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Teaching difficult history in middle school classrooms

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Abstract:

Too much of US history education follows a triumphalist, patriotic narrative. In order to achieve a more complex and truer version of American history, US history teachers should continue to embrace the teaching of difficult histories. However, many teachers identify emotional challenges that come with teaching such histories. In this capstone, I will carry out a synthetic literature review in the fields of intellectual and moral child development as well as affect and pedagogy studies to argue that K12 students are ready to learn (developmentally appropriate) difficult history and examine what researchers have already found about navigating the fraught emotions and surprising affective responses that can come up when teaching difficult history. My goal is to pull out these dense, theoretical narratives into a clear, concise guide that can consolidate some best practices in navigating emotions when teaching difficult history and advance the conversation on the intersection of emotions and history education.

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Introduction

As a student in New Jersey and North Carolina public schools, I learned an essentially progressive narrative of US history. This narrative acknowledged that as a nation, we've made mistakes, but now we've seen the error of our ways and changed for the better. It emphasized reforms like expanded voting rights yet failed to adequately answer questions like why racism, sexism, and homophobia persisted. Studying US history and culture in college transformed my understanding of American history to one that was founded on systems of injustice that have been reformed, but certainly not eradicated and is far more complex and non-linear in nature. I feel lucky to have experienced this hard, disorienting study of history in college, and for my capstone wanted to examine how difficult history can be integrated much earlier into K12 history education.

In this capstone, I will argue that K12 history would be enriched by a fuller, more complex understanding of difficult history integrated in developmentally appropriate ways from kindergarten through high school graduation. Recent pushes to teach more honestly about the histories of various marginalized groups, including African Americans,¹ Asian Americans,² Latinx Americans,³ and more represent a wider call to teach more difficult histories. Although this process is just getting started, the conservative backlash has already been swift. Across the United States, right-wing affiliated groups are rallying to protect the supposed emotional wellbeing of America's students. In a video from Parents Defending Education, a Virginia based group, the video asserts that "My child's brain is a blank slate with unlimited potential, and I want

¹ Turner, "Why Schools Fail To Teach Slavery's 'Hard History.'" "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery."

² O'Dowd, "Requiring Asian American History In Schools."

³ Hill, "Elevating Hispanic/Latinx History All Year."

it to develop in a healthy way, not by force or shame,” and that “In K-12 schools today, activists are pushing a radical new agenda, turning blank slates into members of racial, ethnic or gender groups in conflict with each other.”⁴ Of the nine states⁵ that have so far signed into law bills banning so-called “Critical Race Theory” in their schools, six⁶ contain clauses banning teaching that could potentially cause an individual to “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress solely because of the individual’s race, ethnicity or sex.”⁷ Commenters have argued that these broadly construed laws may intimidate teachers from teaching controversial subjects or mentioning race at all — topics that could easily brush up against difficult history. This project argues that these laws are ill-informed and that children should not be sheltered from a more just, complex, and truer version of national history. But first, we must understand what difficult history is, and how we got to where we are now.

Defining difficult history

While academics have proposed many different names and definitions for concepts broadly related to difficult history, I find Gross and Terra’s the most clearly

⁴ Kamenetz, “School Boards.”

⁵ Iowa, Idaho, South Carolina, Arizona, North Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma, & New Hampshire.

Committee, Iowa HF802 | 2021-2022 | 89th General Assembly; Committee, Idaho H0377 | 2021 | Regular Session; Committee, South Carolina H4100 | 2021-2022 | 124th General Assembly; Hoffman, Arizona HB2906 | 2021 | Fifty-fifth Legislature 1st Regular; Kasper et al., North Dakota 1508 | 2021 | 67th Legislative Assembly Special Session; Ragan, Tennessee HB0580 | 2021-2022 | 112th General Assembly; Toth et al., Texas HB3979 | 2021-2022 | 87th Legislature; West and Bullard, Oklahoma HB1775 | 2021 | Regular Session; Weyler, New Hampshire HB2 | 2021 | Regular Session.

⁶ Iowa, South Carolina, Arizona, Tennessee, Texas, & Oklahoma.

Committee, Iowa HF802 | 2021-2022 | 89th General Assembly; Committee, South Carolina H4100 | 2021-2022 | 124th General Assembly; Hoffman, Arizona HB2906 | 2021 | Fifty-fifth Legislature 1st Regular; Ragan, Tennessee HB0580 | 2021-2022 | 112th General Assembly; Toth et al., Texas HB3979 | 2021-2022 | 87th Legislature; West and Bullard, Oklahoma HB1775 | 2021 | Regular Session.

⁷ Hoffman, Arizona HB2906 | 2021 | Fifty-fifth Legislature 1st Regular.

defined.⁸ In order for something to count as difficult history, Gross and Terra argue that it should align with most of their five criteria. According to Gross and Terra, difficult history:

1. Is relatively central to a nation's history
2. Counters "broadly accepted versions of the past or stated national values"
3. Has possible relevance to current issues
4. Tends to "involve violence, usually collective or state sanctioned."
5. Ends up challenging "existing historical understandings"⁹

These detailed criteria give a good frame of what makes difficult history difficult, and also hint at why critics are so enraged by the possibility of it being taught. Although Gross and Terra highlight that the outcomes of teaching difficult history are uncertain, difficult history does carry with it the possibility of unsettling commonly held national values by showing how they have not been upheld in histories central to national identity.

Other terms are more commonly used, such as "hard history." Hasan Kwame

⁸ Other terms include traumatic pasts, the violent past, difficult knowledge, the sensitive past, and hard history. See Charis Psaltis, Mario Carretero, and Sabina Cehajic-Clancy, *History education and conflict transformation: Social psychological theories, history teaching and reconciliation*, (Palgrave Macmillan: 2017), Elizabeth Cole, *Teaching the violent past: History education and reconciliation* (Rowman & Littlefield: 2007), Deborah Britzman, "If the story cannot end: Deferred action, ambivalence and difficult knowledge," in R. I. Simon, S. Rosenberg, C. Eppert, *Between hope and despair: Pedagogy and the remembrance of historical trauma*, (Rowman & Littlefield: 2000), Carla von Boxtel, Maria Grever, and Stephan Klein, *Sensitive Past: Questioning Heritage in Education*, (Berghahn Books, New York: 2016), Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery," (Southern Poverty Law Center: 2018).

⁹ Gross and Terra, "What Makes Difficult History Difficult?: The Study of History May Challenge Students' Preconceptions about Their Nation, but That Doesn't Mean We Should Shy Away from Hard Truths." 2-3.

Jeffries argues that “Slavery is hard history,” and that “We the people have a deep-seated aversion to hard history because we are uncomfortable with the implications it raises about the past as well as the present.”¹⁰ While this concept is clearly related to difficult history, I find difficult history to be a more broadly applicable term that when combined with Gross and Terra’s framework, gets more explicitly at what makes difficult history difficult. Further, in my research so far, it seems that the term “hard history” is almost exclusively associated with the history of slavery. However, difficult history can also appropriately be used as a framework for learning about histories of settler colonialism, incarceration, war crimes, the Holocaust, and immigration in the American context alone. Because I don’t want to focus only on the inarguably difficult history of slavery, I have chosen to use the term difficult history for its broader application.

Historical context

Yet, defining difficult history does little to tell us what versions of American history are mostly commonly taught in today’s schools. How is it that dominant histories “central to a nation’s identity” and that uphold “broadly accepted versions of the past or state national values” have been formed? Historians of American history in schools reveal how this field has long been contested, but visions of patriotism and nationalism have prevailed in American history. In his 2003 book *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present*, Joseph Moreau explores how the narratives laid out in American history textbooks have long been a source of political controversy. Moreau summarizes how the earliest United States

¹⁰ “Teaching Hard History: American Slavery.” 5

history texts dated to the late 18th and early 19th centuries and utilized the nobility of great Revolutionary leaders and statesmen to attempt to draft a national identity in the early years of the United States' existence.¹¹ Much of this dominant narrative prevailed until the Civil War. After the war, "where antebellum schoolbook authors found the essence of the nation in relatively static narrative elements — the valiant individual, the heroic deed — Thorpe's new writers would seek it in stable but ever-progressing institutions."¹² By the 1890's, textbook authors began giving "at least some indication of the faults of earlier Americans" in line with the rise of more objective and scientific approaches to history as well as the dominance of a progress narrative where these faults, like the existence of slavery and the limited right to vote, were overcome by the forces of American progress.¹³

Similarly, Thelen argues that history has historically been a site of producing the idea of a coherent American nation from its many distinct and not inherently united groups of people and communities. Thelen divides academic/professional historians into five different broad movements, all sharing the common thread of investment in the US as a nation. Thelen argues that these "self-conscious groups of historians promoted national narratives in order to assume authority over alternative storytellers and perspectives on the past."¹⁴ This perspective has often prevailed in the schools' teaching of American history, as Jonathan Zimmermann's work confirms.

Zimmermann finds that it is not sufficient for oppressed groups to only see themselves included into existing narratives in American history. Zimmermann

¹¹ Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation*. 30-31.

¹² Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation*. 44.

¹³ Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation*. 47.

¹⁴ Thelen, "Making History and Making the United States." 380

summarizes how “Jealously guarding their own dominant position in the American narrative, old-stock white conservatives worked to block immigrant and black voices from school textbooks. Eventually most parties to the dispute reached a rough compromise: each racial and ethnic group could enter the story, provided that none of them questioned the story’s larger themes of freedom, equality, and opportunity.”¹⁵ As a result, the history of “our conflict over patriotism and nationalism in the schools — is a fairly straight line, reflecting one constant theme: the progressive inclusion of more and more Americans in the grand national story.”¹⁶ This “inclusive history” contrasts with difficult history because it implies that modernity is much more settled and satisfying in a simple comparison to the past, whereas difficult history connects past to present in an effort to ask how students can make change in their own world. Although they have long been contested, patriotic and nationalistic narratives have prevailed in American schools’ teaching of American history.

Current status

As a result of this focus on patriotic, progressive versions of American history, teachers struggle with aspects of that history that don’t easily align with this narrative. While this project does not attempt to determine how much social studies education in the US already qualifies as “difficult history,” news reports suggest that while some teachers are likely already incorporating this framing, others are still struggling with it in ways that have lasting impacts on students. For example, when the New York Times asked readers to send in messages about how they had learned about slavery, they received a variety of responses. On one hand, some readers reported nuanced lessons

¹⁵ Zimmermann, *Whose America?: Culture Wars in the Public Schools*. P. 4.

¹⁶ Zimmermann, *Whose America?: Culture Wars in the Public Schools*. P. 3.

on slavery with framing representing or approaching difficult history. One reader reported contrasting the school—assigned textbook with Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, leading to a powerful and memorable lesson about how language and narrative shape students’ perceptions of power and the course of history. Others described incisive lessons on how slaveowners’ pursuit of economic power degraded enslaved people and hands-on, field-trip based lessons centering the experience of enslaved people.

On the other hand, some readers reported teaching that only glanced at the realities of slavery or taught that it was beneficial or necessary. Multiple people reported exercises asking them to outline the “pro’s” as well as the “cons” of slavery. Some learned that the kidnapping of enslaved people from Africa brought them to a form of salvation in enslavement. Others were required to role-play as enslaved people, an experience Black respondents described as particularly upsetting.¹⁷ While data like the percent of classrooms where teachers see themselves as teaching difficult history is unclear, what is clear is that there is room for improvement.

One issue here is that the teaching of difficult history doesn’t align well with patriotic narratives and that “good teaching” is often implicitly understood as teaching that provokes positive emotions. As Cathrine Ryther writes, “The ideal-image of pedagogically desired emotions seems almost so obvious as not to require specification. While equanimity – emotional neutrality and calmness – is not undesirable, it seems obvious that ‘good teaching is charged with positive emotion’ (Hargreaves 1998,

¹⁷ Phillip, Nicole. “‘It Was Very Humiliating’: Readers Share How They Were Taught About Slavery.” *The New York Times*, September 27, 2019, sec. Magazine. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/27/magazine/slavery-education-school-1619-project.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/27/magazine/slavery-education-school-1619-project.html>.

835).¹⁸ Ross Douthat provides a useful example of how this positive emotionality can be used to justify patriotic discourses of American education. Douthat justifies “teach[ing] kids first that the past is filled with people who did remarkable, admirable, courageous things,” as a way to avoid hopelessness. Douthat also sees a patriotic education as key to upholding narratives of heroic American progress and values, seeing the African American trajectory from enslavement to Barack Obama’s presidency as an equally valid source of this narrative of American heroism to traditional stories of the Founding Fathers — providing an example of the kinds of inclusive but inherently patriotic narratives Zimmermann points out prevail in our history classrooms.¹⁹

Without practice engaging with difficult history and the strong emotional reactions it can provoke, avoidance and shutting down dialogue are easy and frequent responses among teachers and students alike. James Garrett points out, “the knowledge we encounter in the world can make us want to not-know, turn away, accuse, correct, and forget.”²⁰ When this happens in the classroom, teachers should engage with these emotions, but it can be easy to simply avoid the topic instead. Writing about the case of a small progressive school that took this route, Debbie Sonu wonders if at times the defense mechanisms adults use to ward off the anxieties they feel when confronting events of trauma and shame not only deny the authentic engagement needed in the work of healing, but figure the child as a hopeful symbol of innocence who can’t face the pain adults are too afraid to bear. Sonu points out when this burdening learning occurs, “it may also serve as cause to reverse susceptibility and foreclose on the learning

¹⁸ Ryther, “On the Image of Hate in Education.” 267.

¹⁹ Douthat, “Opinion | Why a Patriotic Education Can Be Valuable.”

²⁰ James Garrett, *Learning to be in the world with others: difficult knowledge and social studies education* (New York, Peter Lang: 2017), 1.

of others, in this case the children.”²¹ Without willingness and strategies to engage with these tough emotional questions, teachers may find it easier to turn away from troubled knowledge altogether.

One well-reported-on subject that reveals the sorry state of difficult history in American schools is the teaching of histories of American plantation slavery. In a 2017 report, researchers at the Southern Poverty Law Center found an abysmal level of content knowledge surrounding the facts of slavery. For example, the researchers found that “Only 8 percent of high school seniors surveyed can identify slavery as the central cause of the Civil War” and that “Fewer than 1 in 4 students (22 percent) can correctly identify how provisions in the Constitution gave advantages to slaveholders.”²² The causes of this state of history education certainly go beyond challenging emotions — the researchers cite poor construction of state history standards and history curricula as well as poorly chosen pedagogy as some reasons behind this lack. They recommend four steps in order to move towards resolving the situation:

1. “Improve Instruction About American Slavery and Fully Integrate It Into U.S. History”
2. Incorporate more diverse historical documents into textbooks and curriculum.
3. Increase the amount of textbook space dedicated to slavery and make more connections to the present.
4. Provide better guidance at the state level in a scaffolded and substantive way, especially in terms of state standards.²³

²¹ Sonu, “Playing Slavery in First Grade.” P. 107.

²² “Teaching Hard History: American Slavery.” P. 9.

²³ “Teaching Hard History: American Slavery,” 11.

While these recommendations may be wise and necessary for history classrooms across the US, these largely curriculum-focused recommendations and others like them don't adequately address underlying issues of teacher and student discomfort with learning about how foundational slavery was to the United States. In the same SPLC report, when asked which part of teaching slavery they felt least comfortable with, history teachers' responses included, "I struggle with being honest and direct about historical truths WHILE not demoralizing or terrifying students," "I have to watch for signs of children being under stress because they are scared of the brutality," and "It is hard for students to understand how someone could [own slaves], and communicating what makes it possible is difficult."²⁴

While improving curriculum on slavery is likely necessary and may make teachers' jobs easier regarding teaching about this crucial topic, it doesn't address the other underlying issues making this history "demoralizing," "terrifying," "brutal," and "hard to understand." This capstone advocates for facing these underlying issues by arguing that children are ready and deserve to learn about difficult history.

The significance of my project is that it advocates teaching a more complex, truer, and just version of US history. As articulated above, historical understanding in this country is relatively low — especially of our failings as a nation that contrast with national myths. Many non-academics and academics alike have called for the teaching of difficult histories as content areas and cognitive frames that challenge this dishonest and prevailing history.²⁵ My capstone project takes up that call yet recognizes the

²⁴ "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery," 28.

²⁵ Garrett, "Difficult Knowledge and Social Studies (Teacher) Education." Gross and Terra, "What Makes Difficult History Difficult?: The Study of History May Challenge Students' Preconceptions about Their Nation, but That Doesn't Mean We Should Shy Away from Hard Truths." Harrison, Burke, and Clarke, "STOLEN GENERATIONS." McCarthy and Sealey-Ruiz, "Teaching Difficult History." Sonu, "Playing Slavery in First Grade." Zembylas, "Critical Pedagogy and Emotion."

emotional challenges inherent to it and makes some suggestions for navigating those challenging emotions.

Research questions

My research questions for this capstone fall into two broad categories: readiness and best practices. My readiness questions include; Are children in middle school “ready” in terms of cognitive/intellectual and moral development to learn various aspects of difficult history? How do we know when kids are “ready” to learn difficult history? How do you determine at what ages/grade levels various aspects of difficult history should be taught at / are developmentally appropriate? My best practices questions include; What are some best practices for teaching difficult history? How can teachers navigate emotions and affect while teaching difficult history?

Scope of research

In terms of subject matter, the scope of my research is fairly broad. Because much of the existing research in best practices in difficult history and troubled knowledge focuses on higher education, narrowing down to a certain level within K12 hasn't seemed feasible at this point as narrowing down the scope of the literature I read might leave no papers behind for me to review. Similarly, choosing only one difficult history — that of slavery, war, colonialism, prisons, immigration law, etc. — would narrow the scope too far. The range of strategies applicable to the teaching of difficult history coming from professors of English and other subjects means I think that keeping my guide more broadly focused could make it more useful in a variety of settings. Given

the vast number of local, regional, national, and transnational histories that could be considered difficult history if taken up by a given teacher or history curriculum, I hope to create a wide-ranging list of broadly applicable strategies that teachers can pick and choose from in their own practice.

So, the scope of my research includes cognitive/intellectual and moral child development for the aspects investigating the readiness of children to learn difficult history as well as scholarship on education ranging from kindergarten to higher education to teacher education programs for the aspects investigating best practices in emotional teaching of difficult history.

Methodology

This capstone is a literature review essay that synthesizes aspects from the fields of affect/critical emotion studies, pedagogy studies, and child development to review best practices in and child readiness for learning difficult history. I draw from these fields because they contain the most scholars directly tackling questions of emotions and difficult history in history classrooms. Yet, one limitation of current research is that most scholars, with the exception of Ziv, Golden, and Goldberg,²⁶ simply assume that students are ready to learn difficult history. I agree with these scholars, but sought to challenge this assumption I was making and saw many scholars and educators making across the course of reading for this project this semester. This why I have chosen to look for answers within the field of child development — specifically cognitive and moral development.

²⁶ Ziv, Golden, and Goldberg, "Teaching Traumatic History to Young Children."

While some scholars in these fields are already in conversation with one another, no one has yet brought the scattered strategies and best practices that are out there together in one place. I hope to add to and synthesize that conversation and compile that information in a way that hopefully will render these findings more readily available. This approach will also bring together focuses on affect/emotion in certain articles with focuses on trauma in others to hopefully address a broad spectrum of emotional responses to difficult history that may range from anger and discomfort to bringing up deep traumas, given the myriad students teachers encounter in classrooms. I hope this broad approach will help make my project broadly applicable.

Applying insights from adolescent development to difficult history

To try to provide answers to the question of if middle school level students are ready to encounter difficult histories, I turned to the fields of child, adolescent, and moral development. In this section, I offer some brief definitions of these terms, some overviews of major theories in the fields, and some thoughts on how their insights may apply to the teaching of difficult history to early adolescents.

Development and learning are related, but different. In their *Handbook of Adolescent Development*, Sandy Jackson and Luc Goossens highlight that studying human development means looking at systematic changes in behavior over time. This comprises three main tasks — describing changes in certain areas of behavior (like cognition, emotion, and morality, the three main types of development I focus on in this paper), studying the associations between changes in these areas of behavior, and synthesizing all these findings to describe broader views of the progress of development as a whole within and across domains.²⁷ In *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators*, Michael Nakkula and Eric Toshalis define cognitive development as “increasing capacity for rational and complex thinking.”²⁸ Overall, development tries to describe broad scale changes in people’s capacity for thought and behavior itself. One clunky simile to describe this might be thinking of development as how the container of what a child learns changes shape and size to encompass more ways of thinking about the world and learning as the process of filling that container of information, theories, and anything at all that can be learned. However, two major developmental theorists, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, differ in their arguments about

²⁷ Jackson, Sandy, and Luc Goossens, eds. *Handbook of Adolescent Development*. Hove & New York: Psychology Press, 2006. 19.

²⁸ Nakkula, Michael J., and Eric Toshalis. *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2006. 2.

if the container must exist before learning of a certain type can occur or if the learning itself can cause the container to expand.

For Piaget, development determines the path that learning takes — and falls into a linear set of development stages. Writing from the 1930s to the 1960s, Piaget became one of the most influential figures in child development. Piaget saw development as “a process which concerns the totality of the structures of knowledge” and through a series of experiments proposed a set of four developmental stages children move through from earliest childhood until adolescence.²⁹ From birth to around age 18 months - 2 years, children experience the world primarily through their senses in what Piaget calls the sensory-motor phase. A famous example of this used by Piaget is that of a ball held in front of a baby, then removed from its field of vision. The youngest children will seemingly forget that the ball exists and stop reaching for it. When the child remembers that the ball exists even when it cannot sense it, the child attains object permanence and is well on their way to Piaget’s next stage.

Next, children begin to create symbolic representations of the world around them in their own mind in what Piaget calls the pre-operational representation stage, lasting usually from around age 2 until around age 7. In this stage, children begin to learn the foundations of language, symbolism, thought, and representation alike. In the third phase, from around age 7 to age 12, children fall into the concrete operational phase and begin learning elementary logic, math, geometry, and physics. In this stage, children begin to think of the world in terms of various rules, classes, and relations to each other. Finally, by early adolescence, most children fall into the formal stage, when they begin to reason based off of hypotheses, ideals, and possibilities. Because this is when Piaget

²⁹ Part 1 Cognitive Development in Children: Piaget. *Development and Learning*. Originally Published in Volume 2, Number 3, pp. 176-186 (1964). S8

found that this is when most children are able to reason more complexly, their cognitive development is likely advanced enough by middle school for them to encounter difficult histories. What Piaget thought drove children through these stages was a combination of four factors: maturation, experience, social transmission, and “equilibration” or “self-regulation,” which he defined as the child’s process of mediating and combining insights between the other three factors.

While Piaget’s conception of development is driven largely by the child’s “self-regulating” between the influences of physical development in the brain and body, direct experience with the world and concepts they learn, and social transmission, Vygotsky focuses much more on social factors in driving learning and development. As Nakkula and Toshalis describe it, for Vygotsky, “children’s cognitive development is shaped by the access they have to the thinking of others.” (8) One of the most well-known concepts from Vygotsky’s work is often called the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky observed in his experiments that children could perform certain tasks at one level on their own, and their performance improved when someone else (an adult or another child) provided assistance with the task.

Based on this observation, Vygotsky argued that there is a zone “expressed as the difference between what a child can do without guidance and what he or she can do with assistance.” (10) Within this zone lies the child’s immediate possibility for learning and development. As the child learns and develops more, the zone shifts.³⁰ Defining this zone can help educators create tasks towards the higher end of this zone to encourage learning. This entanglement of learning and development as the zone of

³⁰ “Vygotsky’s Developmental Theory: An Introduction.” *Films On Demand*, Films Media Group, 1994, fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=98527&xtid=44906. Accessed 1 Apr. 2022.

proximal development shifts also reveals a key distinction between Piaget and Vygotsky. While Piaget argued that development precedes learning, as children can only learn what concepts they are cognitively prepared to construct, Vygotsky's theories argue that learning and development go hand in hand. As children learn more facts and are exposed to more ideas, the way they think and see the world changes — influencing their development, which can allow them to learn more complex concepts, and so on. While many people have challenged Piaget and Vygotsky, many of their insights continue to influence the fields of development in education, visible in “developmentally informed” preschools and scaffolding techniques used throughout K-12 education where educators try to tailor a student's learning to their zone of proximal development.

Most developmentalists agree that adolescence is a crucial developmental stage on the cognitive level when most people make many important transitions into formal, complex thinking. As Nakkula and Toshalis put it,

To mark the distinction between the child and adolescent minds, developmental psychologists often refer to adolescent thought as *theoretical thinking*; it is thought rooted in assumptions about the way things work—assumptions that are then tested through real-world, trial-and-error experimentation.³¹

Piaget tends to coincide with this perspective, given his focus on 11 or 12 as the pivotal age when most children attain the most advanced stage he describes, “formal operations.” Furthermore, Piaget suggests that a key part of adolescent thinking may be the articulation of ideals that they think the world should align with, and contending with this realism may be a key step to entering adult life.³²

³¹ Nakkula, Michael J., and Eric Toshalis. *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2006, 2.

³² Jackson, Sandy, and Luc Goossens, eds. *Handbook of Adolescent Development*. Hove & New York: Psychology Press, 2006. 19.

Karen Bartsch also highlights this conflict, pointing out that

The period of adolescence may be of special importance; both theoretical analysis and indirect empirical evidence indicate that adolescents may experience transition and even crisis with regard to epistemological theory (rather than the happy arrival at rationality suggested by simplistic interpretations of traditional cognitive development theory). If so, educators and education researchers will want to attend to this important cognitive development.³³

Whether realization that the world does not live up to ideals is a happy arrival at adulthood or a demoralizing crisis, most psychologists agree that adolescence is a key phase of cognitive development. Adolescents are also beginning to stretch their mental capacities to a fairly high level, suggesting this is likely a good period for them to be introduced to complicated and difficult topics like that represented by learning difficult history. Indeed, the power analysis and attention to perspective and conflict offered by the framing of difficult history and how it informs modern society may make this a particularly relevant framing for adolescents reconciling the world around them with ideals that may be of newly great significance.

In addition to cognitive development, another area that ties in to the teaching of difficult history is emotional development. One line of argumentation against the teaching of difficult histories argues that for young children in particular, the emotional weight of what they learn may overwhelm any potential for learning. Jackson and Goossens describe how one dominant conception of adolescents sees them as moody, dramatic risk takers who are constantly rebelling against their parents. However, research on the whole does not bear this out. While psychological research suggests adolescents may experience more negative emotions than younger children, this seems to be driven more by mild decreases in happiness and slight increases in negative

³³ Karen Bartsch, *Early Adolescence: Perspectives on Research, Policy, and Intervention*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence, 1993. <http://archive.org/details/earlyadolescence0000unse>.

feelings than a more dramatic view of teens floundering in an ocean of emotion. Furthermore, adolescents “give more complex explanations that pertain to relationships and to other people’s feelings” than children would.³⁴ Just as most adolescents reach stages where they can handle cognitive complexity, they can similarly navigate emotional difficulties and complexity.

Another argument against the teaching of difficult history is that students will uncritically do things like repeat discriminatory behavior if they know this exists — however, a brief engagement with moral development suggests that most adolescents have a sense of right and wrong and are unlikely to do this. One of the most prominent thinkers in moral development is Lawrence Kohlberg. Based off experiments where he presented subjects with moral dilemmas, Kohlberg created six moral stages based off their expressed reasoning he said everyone falls into. Applying some similar logic to Piaget to moral development, Kohlberg postulated that while not everyone reaches the highest stages, there were only six stages of moral development that anyone could fall into. Kohlberg argued, “We know that individuals pass through the moral stages one step at a time as they progress from the bottom (Stage 1) toward the top (Stage 6).” As an individual passes through these stages, they go from believing what is right is defined by receiving or not receiving punishment to being based on laws and relationships with others to a reliance on moral principles.³⁵

Regardless of where one stands on if Piaget and Kohlberg’s view on rigid stages of development hold true, by the time adolescence is reached, Kohlberg argues that most

³⁴ Jackson, Sandy, and Luc Goossens, eds. *Handbook of Adolescent Development*. Hove & New York: Psychology Press, 2006. 51-54.

³⁵ Lawrence Kohlberg, “Moral Stages and Moralization: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach,” in *Moral Development and Behavior: Theory, Research, and Social Issues*, Gilbert Gels and Lawrence Kohlberg, (New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston: 1976), 31.

adolescents have reached stages 3 and 4 -- high enough stages of development to grasp moral dilemmas and learn about controversial issues like those embedded in difficult histories.³⁶ Today, many researchers have taken a stab at adolescent moral development. Hart and Carlo argue that given public perceptions of teens as morally deficient, there is ample funding available from federal sources for research on moral adolescent development. While the debate is still open about the biological basis of various moral tendencies and emotions, one shared theme of much research is that “adolescence has qualities that make it developmentally distinct from childhood. As a result of these distinct qualities, moral character can be transformed between childhood and adulthood.”³⁷

Researchers Malti, Galarneau, and Peplak argue that past researchers like Kohlberg placed too much focus on moral cognition and reasoning. Instead, they propose and carry out research on the link between moral emotions and moral behaviors, studying emotions like sympathy and “ethical guilt.” Malti, Keller, and Buchmann point out that while a larger body of research reveals that more adolescents feel bad after acting immorally (as compared to younger children who are more likely to exhibit some positive feelings from immoral acts), comparatively less research has been done on the potential connections between moral actions and positive emotions — though they suggest from their own study that there is one. Bajovic and Rizzo bring the cognitive and emotional sides together, proposing a strategy of “meta-moral cognition” to help adolescents act more morally.

Strategies and best practices for teaching difficult history

³⁶ Ibid., 33.

³⁷ Daniel Hart and Gustavo Carlo, “Moral Development in Adolescence,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 15, no. 3 (September 2005), 224.

First, it is important to recognize that teaching difficult history can itself be understood as a best practice. In their controversial nature contesting national narratives or the degree to which we live up to national values, difficult histories hold a strong potential to tap into other key skills in history education, like weighing evidence, sorting between multiple perspectives, and examining historical significance. When history is taught as a settled narrative, students lose out on the chance to learn about how history is constantly debated between people who have different interpretations of its events.

Because difficult history often counters prevailing national narratives, like Indigenous histories countering simplified stories of Western expansion, it often offers a strong example of the clash of these differing interpretations. History teachers can use this clash to teach students to think about how different communities consider different events, and to use evidence to weigh different versions. In the Canadian context, Lindsay Gibson argues that difficult history has “the potential to make history meaningful and relevant for students, ... address key civic competencies central to history and social studies curricula, and ... offer generative opportunities for advancing students’ historical consciousness and historical thinking.”³⁸ These civic competencies included evaluating historical significance, utilizing evidence to corroborate narratives, continuity and change, cause and consequence, navigating differing historical perspectives, and considering the ethical dimension of history. These skills involve higher order thinking, interpretation, and critical thinking skills valued by many educators.

³⁸ Lindsay Gibson, “The Case for Commemoration Controversies in Canadian History Education,” *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l’éducation* 44, no. 2 (2021), 446.

Yet, beyond calling for trust, honesty, sensitivity, and open discussion, most popular calls for difficult history don't get too into the weeds of what makes this history so difficult, and how educators can constructively teach it and navigate the emotional difficulties it provokes among students. Scholars within the fields of psychoanalysis and education have brought together these two fields to propose frameworks of difficult knowledge and history similar to that of the Gross & Terra framework outlined above. Basically, difficult knowledge challenges existing cognitive frames. The term was coined by psychoanalyst Deborah Britzman in 2000.³⁹

Following Britzman, Megan Boler calls for a pedagogy of discomfort. Boler's pedagogy stems from a key distinction she makes between passively "spectating" and actively "witnessing." Boler argues that by practicing self-observation and reflection to tell when and how one does each, one can "inhabit a more ambiguous sense of self not reduced to either guilt or innocence. In this process one acknowledges profound interconnections with others, and how emotions, beliefs, and actions are collaboratively co-implicated."⁴⁰ Developing this "ambiguous sense of self" is a key facet of difficult history education and one that counters traditionally patriotic American history education, as described in the historical context section above.

This more ambiguous self-concept that goes beyond guilt or innocence counters conservative frames of learning about histories of racism forcing white guilt, opening up space for lessons and conversations that can continue where guilt might cause students to shut down. Overall, Boler's pedagogy of discomfort

does not intentionally seek to provoke, or to cause anger or fear. However, as educators and students engage in a collective self-reflection and

³⁹ Gross and Terra, "What Makes Difficult History Difficult?: The Study of History May Challenge Students' Preconceptions about Their Nation, but That Doesn't Mean We Should Shy Away from Hard Truths.", 2.

⁴⁰ Boler, *Feeling Power*, 187.

develop accountability for how we see ourselves, and as we question cherished beliefs, we are likely to encounter such emotions as fear and anger—as well as joy, passion, new hopes and a sense of possibility. Yet, some teachers and students may not be used to this dynamic experience of a pedagogy of discomfort, especially given what Hargreaves calls the assumed positive emotions of good teaching. To more specifically flesh out strategies underlying a pedagogy of discomfort, scholars in affect studies and critical pedagogy have made advances in recent years.

Pedagogical strategies drawn from difficult knowledge across disciplines emphasize the importance of strong, trusting relationships in the classroom, a willingness of the teacher/learner to break down hierarchies and show their own vulnerability, and try to build “strategic empathy” within students. Coming from the fields of affect studies and emotion in critical pedagogy, Michalinos Zembylas articulates an ideal vision of educators dedicated across disciplines to teach difficult knowledge. In navigating the emotionally difficult situations this knowledge provokes, Zembylas (2013) highlights the importance of breaking down assumptions, building trust, creating strong relationships, “compassionate understanding in every possible manner,” recognizing mutual vulnerability, using strategic empathy, and building skills for patience, tolerance, and solidarity amongst students.⁴¹

Alcorn, Lindquist, and Albrecht-Crane reveal some strategies for this deep, compassionate understanding. Alcorn reminds educators to try not to take student rejections of content as a personal attack, but rather to see student resistance as an affective/biological disgust response. With this deeper understanding of emotional responses, an educator can even call out a given affective response within a class and

⁴¹ Zembylas, 2013, “Critical Pedagogy and Emotion.” 185-186

ask students to consider and discuss *why* they as a class have reacted a certain way, for example by laughing off ideas of Karl Marx⁴². Lindquist balances an acknowledgement of the teacher's political views with the naive-ness to ask students how they want to discuss difficult knowledge and advocates "deep acting" to manage one's own emotional responses (based on political beliefs) to allow students to more fully express affective responses that might provoke strong responses in the teacher.⁴³ Albrecht-Crane also advocates measured approaches to teacher political investments and listening and the importance of not meeting students confrontationally.⁴⁴ Beyond the imperative of justice underlying calls for difficult history, all these separate accounts reveal the importance to meeting students where they are and not trying to force them to agree with the instructor's views on a given difficult history, but rather giving them the tools and encouragement to challenge their own perspectives and encounter difficult ideas without guiding them to a specific answer or ideology.

One final area of best practices for teaching difficult history involves deep engagement with museum collections and place-based learning wherever appropriate and possible. Liana MacDonald and Joanna Kidman "argue that intellectual approaches to teaching difficult settler colonial histories must also accommodate, in equal measure, emotional and embodied learning experiences that are uncomfortable and frightening yet stimulating and inspiring."⁴⁵ In creating these "stimulating and inspiring" learning experience, MacDonald and Kidman utilize Derrida's metaphor of a crypt and apply this idea in their context through field trips to sites of anti-Maori violence in New

⁴² Alcorn, "Shame, classroom resistance, and bion's desire not to know." 236

⁴³ Lindquist, "Class Affects, Classroom Affectations." 203-204

⁴⁴ Albrecht-Crane, "Pedagogy as Friendship." 498-499

⁴⁵ Liana MacDonald and Joanna Kidman, "Uncanny Pedagogies: Teaching Difficult Histories at Sites of Colonial Violence," *Critical Studies in Education* 63, no. 1 (2022), 32.

Zealand thoughtfully paired with interactions with museum artifacts, guided by Maori curators when possible. This practice is also sometimes used with field trips to plantations in the United States or to concentration camps in Germany.⁴⁶

These authors emphasize the potential of uncomfortable moments to encourage reckoning with dominant narratives in a way that can be particularly effective in the embodied experience of visiting historical sites whenever possible. Through these practices, Kidman and MacDonald assert that “Educators can engage the uncanny through the strategic interplay of place, people, objects, practices, and narrative, to bring together a series of temporal frames comprising the historical past and an uncertain and nebulous present where much has been misremembered about what has taken place.”⁴⁷ Through this layering of past and present, MacDonald and Kidman’s work connects back to the key facet of Gross and Terra’s framing of difficult history connecting to current issues in a way that may prove meaningful for students.

Finally, MacDonald and Kidman do not see getting kids upset in a museum or on a field trip by any means as an end goal of this kind of learning, but rather point out the importance of connecting difficult histories to ways students can make a difference in the present – another helpful best practice. In this case, the teacher studied by MacDonald and Kidman taught her students about previous youth activism. This activism involved a “petition [that] called for an official day of recognition of the New Zealand Wars and for its inclusion in the secondary school curriculum.”⁴⁸ By connecting

⁴⁶ Stephanie Wolf and Jess Clark, “A Critical Moment,” (Louisville, Louisville Public Media: 2022, https://louisvillepublicmedia.org/acriticalmoment/?_ga=2.141633077.600036251.1646342569-1291978319.1643395353). Phillip, Nicole. “‘It Was Very Humiliating’: Readers Share How They Were Taught About Slavery.” *The New York Times*, September 27, 2019, sec. Magazine. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/27/magazine/slavery-education-school-1619-project.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/27/magazine/slavery-education-school-1619-project.html>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

difficult histories to opportunity for youth activism, educators make clear that the goal of difficult history is not to deprive students of hope, but rather to give them the information they need to make the world a more hopeful place.

Trauma-informed practice

While the research on difficult history from a trauma-informed perspective is still growing, a few scholars have brought these fields into conversation, yielding insights about how to balance the interests of students whose families may have been impacted by difficult histories and everyone in between. At the most basic level, incorporating trauma-informed practice into education focuses on training teachers to recognize the signs of trauma responses in their students and in themselves. Recognizing when a student may be experiencing a nervous system reaction to trauma can help a teacher know when to pull them aside and allow them to work through it, perhaps in a less stimulating environment than a classroom if possible. As such, many best practices here center around this management of potential trauma responses — but ideally, those could be avoided, not just managed when they occur.

Because of this, giving warnings about traumatic content, telling students the ending or conclusion of a lesson or story *in advance* to let them prepare mentally, and making potentially traumatic content optional are all key trauma-informed best practices when dealing with potentially traumatic content. Just as a physics teacher should never expose a student whose parent may have died in a car accident to a detailed explanation of how a car crash can lead to death, a history teacher shouldn't make students whose parents or families may have experienced a colonial massacre sit through an account of one if they don't feel ready or strong enough bonds with a teacher or classroom to make that feel safe. Some other practices that may help students learn from and not merely be overwhelmed or shocked by traumatic content can also

include “assist[ing] students to move from the overwhelm of witnessing to focus on what to do with this information in more practical terms,” incorporating self-regulation exercises like breathing exercises and debriefing reactions, and “understanding the power of relationship as a vehicle to assist students to stabilise and regulate.”⁴⁹ Others also argue for the importance of carefully crafted, trauma-informed discussion questions that take into account power dynamics within the classroom.⁵⁰ Many of these best practices are broadly applicable to all types of education, and the emphasis on the “power of relationship” is a clear overlap with the scholars writing in the fields of affect studies and critical pedagogy.

My intervention

While scholars have begun to build up frameworks for determining what makes difficult history difficult and have begun enumerating various strategies for thinking about and navigating emotions when teaching it, they have yet to bring all these strategies together. Most research also focuses on higher education. To address these limitations, my project synthesizes these findings together. I also apply concepts from child development to the question of difficult history when formatting these guidelines and suggesting their appropriateness at the middle school level.

⁴⁹ Harrison, Burke, and Clarke, “STOLEN GENERATIONS.” 60

⁵⁰ Methot, “A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching the Colonization of the Americas.”

Conclusion

While the political debates will rage on, teaching difficult history remains a crucial way to expose more middle school students to a more complex, truer, and more just version of American history. Difficult history encourages students to connect the past to the present and come to their own conclusions about citizenship, belonging, and history. While leaning into the intimidating emotions difficult history can bring up can be challenging, this challenge is a healthy one that can bring about growth.

Most developmental psychologists would agree that middle schoolers are developmentally prepared to learn challenging concepts like difficult history. Cognitively, they're prepared to begin encountering complex topics. Emotionally, they're not as poorly adjusted as some fear they might be. Morally, they do have a sense of right and wrong that is at a critical stage of development and are unlikely to simply internalize stories of abuses as uncritically acceptable.

In terms of best practices, strong lessons on difficult history must rely on the solid foundation of a trusting classroom environment with a sense of solidarity, openness, and honesty amongst teachers and students. Students should use self-observation and reflection to think more deeply about how they engage with history. Teachers should encourage students to cultivate a more ambiguous sense of self, rather than relying on national pride as the sole motivator for learning history. Ideally, difficult history can allow students and teachers alike to interrogate their own beliefs and open up new possibilities. Yet, teachers inclined to teach difficult history may bring their own deeply held political beliefs to the table and must be open to meeting students where they are at rather than causing confrontation. Finally, using museums and other place-based practices can elevate difficult history lessons just as they can all kinds of history education – when used thoughtfully.

Yet, many directions for further potential research remain open. Potential lines of investigation could include questions of the popularity and extent of teaching of difficult history. Researchers could survey teachers to see how many of them consider themselves to teach difficult history, and how they feel about it. Studies could even look into this question across national borders. Reports suggest, for example, that Germany has taken a relatively proactive approach to incorporating Holocaust history into its history courses in public schools.⁵¹ Researchers could investigate how much these courses live up to frames of difficult history, and how that concept is considered in the German context.

Furthermore, this study has been largely limited to the contexts of academia and of higher education, while applying those best practices to middle school education. Research could dive more specifically into how these practices are being applied throughout K-12 education, perhaps by observing classes and interviewing teachers.

The developmental approach also raises questions of how much difficult history should or could be taught at the elementary and high school levels. Future studies could delve into how these frameworks can be developed earlier in appropriate ways, and how they can extend into complex and meaningful high school history courses. Finally, Deborah Britzman and James Garrett have already issued a call to further research how frameworks of difficult knowledge and difficult history can be implemented into teacher education programs, both to aid in preparing future teachers and as a framework for them to use in their own practice. This is also an area where further research could be potentially very useful.

⁵¹ Stephanie Wolf and Jess Clark, "A Critical Moment," (Louisville, Louisville Public Media: 2022, https://louisvillepublicmedia.org/acriticalmoment/?_ga=2.141633077.600036251.1646342569-1291978319.1643395353).

Middle school students are intelligent human beings learning to encounter the world in new and complicated ways. They deserve a history education that does not simply paint a too-rosy picture of an exceptional country, but one that grapples with the fundamental problems and failings of that country in an honest way that allows them to form their own opinions and perhaps, dream of a better world. Incorporating difficult history framings into more middle school classrooms is a promising way to do that.

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