginalized students, not only to enhance their historical consciousness, but also for the continued forming of good participatory democracy and social justice

in society. I start with a brief outline of key pedagogical research on teaching history to historically marginalized students. Then, I outline why culturally relevant sustaining root narratives are essential for effective teaching of historically marginalized groups in terms of their historical consciousness. In line with this, I also note that our still-forming democracy may not be attractive to historically marginalized groups, and given recurring issues in history teaching assignments, I suggest that effective pedagogical practice is always linked to gaining self-awareness and community knowledge. Finally, I remind educators of research-based frameworks for learning, unlearning, and relearning histories, using easily accessible strategies to begin decolonizing curricula in ways that are beneficial and essential for inclusive and equitable classrooms.

### **Pedagogical Research on Teaching History to Historically Marginalized Students**

Calls for social justice in education concerning students of color have a long history from well before Carter G. Woodson's 1933 study that pointed out the damage done to African American students in the educational system.<sup>1</sup> In the mid-1990s, Gloria Ladson-Billings appealed for "culturally relevant pedagogy" that would sustain and encourage students.<sup>2</sup> Geneva Gay's *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (2000) established in this field the importance of teacher pedagogical practice when teaching students of color.<sup>3</sup> Django Paris called for "culturally sustaining pedagogy" in 2012 and invited educators to practice instruction to honor experiential narratives, relationality, story sharing, and collective memory.<sup>4</sup> In 2014, Ladson-Billings revisited her work and argued for "dynamic scholarship" around her theory as supported by Paris.<sup>5</sup> Teresa L. McCarty and Tiffany S. Lee furthered knowledge as they advocated the need for "critical culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy" as necessary to guide the teaching of indigenous students.<sup>6</sup>

In the mid-1990s, researchers in history education also began to concentrate on the need for greater emphasis concerning students' structural understandings and second-order organizing of ideas. Scholars increasingly recognized that without a knowledge and understanding of the ideas students held about the nature of history and their structural concepts, "teaching cannot address

them, and much of the substance of history will be distorted and constrained by children’s tacit assumptions.”<sup>7</sup> All students have unspoken assumptions of how history works or what they think it is for. Therefore, it makes sense to attempt an understanding of the connections between the historical consciousness students may already have, or are developing, and how they make sense of history as a school subject. My own research in the United Kingdom and the United States suggests that students of color and their families may use history for the following purposes:

- Navigation: History enables orientation through time.
- Understanding Roots, Ownership, Belonging: History enables people to understand themselves and others through understanding their ancestors and cultures.
- Learning Lessons: History enables people to learn lessons and avoid errors by showing “what,” “why,” and “how” things happened.
- Cultural Understanding/Respect of Others: History enables people to understand and respect each other.
- Direction of Change, Progress, Deterioration: History enables people to see the deficits of the past and the pluses of the present, and that change is an inevitable process in terms of progression and/or deterioration.
- Evidence of Continuity: History enables people to recognize how and why the present is a continuation of the past.<sup>8</sup>

It is recognized that this list of assumptions may not be true for all students of color, but it points us in directions of how some students may be thinking. If most teachers are white and likely from a college-educated background,<sup>9</sup> then substantive and structural second-order concepts may automatically have a higher priority in teaching at the expense of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. The former are hard cognitive concepts and, for some, less commonsensical than the soft concepts of ownership and belonging, which may have been taken as a given. If we are not teaching history that satisfies some or all these needs, then the discipline will continue to fall short in the eyes of some students of color. If we are fuzzy about why we teach history, this list should be a wake-up call. Regarding what students of color may be expecting, research points to the gaps between their expectations and what they thought they received in formal school history.<sup>10</sup>

By dismissing social justice as “common sense,” the pre-service teachers quoted in the introduction failed to recognize that their mindset of defensiveness and dismissiveness was precisely the reason they needed to take time to read and examine their own beliefs and values about race, racism, and issues of social justice in the education system. They had not come to terms with the necessity to engage in courageous and critical conversations concerning social justice if they wanted to become effective teachers for all students.<sup>11</sup> Gone unnoticed was that how we understand normative values of our societies—the categories we create, the concepts we forge—is gained through social processes that are “historically and culturally specific.”<sup>12</sup> Common sense is created. These ideas shape worldviews of ourselves and those we teach, lodging themselves into belief and value systems and becoming embedded in our instruction and in students. There is, therefore, a need for alternative and counter narratives.

### **Alternative and Counter Narratives in Teaching Historically Marginalized Students**

Any study of history should have an impact on the way society is viewed. The perceptions that historically marginalized groups have of how they are represented—or not represented—in history may well be a misconception of reality bolstered through familial and personal experiences.<sup>13</sup> It is, therefore, a reality frequently constructed with significant others that gives a sense of location and identity. In my own research in the United Kingdom, when students were asked if they thought history was important, and why or why not, typical responses from black and white students included the following:

Patrick, age 14, white student: “It’s just about the past, where your parents have been, what your parents have done, how they have been living and stuff.”

Fred, age 13, black student: “If you don’t know your roots, you’re a bit lost aren’t you?”<sup>14</sup>

Figuratively, students wear the histories we teach. Educators should be asking whether the histories children learn at school tell them they are valued, included, and respected. If students perceive that what they think of as “their histories” are just tolerated, ignored, slighted,

attacked, and/or neglected, they may conclude that they, too, are unimportant and invisible. Educators need to ask whether what they teach is enabling or subjecting.<sup>15</sup> Some histories may be basking in sunlight and some obscured by shadows of omission. The curricular materials that educators omit may tell them almost as much about themselves as what they include. Moreover, inattentive or blasé teaching of content that students of color may claim as their own is debilitating and damaging for these students.<sup>16</sup> All too frequently, students of color mention instances of hurt and insensitivity from teachers and peers; they characterize negative attitudes about black and brown people in history as personal attacks on their identity.<sup>17</sup> For example, Lee, age 14, recounted an incident with a teacher who was probably trying to use an assignment to teach empathy, but the repercussions for this student stung:

We had to pretend to be slaves. Everyone was black slaves. And some of the kids were like saying “oh it’s easy to pretend to act black, just act stupid,” and stuff like that. And in history [lessons] people would make jokes like, “you wouldn’t see white people puking up over each other,” like when they were on the ships, and they threw up.<sup>18</sup>

Responses to such assignments indicate that the resulting hurt, anger, bewilderment, and feelings of temporary exclusion could impact adversely on student learning experiences. Traumatic events cannot be incorporated into our existing schema; instead, we separate them from how we make sense of the world. As they are not integrated in our meaning making, we continually re-experience the trauma or avoid it and develop partial amnesia.<sup>19</sup> Traumatic memories of how black and brown people are often depicted in and outside of formal history may alter students’ system of meaning making.<sup>20</sup> Threatening and negative meanings may then be attached to school history, making it difficult for students to construct a positive sense of self or the discipline. Many students of color in daily routines in and outside school often expend mental energy to deal with negative deficit stereotypes and categorizations that they encounter.<sup>21</sup>

Research in the United Kingdom underscores the microaggressions experienced by students of color during Black History Month in the classroom, and how this may have a debilitating effect on them.<sup>22</sup> The segregation of cultural appreciation months/days may create an often-hidden backlash of throwaway remarks from white students who may

have experienced inadequate treatment of non-European history, and this may belittle inclusionary efforts.<sup>23</sup> Helping all students explore and investigate the historical roots of contemporary issues and why we have such months/days will help them uncover why context—and subcontext—matter. Students need to better understand that history is created and multilayered, and that the present is also multilayered and often contingent on the past. Racist “common sense,” everyday discrimination, and conscious and unconscious ways of thinking and interacting reinforce racial hierarchies. In his debut novel, *Tommy Orange* reminded us of native nations’ experiences:

An unattended wound gets infected. Becomes a new kind of wound like the history of what actually happened became a new kind of history. All those stories that we haven’t been telling all this time, that we haven’t been listening to, are just parts of what we need to heal. Not that we’re broken...If you have the option to not think about or even consider your history...whether it even deserves consideration, that’s how you know you’re on board the ship that serves hors d’oeuvres and fluffs your pillows, while others are out at sea, swimming and drowning...<sup>24</sup>

Compound this with what research has shown about aggressive monitoring of black and brown students in comparison to white students in terms of school discipline,<sup>25</sup> and we begin to build up a more complete picture of micro- and macroaggressions that students of color are more likely to experience than their white counterparts. Then add to this mixture the differential responses to white parents’ efforts to intervene in their children’s education in comparison to black and brown parents, and this again hammers in hierarchies of who has the most and least power.<sup>26</sup> Invisible systems and structures in education often pull teachers to act in certain ways and the resulting behaviors may push students away from school, despite that teachers have the power to push them toward advanced placements. It is not an exaggeration to think educators in many ways may be enabling the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Microaggressions are a thousand papercuts.<sup>27</sup>

There is danger in seeing the concrete experiences of students designated within specific categories as being transferable and applicable to all, and the brain’s propensity to categorize may lead to stereotyping, which often manifests itself in behavior.<sup>28</sup> There is, of course, harm in apportioning sameness of experiences and behavior

exclusively to a single group. The importance of the intersectionality of race and the historical consciousness of students is not just about knowing. It also concerns action and equity. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” powerfully reminded us that anyone may fall into the trap of viewing others through social negative caricatures:

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans, and I could not have been more ashamed of myself.<sup>29</sup>

Stereotypical caricatures are damaging to historically marginalized students. To reiterate, it is frequently difficult for students of color to construct a positive sense of self or history from informal and formal histories and the lived experiences of themselves and/or their significant others. The papercuts of microaggressions may on the surface seem slight. Nevertheless, they hurt and bleed into the present and create silent explosions.<sup>30</sup>

### **Identity, Self-Awareness, and Community Belonging among Historically Marginalized Students**

Research is largely clear regarding why people affiliate or are pulled toward a group, and it is principally the influence of others that creates this sense of community. Identities are acquired little by little. Arguments abound as to how history helps create a sense of composite identity and an understanding of shared cultural beginnings. Gaining emotional satisfaction through recognition of belonging, ownership of history, and building of community is a paramount psychological need for individuals before they can begin to achieve.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, identities—designated, constructed, or imposed—are the foundation of social meaning.<sup>32</sup>

The idea that teaching a dominant historical narrative instills or pulls students of color toward concepts of national identity may not have much personal resonance with students whose lived experiences may collide with key facets of that narrative. Pronouncements of “we are all equal now” may seem hollow and a fallacy for some

black and brown students whose experiences, whether personal or vicarious, suggest otherwise.<sup>33</sup> When educators don't teach about the oppression and resistance by people of color, when educators teach with nebulous abstractions, when educators are blind to the perpetrators of injustice and don't name names, they may again be complicit in injustice. Educators may reinforce racial hierarchies and teach messages that students internalize. All these aspects make possible the cycle of ignorance and chosen blindness in which students are routinely exposed to multiple encounters of practice that deny their humanity. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that some students may have little concept of their place in national identity.<sup>34</sup> They may not experience a sense of national unity through studying history at school if it contains little with which they can make cultural connections. If educators fail to highlight cultural universalities and the intersectionality of historical narratives, students of color may not automatically make such connections to themselves. As instructors, we should be more mindful of the overt and subtle ways power works in classroom settings, which are in some ways a microcosm of society. Educators need to be systematic and deliberate in their efforts to dismantle and create space in their classrooms as they learn, listen, and relearn and reteach histories that humanize and value all students.<sup>35</sup>

Issues of race, nationality, and, increasingly, religion and secularism can create stereotypes and cause people to rely on learned behavior and automatic responses. The tendency to view people as a homogenous mass once a societal label is assigned is a function of our brain's propensity to categorize.<sup>36</sup> Identities are not static—they shift, splinter, shatter, push and pull, and reformulate in all of us. Who we were yesterday is not necessarily who we are today. For our students, the old choices of assimilation, integration, and nationalism as a means of social cohesion have never been the only alternatives; of course, for the vast majority, nor is the apartheid of pockets of personalized histories on either end of the political spectrum.<sup>37</sup>

If students, especially adolescents, are forced to choose who they must be while denying of aspects of life that they believe are non-negotiable, such as their religion, they may choose alternatives that are not palatable or are damaging to themselves and democracy. The push and pull of identities come not only in the classroom, but also from other areas of life that teachers have little to no control over.



However, educators can create a shared vision of possibilities in the way they create centers of belonging for all students. When teaching adolescents who are trying to find out who they are and discover their possible selves, it is important that they see themselves and their potentiality along with a sense of ownership and belonging represented in historical narratives.<sup>38</sup>

School history has always played a “political” role in establishing what it means to be a valued, active, informed member of society, and this includes giving students a sense of cultural roots and shared inheritances, preparing them for adulthood and becoming fully functioning participants in democracy. A goal of general education in some measure has been to prepare students for more than survival in the adult world, to guide them into better understanding and maneuvering the opportunities, responsibilities, and associated experiences of adulthood.<sup>39</sup> Asking uncomfortable personal questions of ourselves, and of just whose histories are valued, may help us understand why some students choose to affiliate themselves with family histories that counter or disrupt dominant or national narratives.<sup>40</sup> Once educators see the issues or have heard the arguments, they cannot unsee or unhear them. Acknowledging and listening to a history that is based on self-defined narratives can be challenging for educators, but it is crucial in the pursuit of social justice. The same size seldom fits all, and diversity and inclusion has never equaled the sameness of experience. Therefore, our response should be responsive, not prescriptive.<sup>41</sup>

For students of color to engage with history in the curriculum, history teaching must move beyond what may seem to be trite citizenship values to some students. If students of color feel that they are outside or on the borders of being accepted as citizens, then what they are learning about democracy and how it functions may hold little intrinsic or extrinsic value.<sup>42</sup> Imagine what might happen if educators realized they had the power to interrupt and transform systems and structures that impede marginalized students. Imagine if educators engaged in learning that opens doors to wider opportunities, for every student. Imagine if educators focused more on curiosity and did not shy away from hard questions and difficult conversations. Imagine if educators became more uncomfortable with the kind of compliance that snuffs out curiosity. Educators want students to move from basic repeating to questioning and

finding answers, but they need to be prepared for answers that they might disagree with. Similarly, educators need to help all students feel secure with searching for answers and feel more comfortable with the shakiness of uncertainty.<sup>43</sup> Classrooms are Petri dishes of diversities, and educators cultivating history cells successfully will contribute to issues of identity, ownership, and, ultimately, belonging and inclusion. These matters, like most of the cultural iceberg, lie hidden in plain sight.<sup>44</sup> Educators need to go below the surface to see how students wear what they are taught and whether students' histories are standing in the sunlight or the shadows. If educators fail to create communities of learning and belonging in social studies classrooms, they are helping to perpetuate prejudices that in worst-case scenarios may prove deadly for democracy and destroy the relevance of formal school history for students of color.

### **Creating Inclusive and Equitable Curricula for Historically Marginalized Students**

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that educators teach in the way that they were taught and find most engaging.<sup>45</sup> Educators are products of their lived environments. In the 1990s, research into teachers' views concerning history teaching conducted by the Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches (CHATA) project disclosed that the aims of schools' history included "bringing the past alive" for elementary school teachers and "handing on information" for K-12 teachers.<sup>46</sup> However, teachers do not just transmit knowledge. Teachers' prior experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of looking at the world shape their teaching and, therefore, directly or indirectly affect those being taught, regardless of prescribed state and national standards. Teachers, nor students, enter classrooms with a *tabula rasa*.<sup>47</sup>

The public's attention is often drawn to acts of individual teachers, usually flagged up these days on social media by parents protesting a questionable history assignment or children's literature that shows little thought about the complexities of historical events and instead waters down and sanitizes a historical wrong that still has repercussions in the present.<sup>48</sup> We blame individual teachers for throwaway remarks and assignments in which they clumsily—or willfully—inflict emotional damage and trauma on the student descendants of victimized people.

The excuse for such acts frequently comes in the guise of wanting to teach historical empathy. In 2022, a social studies teacher described to me the following assignment prompt:

Imagine you are an 18<sup>th</sup> century slave owner. Look at the cost of slaves and the different tribes they come from. You have \$1200 to spend on slaves. Make a list of the slaves you would buy; trying to get value for money.<sup>49</sup>

The assignment was accompanied with a list of slaves with prices and attributes:

Lazy; vicious, mutinous, hardworking if tamed.<sup>50</sup>

If history teachers find nothing amiss with the assignment and cannot see how it might harm all students, then there is a problem. As people teaching history with integrity, educators need to peel back their own thoughts as to why they would find this kind of assignment acceptable or not. Why is it so easy to belittle students of color in a history classroom while white children are perhaps given a sense of superiority?<sup>51</sup> Consciously and unconsciously, educators are in a cycle of repetition: questionable assignment, exposure, outcry, apology, and—perhaps like the proverbial fool—expectation of something different to happen in the future.<sup>52</sup>

By apportioning blame to individual teachers and to ignorance, educators enable a systemic legacy of policies and practices that justify rather than challenge the intersectionality of unconscious and conscious bias, unfiltered and filtered racism, and prejudice toward students of color in history classrooms regarding opportunity, learning, and discipline gaps.<sup>53</sup> Educators are frequently moved to teach things that represent their ways of thinking, along with the dominant culture they have been socialized in.<sup>54</sup> Think about the frequent elevation of written sources over oral sources, which belittles oral histories and, ultimately, the experiences and ways of knowing possessed by historically marginalized students.<sup>55</sup> Think about the ease with which educators accept textbooks that perpetuate narratives of exclusion. Staggering statistics highlight that in “early childhood curricula and booklists, students read many times more books featuring animal characters than books about all characters of color combined.”<sup>56</sup> Of the 1,205 books analyzed by the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, “1,003 books were by white authors yet white students represent only 15% of NYC’s student

population.”<sup>57</sup> For those growing up on tales of Peter Rabbit, Clifford the Big Red Dog, or Peppa Pig, this may not come as a surprise, and if the same study was done around the country, it probably would yield similar results. However, educators should be troubled. Children read books, watch cartoons, and engage with social media repeatedly. They internalize the hidden messages of who is the lead character and who are side characters, who speaks and who is silent, and whose lives are disposable.<sup>58</sup> Constructed common sense promotes what and how societies choose to teach (or ignore or remain silent on) and, like textbooks or exclusionary media material, facilitates ongoing injustice for historically marginalized students. Educators have a duty of care toward all students and should be willing to consider frequently challenging and reframing their internal beliefs, attitudes, and pedagogy. Failing to do so will manifest itself in behavior, stunting and stagnating personal growth—of teachers and, ultimately, of those being taught.<sup>59</sup> Knowledge of the problem, however, is not enough. We should be compelled to pedagogical action.<sup>60</sup>

### *Frameworks for Teaching Social Justice and Uncomfortable Histories*

Widening the aims of school history has been seen as a cause for concern. However, if students are not equipped with cultural tools, such as alternative narratives to better understand another culture or cultures that make up their own, they will find it difficult to support or defend a culture. However, even more basic is “knowledge” and the ability for all students to “describe.” If students cannot even describe a tradition, culture, or belief outside of their own, then they can hardly defend or decry it in any meaningful mature way.<sup>61</sup>

Dominant narratives reinforce dominant cultures, as well as deficit theories. Languages, literacies, and cultural ways of knowing are often ignored or seen as deficiencies; these silences and gaps oppress and obstruct sustained inclusion and a sense of belonging for students of color when educators teach history.<sup>62</sup> As social studies educators, we are often more adept at differentiating our strategies and methods when instructing, and this may come with the side effect of paying scant attention to the dominance of a single narrative.<sup>63</sup> When societies mythologize the ability of one group to plunder resources and people, and when it is infused into our curriculum

without question, history educators are promoting hierarchies of racial superiority consciously and unconsciously, which students will internalize. By sticking to an either/or dichotomy of history and by not being open to alternative ways of viewing the past, educators will shortchange all students. Singular interpretations of history are ahistorical.<sup>64</sup> Using counter narratives from a variety of media and making space in our lessons for historically marginalized students to create their own counter narratives to be seen and heard are powerful and effective inclusionary tools.

When teaching uncomfortable histories, it is important for students and educators to understand and engage with the complexities of the past and present, and how these complexities shape society. LaGarrett King has written extensively on this topic, providing valuable insights and approaches to teaching difficult histories.<sup>65</sup> History is an ideal discipline to help students cope with and understand media literacy, political literacy, identities, religious intolerance, and a spectrum of what some may deem difficult topics. Using King’s framework gives key insights and approaches that can be used to teach uncomfortable histories. **Figure 1** outlines five essentials of good inclusive pedagogical practice when reforming teaching toward issues of social justice, focused on the overall process of the planning, teaching, and reframing of topics.

### *Media Resources for Teaching Social Justice and Uncomfortable Histories*

**Figure 2** includes a second set of five essential points of inclusive pedagogical practice when using media resources for teaching social studies and historical empathy, specifically using trade novels, graphic novels, and cartoons. These resources offer a creative and effective way to engage students, teachers, and pre-service teachers in learning about historical events and social justice issues. They provide a visual medium that can help students better understand the context and complexities of historical events while also allowing for more in-depth exploration of such social justice issues. As history teachers, we can use diverse media to teach social studies and historical empathy instead of relying on traditional roleplay. Regarding professional recommendations, a good place to start is the list of trade books provided by the National Council for Social Studies.<sup>66</sup>

### **Five Essentials of Teaching Social Justice through Inclusive Pedagogical Practice**

- 1. Center the voices of marginalized communities:** Use both primary and secondary sources from marginalized communities and incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences into the curriculum. A focus on humanizing elements in our history lessons, including the emotionality found in history and the emotionality students may bring to a topic, is a crucial aspect in this centering.
- 2. Focus on critical inquiry:** Encourage students to question and analyze historical narratives, sources, and perspectives. This involves engaging in dialogue and debate and exploring the complexities and contradictions of historical events and personal experiences.
- 3. Use multiple perspectives:** Emphasize the importance of using multiple perspectives in teaching uncomfortable histories. This must involve exploring different interpretations of historical events, as well as examining how different groups experienced and were affected by these events. We should not shy away from the complexities of events and the reality of how context and other variables shape histories.
- 4. Make connections to the present:** Help students make connections between past and present, and help them explore how historical events and legacies continue to shape our society today. This can involve exploring current issues and social movements that are related to the historical events being studied.
- 5. Foster empathy and moral and civic engagement:** Emphasize the importance of empathy and moral and civic engagement in students, particularly in relation to uncomfortable histories. This involves encouraging students to put themselves in the shoes of historical actors, and to consider their own roles and responsibilities in creating a more just and equitable society.

**Figure 1:** Essentials for incorporating frameworks for teaching social justice and uncomfortable histories.

Recommendations can also come from the students themselves. In my methods classes, I ask students to bring in a two- to three-minute clip of a cartoon that contains a counter narrative concerning a historical or present-day issue. Students relish this task and call attention to topics that are pertinent to them and to others. This

### **Five Essentials of Incorporating Social Justice Media through Inclusive Pedagogical Practice**

- 1. Select the right media:** Look for sources that provide an accurate and nuanced portrayal of historical events and social justice issues. Trade books and graphic novels can be less intimidating than traditional textbooks. The chosen books should enable students to see and learn about several perspectives. Cartoons, especially older ones, tend to be blatant in their disregard for social justice issues and therefore highlight the need for counter narratives.
- 2. Use the media as a jumping-off point:** Use a source as an opportunity to delve deeper into the historical events and social justice issues that the source addresses. Don’t fall into the trap of discarding older books, such as Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1983) for younger readers. Of course, newer books are valuable, such as Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s *Take My Hand* (2022) for older and more mature students.
- 3. Provide guided questions to analyze and interpret media content:** Encourage critical thinking and reflection on the historical events and social justice issues explored in the medium being utilized. Also leave space for a student “free-write” to allow students to voice their own views, opinions, and feelings openly.
- 4. Use the media to connect the past to the present:** Help students to see and draw connections from the historical events and social justice issues explored in the source to current events in their own lives. This enables students to recognize the relevance of what they are learning and how history can inform their understanding of contemporary issues, allowing them to see themselves and others in the history that they are learning. Portions from books like *Black Enough* (2019), edited by Ibi Zoboi, are great starting points.
- 5. Use the media to foster empathy:** Encourage students to put themselves in the shoes of historical figures and explore how their actions were shaped by their social and historical context.

**Figure 2:** Essentials for incorporating media resources for teaching social justice and uncomfortable histories.

advice may seem stale, but educators don’t always need to be reinventing the wheel; they can, however, find tactics to use the “wheel” in more productive ways.

History teachers are missing great opportunities if they fail to recognize the importance of opening windows of learning into different cultures, especially for students who rarely journey outside of their own communities. Once educators incorporate diverse resources such as trade and graphic novels into their social studies curriculum, they will help students engage with historical and social justice issues in meaningful ways.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, by fostering intellectual empathy, history teachers can help all students develop a deeper understanding of history and the issues that continue to shape the world—and students will better see the usefulness of history in their lives.

Our personal beliefs and experiences may make it easy for us to conveniently forget that racist ideology and myths are still with us. Incorporating the insights and approaches of scholars like LaGarrett King can help teachers effectively teach uncomfortable histories in a way that is meaningful and impactful for historically marginalized students. The current debate concerning how people of color were and are subjected to racist beliefs in the medical field is an example of the physically detrimental toll that occurs when such falsehoods are seen as facts.<sup>68</sup> By centering the voices of marginalized communities, focusing on critical inquiry, using multiple perspectives, making connections to the present, and fostering empathy and moral and civic engagement, teachers can help students understand the complexities of the past and present and become active agents of social change. The blind acceptance of dominant uncritical narratives that portray indigenous and other historically marginalized groups as invisible excludes and obscures the experiences of students in the classroom, implying they are unworthy of recognition.<sup>69</sup> Giving historically marginalized actors agency only in terms of reactions to those with power—and continuing to marginalize, both spatially and literally—is unacceptable.

### *Digital Sources for Teaching Social Justice and Uncomfortable Histories*

Educators must continue to integrate and centralize marginalized narratives. When educators begin to balance suffering and oppression with resistance, resilience, and accomplishments, they make it possible for all students to feel seen and valued.<sup>70</sup> When we choose historians and literature that reflect the racial and cultural



### **Recommended Digital Sources for Incorporating Alternative Narratives and Counter Narratives**

***Learning for Justice*** (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/podcasts>): The podcasts by Learning for Justice (a project by the Southern Poverty Law Center) feature interviews with scholars, educators, and activists who are working to advance social justice and equity in education. Episodes often focus on under-represented perspectives and counter narratives in history, such as the experiences of LGBTQ+ people during the Civil Rights Movement.

***Teaching Hard History*** (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/teaching-hard-history/>): Also produced by the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Learning for Justice, *Teaching Hard History* is a podcast series hosted by Hasan Kwame Jeffries that provides educators with tools and strategies for teaching about the history of slavery in the United States. Episodes explore under-represented perspectives and counter narratives, such as the experiences of enslaved people who resisted slavery and fought for their freedom.

***Crash Course Black American History*** (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8dPuuaLjXtNYJO8JWpXO2JP0ezgxsrJJ>): Clint Smith’s *Crash Course Black American History* is a video series that provides a concise and accessible overview of black American history. The series challenges traditional narratives of American history by highlighting the contributions of black people and exploring the systemic racism that has shaped our society.

**Figure 3:** Recommended digital sources for teaching social justice and uncomfortable histories.

backgrounds of our students, we are showing them that they matter, and that the toils of their ancestors made—and make—our country what it is, and what it may become.<sup>71</sup>

When teaching history, using a variety of alternative narratives and counter narratives—and a variety of formats—is a crucial component of good pedagogical practice to provide a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the past. The *Learning for Justice*,<sup>72</sup> *Teaching Hard History*,<sup>73</sup> and *Crash Course Black American History*<sup>74</sup> podcasts are all excellent resources for incorporating counter narratives into history education through digital sources. **Figure 3** offers additional detail for each of these sources.

Incorporating counter narratives and their accompanying insights and approaches provides students with a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the past. When pedagogical practice shows all students that their teacher values historically marginalized histories, knowledge, experiences, and wisdom, it also shows historically marginalized students that they do have a seat at the table. In fact, historically marginalized ancestors helped build the table, and these students as their descendants are still building this unfinished nation.

### **Conclusion: Inclusion Always Starts with “I”**

More than just a word, “inclusion” always requires action. Inclusion involves a commitment to the inherent value of each student in the histories that educators teach. Diversity is easy. People are diverse. However, the visions and goals of knowing what individual educators want systems of education to look like and feel like are critical in a polarized era, and for this, there are no easy routes.<sup>75</sup> The history of decolonization in countries around the world is fraught with episodes of trial and error, damage, warfare, and, in many cases, eventual reluctant acceptance with vestiges of formal and informal empire lingering in many places. Decolonizing or challenging dominant narratives in a history curriculum is often an act of quiet internal rebellion, as on a personal level, educators will have to decolonize their ways of thinking and teaching.<sup>76</sup> If educators are to become allies, they should be prepared for all consequences—those deemed positive and negative. If a history curriculum is neither a mirror reflecting the students being taught, nor a window that opens views of possibilities for all students, it is problematic.<sup>77</sup> If the history that educators are teaching presents victimization and oppression without balancing stories of resistance, resilience, and overcoming—and if this does not raise concerns—it represents condonation, complacency, and complicity with the project of maintaining the myth of white supremacy. As teachers wanting the best for all children, educators must reflect, examine, and act on their power and privilege to challenge and change such representations and, ultimately, the system that perpetuates them.

If history teachers feel only pity toward historically marginalized students, then they are ensuring business as usual. If educators feel defensive and attacked, then they are ensuring business as usual.

If educators fail to look inside of themselves to ask why they feel this way, then they are ensuring business as usual. However, if educators can step back and be open to the uncomfortable feelings of what a classroom, school, school system, and educational system might look like if they centered and infused inclusion and worked towards social justice, then business as usual would be transformed as liberating for all students. Social justice is not a destination—it is a continuous process. To start or continue to strive toward our goals, educators must be purposeful and deliberate in their actions. Inclusion comes not by accident, but by design. It is often on the dark edges of ourselves that we discover the light of who we are aiming to become. By purposefully disrupting conventional narratives and conventional history, educators must continue to unravel the tangled webs of racism and systems of social injustice as they persist in working toward the quest of “a more perfect union.”

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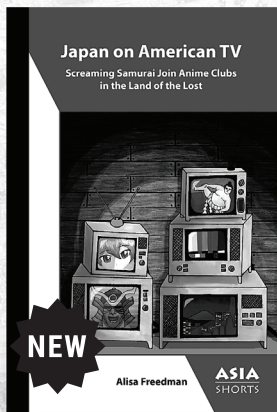
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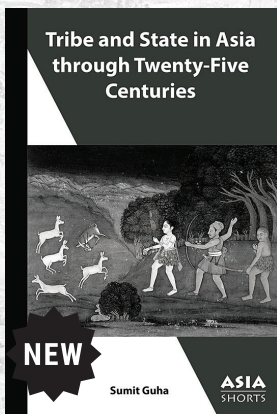
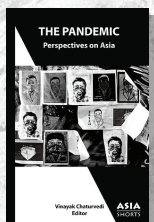
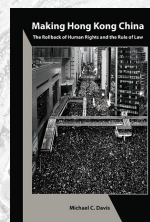
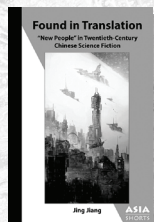
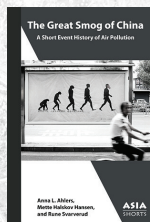
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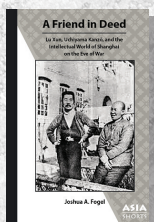
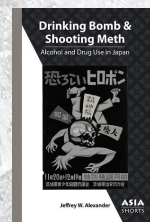
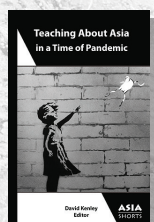
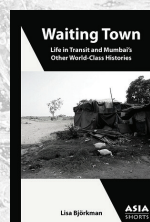
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