Chapter 1
Elevating Marginalized Voices in Social Studies Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how social studies educators can intentionally elevate marginalized voices to create richer, more inclusive learning experiences. It contends that traditional curricula—often centered on privileged white narratives—constrain students' understanding of the past and limit their ability to engage meaningfully in democratic life. Drawing on research, classroom practice, and vetted instructional resources, the chapter offers practical strategies for centering historically excluded perspectives, that foreground resilience, agency, and community-based knowledge. It highlights design tools and structured civic processes to support inquiry-driven instruction. Emphasizing safe discussion spaces, thoughtful use of primary sources, and student agency, the chapter positions social studies as a discipline uniquely suited to fostering empathy, critical consciousness, and civic readiness. Ultimately, it provides educators with actionable approaches to transforming curriculum and practice so all students encounter a more inclusive, accurate, and empowering American narrative.

INTRODUCTION

"Today, we are going to learn about the first five dead guys." That is what I said when I began my 8th grade social studies lesson on the first five presidents. These

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five white, privileged men have been canonized into the social studies pantheon. Old school educators believe you can't learn United States history without centering learning around the "first five dead guys." The concern is not that they are learned about, but that they are *central.* While they are centralized in the understanding of U.S. history, they are not the only voices. By exploring those other voices (including those within these men's sphere of influence), we surface additional narratives that, likewise, contribute to the nation's complex history. How did Martha Washington carve out another identity and demonstrate her own agency during her husband's presidency? What did Ona Judge—a young woman enslaved by the Washingtons—think about working in a city as an enslaved woman? What was Sacagewea's motivation in teaming with Lewis & Clark? While these are women that are known in our traditional national curriculum, they are often portrayed as bystanders in the nation's story as their perspectives are rarely taken into account. If this marginalization is true for well-known figures, what happens with the voices of everyday people?

The students in our classrooms come from diverse communities. They might be defined by geographic, cultural, economic or civic characteristics—or a combination of all of them, making all of their experiences unique. The point is that each student that steps into your class has a community (or multiple) with which they identify. According to Gutierrez (2021), "...communities belong to an intellectual tradition. A community's intellectual tradition is made up of histories, literature, philosophy, and more." Not only do intellectual communities draw from the past, he continues, but they intentionally pull their wisdom and learning together for future generations. But what happens when a student from a traditionally marginalized community enters your classroom and *only* interacts with an intellectual tradition that is not their own? What happens when that student doesn't recognize the culture, linguistics, or behaviors of the narratives educators consistently put in front of them? How can they identify with these people from a past that feels almost foreign to them? Historical narratives and stories that dominate the curriculum in U.S. schools are built upon "privileged White voices" (2021). How can *all* of our students see themselves in the past when constantly presented with this dominant perspective?

Many well-meaning educators have included the occasional marginalized voice, often as a biography or as a featured spotlight. Such examples of inclusion often happen during the identified months: Black History, Women's History, Hispanic Heritage Month, LGBTQ+ History, etc. While this may be well-meaning, such limited inclusion does not meaningfully threaten the dominant narrative if diverse voices merely show up in no more than (maybe) a lesson. This "illusion of inclusion" is doing a tremendous disservice not only to the historical record, but to the marginalized communities impacted. It's time to commit to making changes (King, 2020).

Social studies has always been a field where competing narratives and diverse perspectives intersect, leading to a curricular tension for teachers to navigate. His-