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Fifth-Grade Inquiry into a Convergence of U.S. Imperialism, Racism, and War: A World War II Lesson

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Abstract

This article describes a 5th-grade inquiry lesson in which an elementary school teacher engaged her students to examine what happened in the Philippines during WWII and why. Doing so, the article illustrates the possibility of teaching war from a critical lens in an elementary classroom.

Keywords: Teaching about war, elementary education, inquiry lesson, history education

Did Japan attack the Philippines too?

Was the Philippines U.S. land? How come?

If the Philippines was U.S. land and attacked, why did FDR cross out Philippines [in the Infamy Speech draft]?

Why did FDR focus on Europe when U.S. lands in the Pacific were attacked?

Fifth graders in Ms. Lee's class were busy analyzing and sensemaking of primary sources on World War II (WWII) in the Philippines (see Appendix A). They were puzzled and intrigued by what happened in the Philippines during the war. The topics they focused on included the following: The Philippines was a U.S. territory from 1898 to 1946 (see primary source 1 in Appendix A). When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, it also attacked other U.S. territories in the Pacific including the Philippines (see primary source 2 in Appendix A). Yet in his "Infamy Speech" delivered to Congress, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) primarily focused on the Pearl Harbor attack (see primary source 3 in Appendix A). Despite that fact that Filipinos were U.S. nationals and fell under Japan's control, FDR's administration opted to focus on the European theater first (see primary source 4 in Appendix A). This contributed to four years of brutal occupation of the Philippines by Japan (see primary source 5 in Appendix A) as well as the countless deaths of U.S. soldiers and Filipinos in the process of "liberating" the Philippines (see primary sources 6, 7 in Appendix A).

Analyzing the primary sources on this history, fifth graders in Ms. Lee's classroom faced critical questions: How could the United States, a country born out of anti-colonial revolution against Great Britain, possess colonies of its own? How did racism shape U.S. response to Japan's invasion of the Philippines? U.S. war with Japan, fought in the Philippines during WWII, showcases a convergence of U.S. imperialism, racism, and war, revealing race has shaped lives

not only in the U.S. mainland but also in U.S. territories overseas and determined who were counted as “Americans” worth protecting and who were not (Hunt & Levine, 2012; Immerwahr, 2020; Kramer, 2006).

In Georgia where Ms. Lee teaches, this event is not included in the official curriculum. The state standards expect fifth-grade students to study WWII with a focus on Germany’s aggression in Europe, Japan’s aggression in Asia, the Holocaust, the Pearl Harbor attack, and the U.S. role to end the war (Georgia Department of Education [GA DOE], 2017). This curriculum depicts the United States exclusively as a benevolent savior of peoples suffering under the empire-building of Germany and Japan. Doing so, it entrenches a dominant national narrative of the United States as a beacon of anti-imperialism and promotes a myopic understanding of U.S. history, such as the one former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (2003) adopted in his response to a journalist’s question regarding the U.S. invasion of Iraq:

[The United States] is not a colonial power. We have never been a colonial power. We don’t take our force and go around the world and try to take other people’s real estate and other people’s resources, their oil. That’s just not what the United States does. We never have and we never will. That’s not how democracies behave.

A perspective on U.S. history like this is dishonest about historic and current U.S. actions in the world, which includes conquering Indigenous peoples’ lands and Mexico’s territories; conquering islands in the Pacific and Caribbean; backing pro-United States dictators and oppressive regimes in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America; waging multiple wars and inciting coups there; and occupying almost 800 military bases around the world today (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Hunt & Levine, 2012; Vine, 2020a).

As a former teacher and current teacher educator, I maintain that students need an honest, critical understanding of U.S. history to make informed decisions on government actions and to bring peace, not violence, to the world. Especially in the continued war that the United States has waged in since 2001, students need a fuller story than what is offered by mainstream media, official government sources, and official curriculum to contemplate alternatives to war (Gibbs, 2021; Noddings, 2012; Vine, 2020b). With this belief, I collaborated with Ms. Grace Lee, an elementary school teacher in Georgia, to develop and teach a lesson on WWII in the Philippines as a part of a fifth-grade unit. In this paper, I describe how Ms. Lee engaged her students in the lesson and how the fifth graders made sense of U.S. imperialism and racism entangled with WWII in the Philippines. Doing so, the goal of the paper is to illustrate the possibility of teaching war and history from a critical lens in an elementary classroom. Before proceeding, I first present historical background of the war and situate the lesson within the literature on teaching about war.

Historical Background

History of U.S. Territories and Imperialism

Many U.S. mainlanders know little about U.S. territories, the land over which the United States claims sovereignty as part of the country. When thinking about the United States, most people would picture a map that has 48 states in the mainland along with Hawaii and Alaska. In this mental map, Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the North Mariana Island—today's five inhabited U.S. territories—are rarely included. Few would also know that the United States held jurisdiction over more people overseas (135 million) than on the mainland (132 million) during the 1940s when the Philippines, Hawaii, and Alaska were U.S. territories (Immerwahr, 2020).

The history of U.S. territories in fact goes back to the beginning of the United States (Alessio & Renfro, 2016; Immerwahr, 2020). When the Treaty of Paris was ratified to grant the United States independence, Virginia ceded its claims over the area north of the Ohio River to the federal government. With that, the United States was no longer a union of states alone but an amalgam of states and territories, which it has been ever since (Immerwahr, 2016). Through wars, conquests, treaties, and purchases, the United States took over more territories, finishing territorial conquest within North America by the 1850s (Alessio & Renfro, 2016).

Eventually, these territories became states and were admitted into the Union. However, the passage to statehood was not same for all territories, and often white supremacy was at the core of the process (Delay, 2015). For example, California transitioned from military rule to statehood in 2 years because it quickly filled with whites. In contrast, Oklahoma languished as a territory for 104 years because it had few whites within the territory. Only after thousands of whites poured into the territory was it admitted as a state in 1907 (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

U.S. territorial conquest did not stop when it completed the border within the mainland (Hunt & Levine, 2012). Even well before all the continental territories became states, the United States was active overseas, claiming more territories such as *guano* islands, that is, uninhabited islands possessing valuable fertilizer (Skaggs, 1994). Through the Spanish-American War, the United States further occupied the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam (Alessio & Renfro, 2016). These overseas colonies were under U.S. control until the end of WWII.

In the post-WWII context when the decolonization movement swept the world, the United States felt pressure to let its colonies go because presenting itself as the world's triumphant democracy while holding onto its colonies would be hypocritical (Immerwahr, 2020). Hence, in 1946 the United States granted the Philippines independence. In 1952 it granted Puerto Rico a status of commonwealth. In 1959, it made Alaska and Hawaii states. Today, the United States still has five inhabited territories, and 4 million people live in them.

In short, the United States has held territories throughout its history through imperialist actions (Immerwahr, 2020). Defined as powers over peoples and, often, occupation of their lands outside the borders of a nation-state, imperialism has a long history in the United States (Immerwahr, 2020; Kramer, 2011; Okihiro, 2017). Yet official curriculum tends to present U.S.

imperialism and territories as a short-lived aberration existing only around the time of the Spanish-American War (Loewen, 2009). Doing so, the curriculum silences history in which people in U.S. territories have often been treated as inferior or unworthy of protection due to their non-whiteness (Kramer, 2006). Few mainlanders would know of inhumane medical trials carried out on people in U.S. territories or the use of territories for U.S. nuclear test, which uprooted people's lives there (Immerwahr, 2020).

History of the Philippines as a U.S. Territory

Curricular silence on WWII in the Philippines is not surprising given the general curricular silence on U.S. imperialism and territories. In school, students may hear about the Philippines during the study of the Spanish-American War, but that's mostly it. Many would not learn what happened next to the Philippines and other newly acquired territories in the aftermath of the war.

Despite nearly dropping out of U.S. collective memory, the Philippines was a U.S. colony for more than 40 years, from 1898, when the United States took it over after the Spanish-American War, until 1946, when the United States finally set it free. Prior to becoming a U.S. colony, the Philippines was a Spanish colony for 400 years (Francia, 2013). When the United States came to the Philippines during its war with Spain, Filipinos were already fighting an anti-colonial revolution against Spain. Filipino revolutionaries believed the United States was their ally and helped the United States win the Spanish-American War. In the middle of the war, Filipino General Emilio Aguinaldo proclaimed Philippine independence and announced the establishment of the First Philippine Republic. However, both the United States and Spain ignored this proclamation. Instead, Spain surrendered to the United States and sold the Philippines along with Guam and Puerto Rico to the United States (Francia, 2013; Go & Foster, 2003).

Taking over the Philippines as a colony was controversial in the U.S. mainland. Imperialists advocated annexation to spread U.S. power across the Pacific. They further viewed Filipinos as unfit for self-rule, arguing the United States had a moral duty to take over and civilize them (Kramer, 2006; Rusling, 1903). Anti-Imperialists opposed annexation by arguing that governing a foreign people without their consent would violate the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. Some anti-Imperialists further opposed annexation because they didn't want Filipinos, a primitive race in their eyes, to become a part of the United States (Kramer, 2006).

The debate ended with an Imperialist victory, and the United States began installing a new colonial regime in the Philippines. Filipinos resisted, and the War of Philippine Independence began in 1899. Despite commonly being called the "Philippine-American War" in the United States, this war was, for Filipinos, a war of independence. It was their continued fight for sovereignty against foreign empires, first with Spain and then with the United States. The war (1899–1902) was brutal, involving mass killing, torture, and the burning of villages because many U.S. military leaders dehumanized Filipinos as barbaric savages (Kramer, 2006). After winning the war, the United States ruled the Philippines until 1946 (Karnow, 1989).

WWII in the Philippines

So, when Japan attacked the Philippines in 1941, Japan did not attack a sovereign country; it attacked a U.S. territory. In contrast to the popular memory of Pearl Harbor, Japan attacked not only Pearl Harbor but also most U.S. territories in the Pacific. Moreover, the attack on Pearl Harbor was only an attack, and the Japanese never came back. Yet the Philippines and other U.S. territories such as Guam and Wake Island were invaded and occupied by Japan (Immerwahr, 2020).

FDR, however, focused on Hawaii when he delivered the Infamy Speech to Congress. In fact, the night before the speech, he made several revisions, crossing out prominent references to the Philippines and Guam. One possible explanation is that FDR knew that the Philippines and Guam, although technically part of the United States, were foreign to U.S. mainlanders (Immerwahr, 2020). In contrast, Hawaii was more plausibly “American” with more white population. To rally the nation to war, FDR might have highlighted Hawaii while taking the Philippines and Guam out from prominent references of his speech (Immerwahr, 2020).

Despite the Philippines and other U.S. territories in the Pacific were attacked, FDR chose the Europe First strategy, which prioritized U.S. military resources to win the war against Germany before the war against Japan. This contributed to Japan’s quick occupation of the Philippines, which lasted almost 4 years. In the Bataan Death March, thousands of U.S. and Filipino troops died on the way to prison camps and during their incarceration under Japanese occupation (Immerwahr, 2020).

The U.S. Army finally returned to retake the Philippines from Japan in 1944. The U.S. reconquest was extraordinarily violent, bombing and shelling suspected Japanese targets from afar instead of fighting on the ground. The aim was to protect the lives of U.S. soldiers, but the cost was borne by Filipinos. About 1 million Filipinos lost their lives (Jose, 2006; Seekins, 1991). After Japan surrendered, the United States finally granted independence to the Philippines on July 4, 1946. The U.S. flag came down, and the Philippine flag went up over the capital city Manila on that day.

Why Teach WWII in the Philippines?

Teaching about what happened in the Philippines during WWII and its historical context can debunk American exceptionalism, a national myth that the United States is uniquely virtuous among other great powers because, as a republic born out of anti-colonial revolution, it must be inherently against imperialism and wage war only when evildoers leave no other option. Despite sounding comforting and familiar, this myth hides not-so-glorious parts of U.S. actions in the world.

For example, U.S. conquest of Indigenous peoples’ land is outright settler colonialism (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Taking over a third of Mexico in the 1840s is also far from anti-colonial (Zinn, 2011). Supporting oppressive regimes and pro-U.S. dictators instead of grassroots leaders in many countries in Asia and Latin America is also not what an anti-imperialist country would

do (Immerwahr, 2020). Moreover, many U.S. wars were intricately linked to the issues of money and power, largely serving the economic and political interests of elites while leaving countless people at home and abroad, including children, dead, wounded, displaced, or devastated with trauma and pain (Vine, 2020a).

Breaking curricular silence on WWII in the Philippines is a part of honest, critical teaching of U.S. history (Gibbs, 2021; Zinn, 2007). Teaching this event can engage students with important questions in U.S. history, such as these: Can a democracy rule another people? What does it mean for the United States, a former colony of Great Britain, to possess colonies of its own? For what reasons has the United States intervened in the affairs of others? How has race and white supremacy shaped U.S. actions in the world? What role should the United States play in the world? Inquiry and discussion on these questions would better equip students with critical civic literacy and agency to bring peace, not violence, to the world (Gibbs, 2021; Vine, 2020a; Zinn, 2007).

Fifth-grade Inquiry into WWII in the Philippines

Lesson Design and Context

Ms. Lee and I designed a 90-minute inquiry lesson on WWII in the Philippines as a part of fifth-grade unit on WWII. The compelling question for the inquiry was: What happened to the Philippines during WWII and why? The learning goal was for students to analyze primary sources about the war and infer the cause, execution, and effect of the war. Doing so, the lesson was aligned with Dimension 2 of the C3 Framework (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013), including D2. His.10.3-5: compare information provided by different historical sources about the past; D2. His.14.3-5: explain probable causes and effects of events and developments; and D2. His.16.3-5: use evidence to develop a claim about the past. The primary sources chosen for the lesson were to challenge the comforting narrative of American exceptionalism, thus possibly creating feelings of discomfort in students (Garrett, 2017; Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Zembylas, 2014). Therefore, we used a whole-group guided inquiry with multiple spaces where students could share their emotional and cognitive reaction to the lesson.

Students were diverse, including five African American, six Asian, four Latinx, and nine white students who were ages 10 and 11 and came from varied socioeconomic statuses and migration histories. Ms. Lee is an Asian American teacher with 6 years of teaching experience and master's degree in education. I am an Asian American teacher educator and have regularly collaborated with Ms. Lee for critical social studies education.

Student Engagement with the Lesson

The lesson was taught after students learned about German aggression in Europe, Japanese aggression in Asia, and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in previous days. Ms. Lee was a primary instructor, and I was a guest teacher assisting the teacher and students. A packet of primary sources and a source analysis sheet was given to each student before the lesson (see Appendix B). All names are pseudonyms to protect privacy.

First round of inquiry: What happened on December 7, 1941?

Ms. Lee began the whole-group guided inquiry by asking students to individually analyze two sources: 1) A newspaper headline, “Japs Bomb US Islands; Naval Bases at Hawaii, Manila Attacked” (see Figure 1); and 2) Eleanor Roosevelt’s remarks on Japan’s attack in her weekly radio program the night before FDR’s Infamy Speech to Congress. After students recorded their analysis on the sheet, Ms. Lee invited students to share their thoughts, feelings, and questions.

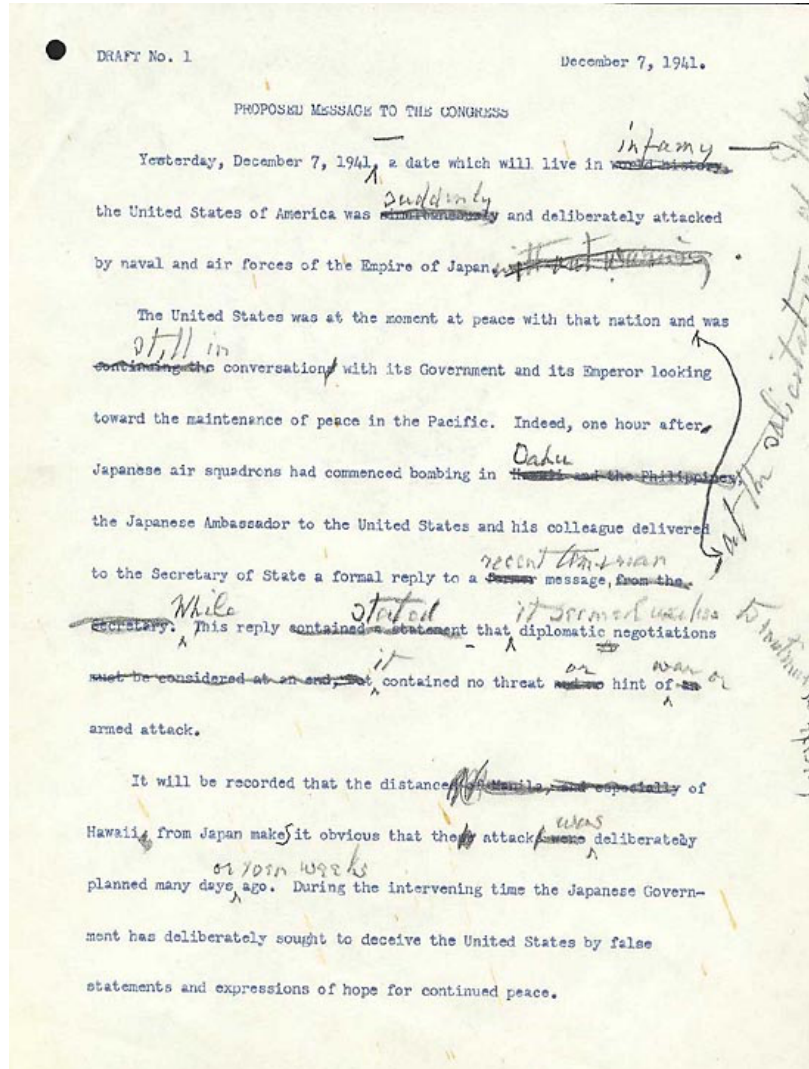
Figure 1

Japan’s attack on the U.S.



Ariel started, “Japan attacked Philippines too!” Bella added, “Yeah, but the video clips we watched yesterday [BrainPOP and FDR Infamy Speech] didn’t say about this!” Caleb agreed, “It was only about the Pearl Harbor, I think.” Cali asked, “Was Philippines U.S. land? How come?” Ms. Lee explained, “Do you all remember Spanish-American War that you learned earlier this year? Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam became U.S. colonies after the war, right?” While nodding, Cali pointed out, “Then, why didn’t the video clips say about Philippines?” Ms. Lee commended Cali’s question and guided students to look at the next primary source, which was FDR’s Infamy Speech draft (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
FDR's Infamy Speech Draft



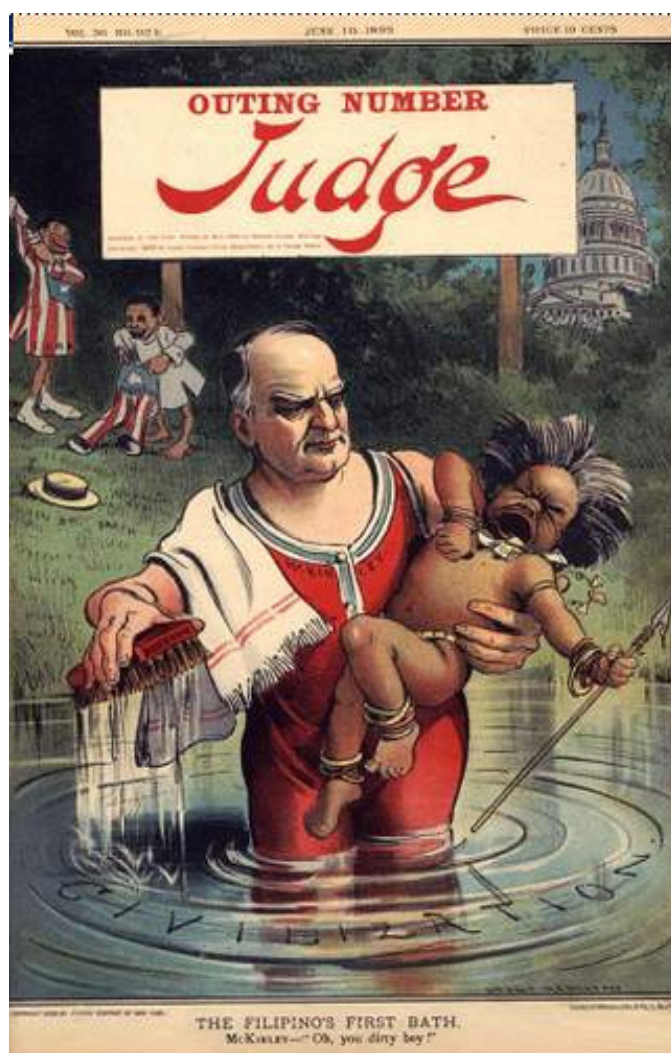
While analyzing the speech draft, students began to think out loud: “FDR deleted it [Philippines]!” “He did! But why?” Many seemed puzzled and intrigued. After a short silence, Gabi speculated, “Maybe the attack wasn’t that bad?” Harper extended, “Maybe Philippines wasn’t that much important?” Isaac added, “Or maybe he wanted to hide America had colonies?” Jackie built on, “That makes sense! Talking about Philippines would make us look bad!” Commending students’ insights, Ms. Lee stated that FDR never explained about his revision, and so historians can only infer based on available sources “like you all did wonderfully!”

Second round of inquiry: How did Philippines become U.S. colony?

The second round of inquiry focused on the historical origin of the Philippines as a U.S. colony. Ms. Lee asked students to first individually analyze two sources: 1) William McKinley's interview on his decision to annex the Philippines; and 2) a magazine cover titled "The Filipino's First Bath" in which McKinley is bathing a Filipino and saying, "Oh, you dirty boy!" (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

"The Filipino's First Bath"



Recording their analysis on the sheet, students started commenting, "This is racist!" "This is bad!" Katie elaborated, "So, he [President McKinley] is basically saying Americans are better than Filipinos, so America needs to teach them how to run the country? This is racist!" Jacob added, "The magazine cover too!" Acknowledging student analysis, Ms. Lee explained the

discourse of benevolent assimilation behind U.S. annexation of Philippines. She then provided a brief overview of timeline on the Philippines as a U.S. colony before students headed out for lunch.

Third round of inquiry: What happened to the Philippines during WWII?

After lunch, Ms. Lee led the next round of inquiry. Using a PowerPoint photo slideshow, she guided students to analyze first a set of photos depicting the Bataan Death March. Students reacted: “It’s sad!” “I feel bad for our solders and Filipinos!” The next photo showed the U.S. bombing of Manila (see Figure 4). Paris stated, “The girl in the bombed city, I can’t imagine how scared she was!” Penelope asked, “Did America really have to bomb the city?” The last photo set showed the United States granting independence to the Philippines in 1946. Seeing a photo in which the U.S. flag was coming down and the Philippines flag was going up, students exclaimed, “Yay.” “Finally.”

Figure 4

Aftermath of the U.S. Bombing of Manila



Whole-group discussion

It was time for whole-group discussion. Ms. Lee first asked students to share new knowledge they generated from the lesson. Students stated: “Japan attacked Philippines”; “Philippines was an American colony”; “Racism was bad”; “FDR chose Europe first”; “Many

innocent people died.” Next, she asked students how the new knowledge made them feel and why. Students articulated: “I was surprised because I didn’t know we had colonies”; “It was sad to see many people died”; “It was disappointing to see our government didn’t protect our soldiers!” Last, Ms. Lee encouraged students to share questions they generated from the lesson. Students wondered: Why did FDR delete Philippines in the draft? Did FDR want to hide America had colonies? Why did FDR help Europe first? How did Filipinos feel about the war? How did our solders feel about the war?

There wasn’t much time left to address all student questions fully. Ms. Lee promised to come back to the questions in future lessons while commending students’ deep engagement with the lesson. She also reminded the students to continue to use a critical lens to study how the United States has engaged with the world in their upcoming units on Cold War and post-9/11 wars.

Student Learning

Sitting down for a lesson debrief, Ms. Lee and I agreed that although the 90-minute lesson was too short to address students’ questions, insights, and feelings fully, it did create a space where students could critically read and question U.S. imperialism and racism entangled with the war. We also agreed on students’ openness to difficult knowledge. Literature suggests that when confronting disruptive knowledge, the learner may resist difficult knowledge to stay within their cherished world views (Miles, 2019; Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Zembylas, 2014). The fifth graders were, however, in general, open to the cognitive and emotional challenge. Although feeling puzzled, confused, sad, or disappointed, they continued to engage with new knowledge on racism and imperialism entangled with the war. In making sense of student engagement, we posit that fifth graders may not have developed attachment to their previous knowledge to the extent that they would reject new disruptive knowledge quickly. This means then elementary classrooms can and should be places where students engage with critical study of history, not a place where they are sheltered from it.

Meanwhile, given the time constraint, we could not incorporate C3 Framework’s Dimension 4: Taking Informed Action (NCSS, 2013) to the lesson. In future lessons, Ms. Lee plans to guide her students to act on new understanding from the lesson by writing a letter as a class to BrainPOP. In the letter, students will make a persuasive argument on why and how to make change in the current BrainPOP video clip on the Pearl Harbor attack.

Concluding Remarks

Fifth graders in Ms. Lee’s class taught us that elementary students are ready and eager to go beyond a dominant narrative of U.S. actions in the world. I hope many teachers will join Ms. Lee to empower students with an honest and critical understanding of U.S. history. How students view the past and the present will shape how they imagine and act for the future.

Sohyun An is a Professor of Social Studies Education at Kennesaw State University. A former high school teacher of social studies in South Korea, she now is a teacher educator of elementary social studies education. Her teaching and research center on anti-racist social studies curriculum and pedagogy, critical war studies, and critical Asian American history education.

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Appendix A. Primary Sources Set

Source 1. A map of the United States in 1900s



Source 4. "Europe First" strategy



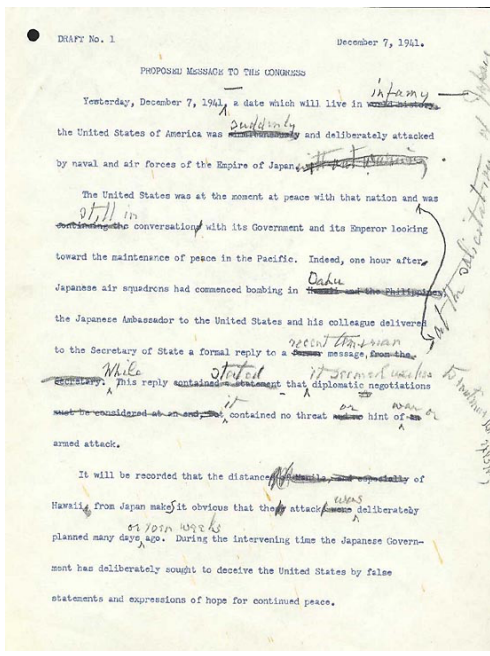
Source 2. Japan's attack on the US



Source 5. Japan's occupation of the Philippines



Source 3. FDR's infamy Speech Draft



Source 6. Bataan Death March



Source 7. Bombing of Manila



Appendix B. Primary Source Analysis Worksheet

Investigative Question: What happened to the Philippines during the World War II?

Direction: Study primary sources one at a time, in the numbered order, and record your observations and thoughts below.

Primary Sources	I see...	I think that...	I wonder...
Source 1			
Source 2			
Source 3			
Source 4			
Source 5			
Source 6			
Source 7			
What is your answer to the Investigative Question?			