



# Trust Me I Need Complexity: Disrupting simplified and sanitized social studies in elementary classrooms

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Jessica Ferreras-Stone

I am an Associate Professor of Education at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington on the Traditional Lands of the Lummi Nation and the Nooksack Tribe. As the daughter of Cuban refugees, I rarely if ever, learned about my community in schools. As a researcher, I now know many communities have been excluded in social studies education. For this reason, my ultimate goal is to aide both preservice and inservice teachers in honoring diversity in social studies education. My own professional development efforts have been focused on researching the buried stories of historically marginalized communities. In particular, I enjoy learning these stories through oral story telling traditions such as podcasts, and webinars. Outside of my professional pursuits my family and I enjoy hiking, mountain biking and playing outdoors.



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## INTRODUCTION

Let's be honest, the way we teach social studies is boring. Research repeatedly documents students having negative attitudes toward social studies ([Haladyna & Thomas, 1979](#); [Schug, 1984](#); [Zhao & Hoge, 2005](#)). Yet, interest in historical content is evident based on the amount of time spent reading historical novels and watching movies with historical content. I believe students find our teaching of sanitized social studies boring, while simultaneously enjoying the content in other formats.

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To help elementary social studies teachers disrupt sanitized versions of social studies, I urge that we start trusting our students to grapple with complex narratives. First, I demonstrate the prolific existence of sanitized stories in social studies textbooks. Next, I provide a rationale for and descriptions of complex narratives. Lastly, a ‘Complex Questioning Framework’ is presented to help educators identify sanitized social studies in order to add the necessary complexities.

## SANITIZED STORIES IN TEXTBOOKS

Most elementary social studies lack complex narratives. This is partly due to the overreliance on textbooks containing sanitized versions of past stories. Russell (2012) points out the dominant role of textbooks, reporting that only 40% of social studies teachers assign reading material other than the textbook. Another study found that 75 to 90 percent of social studies instruction is based on the textbook (Wade, 2002). This overreliance on the textbook is problematic because textbooks lack complexity. Social Studies textbooks have often been critiqued for oversimplifying historical events with sanitized versions of the past (Calderón, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Loewen, 2008; Peterson, 2008). Elementary social studies tend to smooth over conflict (Cowhey, 2006; Peterson, 2008). In other words, social studies curricula is problematic because it contains lies, by omission or otherwise, that we as educators should not perpetuate (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Loewen, 2008).

Examples of sanitized stories that downplay conflict and lack complexity are plentiful. Calderón (2014), describes the sanitized version of history associated with ‘Manifest Destiny.’ Her work details how although textbooks “treat settler expansion into the western territories of the USA as a dark time in its history, they nevertheless promote narratives that present this clash between settlers and tribes, and the displacement of tribes by settlers as inevitable, to give way to the superior Western civilization of settlers” (p. 31). Consequently, elementary students learning from these textbooks do not explore the complex conflicts, resistance and genocide associated with Manifest Destiny.

Similarly, Loewen (2008) explains how textbooks oversimplify heroes by describing them as one-dimensional. He specifies how the story of Hellen Keller has been reduced to a girl who was deaf and blind who learned to read, write and talk. This is undoubtedly a noteworthy accomplishment. Yet, this sanitized story does not describe how she used her voice to take informed action. A more complex and accurate retelling of her story describes her as a college graduate, an activist for women’s suffrage and socialism, and a co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

An avoidance of the term race has also sanitized social studies curricula. Peterson (2008) explains that stories of racism and inequality are missing, thus leaving little to no reason to retell the resistance to these forms of oppression. Likewise, Ladson-Billings (2003) explains that most social studies textbooks avoid the term race. Yet, she contends that “social studies can serve as a curricular home for unlearning the racism that has confounded us as a nation” (p. 8). Furthermore, she asks that we deliberately include race talks in social studies instruction rather than “pretend that we live in a society and world where social justice



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and equity prevail” (p. 10).

Textbooks avoid the term race while simultaneously omitting ethnic groups of color. Many studies report a monolithic retelling of American history that focuses on Eurocentric narratives (Monforti & Mcglynn, 2010; Shear et al., 2015; Suh et al., 2014). This omission is problematic because it neglects to tell the injustices faced by BIPOC (Black Indigenous and People of Color) individuals and the significant contributions they have made to our society. Ladson-Billings (2003, p.4) describes this omission as a “discourse of invisibility” within the social studies curriculum that has led to oppressive experiences for students from historically marginalized communities. Social studies is where students learn about the past to make informed decisions as active participants in their communities (NCSS, 2017). Yet, learning from a curriculum that prioritizes Eurocentric perspectives suggests only the contributions from some -not all students- are welcomed (Ferreras-Stone, 2020). This problematic trend must end.

## COMPLEX SOCIAL STUDIES

We must start trusting students with complexities. Complex social studies disrupt sanitized social studies by: (1) addressing race and racism, (2) presenting multiple and sometimes conflicting viewpoints, and (3) including past and present stories of historically marginalized communities. Social studies taught through a lens of complexity meets the description of elementary social studies set forth by The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). NCSS (2017) describes powerful and purposeful elementary social studies as one that “owes children opportunities to explore the variety and complexity of human experiences through dynamic and meaningful education” (para. 6). Moreover, NCSS (2013) calls for elementary social studies to present multiple and conflicting viewpoints for students to evaluate and form evidence-based claims. For this reason, we must supplement the sanitized stories found in textbooks with the buried stories of historically marginalized communities.

Furthermore, complexity within elementary social studies is needed because “the purpose of elementary school social studies is to enable students to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world” (NCSS, 2017, para. 7). Their world is an increasingly diverse place, where individuals with differing viewpoints experience conflict. At its core, social studies should be where students learn how to make informed decisions that attend to multiple perspectives in order to honor human diversity.

## TEACHING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Introducing multiple perspectives to young learners can be done through picture books such as *Duck and Rabbit* (Krouse Rosenthal & Lichtenheld, 2009). In this book, two unseen characters debate the identity of the image as either a duck or a rabbit, the unseen characters then present evidence to support their reasoning. For example, a carrot is placed near the image aiding the reader in seeing a rabbit. Conversely, bread placed at just the right angle



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aids the reader in seeing the same image as a duck. Introducing multiple perspectives in this manner allows the reader to see how others view the same image in ways that are different from their own and invites conversation about evaluating resources and using evidence, both of which are stated goals of social studies (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Two additional books to present and discuss the existence of multiple perspectives are *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1996) and *They All Saw A Cat* (Wenzel, 2016).

After understanding that multiple and conflicting viewpoints provide a more complete picture, students can begin examining content from an age-appropriate complex lens. For example, a sanitized retelling of the women's suffrage movement would describe the work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, along with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment. Yet, a more complex narrative would include the often-untold stories of Black suffragists such as Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell. Complex social studies attending to racism would also describe the intersectionality of oppression faced by Black suffragists, whereby Black men wanted their support to fight racial discrimination, and white women wanted their support for gender equality (Ferreras-Stone, 2020). Most importantly, with repeated exposure to complex narratives, students can learn to notice when a voice is missing or has been silenced. For this reason, teachers should always encourage young learners to ponder who is telling the story and who else could tell the story.

## COMPLEX QUESTIONING FRAMEWORK

Admittedly, seeing history as sanitized when the master narrative has dominated textbooks for so long can be challenging. Nevertheless, change is needed. Providing students with complexities demonstrates that we trust them as critical thinkers that can grapple with and attend to the diverse perspectives. Furthermore, trusting them with complexities allows them to evaluate the decisions from the past and gain confidence decision-makers (Engle, 2015).

Complex narratives provide BIPOC students with the representation they need and deserve while concurrently providing all students with examples of how BIPOC individuals have and can continue contributing to our society. Perhaps when students are presented with conflicts and complexity, they will find our teaching of social studies more enjoyable or, at the very least, less boring. Table 1 presents a 'Complex Questioning Framework' I developed to help teachers intentionally disrupt the sanitized social studies to include complexity that recounts the untold stories of historically marginalized communities.

To implement the 'Complex Questioning Framework,' educators must supplement the sanitized stories found in social studies curricula to include the omitted perspectives of historically marginalized communities. The supplemented resources can take many formats, such as primary source documents, oral stories, images, and picture books to name a few.

To honor human diversity, we must disrupt the sanitized stories often found in the social studies curriculum with rich complexities. Doing so teaches all learners how to be critical thinkers who evaluate multiple perspectives when making decisions. Perhaps most impor-



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Table 1 Complex Questioning Framework	
Question	Rationale for Question
How has this story been oversimplified?	Analyze the text in order to notice sanitized narratives and intentionally seek more accurate presentations of historical events.
What complex, controversial, or conflicting viewpoints can students examine?	Identify content and determine how the students will examine (and not just learn about) complex, controversial, and conflicting viewpoints.
Who is telling the story?	Note the Eurocentric narratives that dominate textbooks.
Who might tell the story differently?	Disrupt the Eurocentric pattern by allowing students to explore the untold stories from historically marginalized communities.
How will intersectionality be addressed?	Seek understanding of people’s multiple identities and how they interact to create complex individuals.
How will students evaluate the decisions made?	Guide elementary students to examine the decisions made by historical figures as well as the implications of those decisions.
How will I encourage students to make connections to present day?	Make the information relevant to students’ lives will increase. This will increase student engagement as and allow students to apply what they learn to life outside of the classroom.

tantly, complex social studies will aid students in noticing and speaking up when they see monolithic patterns in society, thus encouraging them to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions in our diverse world. I wonder how many students receiving sanitized social studies are crying out, ‘trust me, I need complexity’.

## Q & A WITH JESSICA FERRERAS-STONE:

### Question #1:

#### *Teacher’s Question:*

Do you have suggestions for educators on how to approach this important work given the current climate of states “banning” critical race theory?

#### *Jessica Ferreras-Stone’s Response:*

My first recommendation for teachers working in states that are “banning” Critical Race Theory (CRT) is to begin with a clear understanding of what CRT is and what it is not. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021, August 21), a founding scholar of CRT, recently stated:

My particular interest is in Critical Race Theory in education. Not to teach teachers about it. I don’t expect teachers to do this work. I don’t expect teachers to do anything around Critical Race Theory in grades kindergarten through twelve. In fact, I don’t actually introduce the notion of Critical Race Theory to undergraduates. They have no use for it. The theory is important at the graduate level. It is important for analyzing and making sense of social phenomenon (6:14-6:48).

Ladson-Billings reminds us that CRT is a theoretical framework used in educational research to understand the systems that have led to and perpetuated racial inequities. This definition and explanation of CRT’s intended use is essential because banning CRT is not

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the same as banning the inclusion of accurate history detailing the racial discrimination individuals have endured. In other words, because I understand CRT as the theoretical framework used in research, I contend that CRT bans have no impact on my ability to teach accurate and complex history that includes the racial discrimination too many have endured. Yet, this CRT clarification does not address states banning ‘divisive’ topics. In those instances, I would ask ‘divisive to who’? I, along with many others from historically marginalized communities, find the current curriculum divisive in its exclusion of important and truthful narratives.

Given the current political climate, it is normal and expected that many teachers are nervous about including complex narratives in their social studies instruction. My recommendation to those teachers is to ensure they have a firm understanding of the components of high-quality social studies. For instance, many teachers will find the four dimensions outlined in the C3 inquiry arc developed by the National Council for the Social Studies to be extremely helpful (2013). Understanding the dimensions of the inquiry arc can guide teachers in planning high-quality instruction while providing a strong rationale for their instructional decisions. For example, some in favor of these bans may support the inclusion of civil rights area content but not a discussion of how that content is applied in present times. Yet, teachers with a firm understanding of the inquiry arc will be able to support their instructional decisions by stating that the application of knowledge is rooted in dimension four of the inquiry arc entitled ‘Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action’ (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, pg. 59). I believe rooting one’s instructional decisions in national frameworks specific to social studies demonstrates our expertise and knowledge as educators, therefore providing a strong rationale for our instructional decisions.

Throughout my career, I have noted that teachers who enhance textbook curricula with a more complex and accurate narrative will have their instructional decisions questioned at a higher rate than teachers who strictly teach from the textbook. I simultaneously firmly believe that teachers who supplement the textbook consistently deliver instruction that is of much higher quality. Yet, knowing that this high-quality instruction will be questioned, teachers must be prepared to explain how and why this instruction meets the rigorous demands of social studies that strict adherence to the textbook does not. Therefore, my recommendation is to be prepared to provide a strong rationale for each of your instructional decisions and how it is linked to descriptors of high-quality social studies as defined by national organizations specialized in social studies education.

## **Question # 2:**

### ***Teacher’s Question:***

Your examples of how to introduce young students to multiple perspectives using children’s literature is helpful. What advice do you have for how teachers could approach the complexity or race in age-appropriate ways with early elementary students?



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***Jessica Ferreras-Stone's Response:***

I would recommend two things. First, I would emphasize the importance of preparing and perhaps even over-preparing for lessons with complex narratives. Given that too often complex topics, such as race, are not addressed teachers, will want to write detailed lesson plans that will assist them in delivering high-quality instruction. More specifically, I would advise teachers to consider what comments or questions they can envision their students asking during the lesson and brainstorm how they might respond to a question or redirect a comment to ensure it does not derail the lesson.

Secondly, I would advise talking to colleagues who have engaged in complex classroom discussions and learning from their experiences. The more we hear and learn from each other, the less alone we feel engaging in this important work. Recognizing that many teachers find themselves alone in this work, reading about early elementary teachers' experiences with these complexities is also helpful. For example, "Who said we're too Young to Talk About Race: First Graders and Their Teacher Investigate Racial Justice Through Counterstories" describes one teacher's experience stating:

I was concerned about showing the image of a black man being auctioned because it makes me uncomfortable to even look at the illustration. My students, though, demanded more of me. I was surprised at how important this image of the black man being sold was to Malcolm. His interests did not surprise me, but the way that he related back to the image repeatedly did. I had perhaps underestimated my student by expecting a primarily emotional response, but his emotional connection to the image allowed him to make strong academic connections and build his understanding of both the underground Railroad and the civil rights movement. This experience made me think that I do not know what will spark interests and inspire strong connections for my students. So, part of my job is exposing them to both the comfortable and the uncomfortable to allow them space and opportunity to make such connections (Holmes et al., 2018, p. 140).

A book full of lessons, anecdotes, and student work samples related to complex social studies with early learners is Mary Cowhey's (2006) book entitled *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades*. One excerpt that demonstrates the authors' commitment and experience in this work states:

I want to teach my students history as a contextualized story. I want them to learn a story with rough texture, complete with flaws and conflicts and complexities, not slick, sealed, sanitized versions. I want to share my passion for history and my experience as an organizer for social justice with six, seven, and eight-year olds in a way that is meaningful, challenging, and developmentally appropriate. I hope to teach them to become educated consumers of history and current events, who consider the perspective of the author and the authenticity of the documents referenced. I want them to become confident critical thinkers, eager to dive below the surface to find deeper meanings and connections. I want them to grow as people who not only can recognize injustice but are willing and able to take an effective principled stand for justice (pg. 122).



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Mindful that many are nervously taking either their first step while others are taking a deeper dive into complex social studies, I encourage everyone to find resources such as these that provide insights and guidance.

### **Question # 3:**

#### ***Teacher's Question:***

Your framework raises important questions for teacher to use to evaluate texts. Where might teachers find resources to supplement sanitized texts?

#### ***Jessica Ferreras-Stone's Response:***

One favorite supplemental resource is high-quality children's literature. School and public librarians alike are extremely knowledgeable in this space. For this reason, I encourage teachers to work closely with these librarians when seeking supplemental texts. Another strategy for finding high-quality children's literature is reviewing award-winning books. For example, the Pura Belpre Award is presented each year to a Latinx writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latinx experience. Other awards can be found on the American Library Association website. Lastly, two websites I frequently use to find high-quality supplemental children's literature are 1) Social Justice Books - <https://socialjusticebooks.org/> and 2) Diverse Book Finder - <https://diversebookfinder.org/>. Both websites provide search engines allowing you to use specific terms related to the content you seek to expand.

Although children's literature is an outstanding resource that most elementary teachers regularly use in their classrooms, I also want to point out that sanitized texts can be enhanced with other resources. Two additional formats I enjoy using are political cartoons and movie clips. Although I do not have a specific website I use to locate political cartoons, I have often found that a google search with key terms specific to the unit along with the word 'political cartoon' often yield good results. For teachers wishing to use film clips, I recommend using the book series Hollywood or History, which provides ready-to-go lessons with preselected film clips. The Hollywood or History questioning format promotes critical thinking and analysis that invites students to engage in complex understanding that extends beyond what is presented in most textbooks.

### **Question # 4:**

#### ***Teacher's Question:***

What differences have you witnessed in students' interest and engagement when they are exposed to more complex and inclusive narratives?

#### ***Jessica Ferreras-Stone's Response:***

Initially, students may be apprehensive when presented with complex narratives. After years of sanitized social studies that relies on a Eurocentric narrative, students will need to be





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taught how to analyze multiple (and sometimes conflicting) narratives. Therefore, teachers must be prepared to teach both the content and the skill. In much the same way that students may initially struggle when calculating long division, they may struggle when faced with a complex narrative that necessitates critical thinking. As math educators, we understand that students need adequate supports and repeated exposure to master long division. Similarly, as social studies educators, we should expect that students will need adequate supports and repeated exposure to complex narratives. When educators of young learners are committed to 1) teaching the complex content, 2) teaching the skill of critical thinking in social studies, and 3) repeated exposure to both the skill and the content, I have seen student engagement increase dramatically. In fact, when these three interlocking components receive adequate attention, I've seen students ask for more social studies while simultaneously considering how they can become active contributors in their communities.

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