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Teaching local difficult history through primary sources

Exploring tensions in teachers' pedagogical reasoning

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Abstract

Teaching about local, difficult pasts can center students, their communities, and civic action. However, doing so poses personal and professional challenges. Drawing from Critical Historical Inquiry and Activity Theory, this study explored how six experienced secondary social studies teachers reasoned about selecting primary sources to teach the history of policing and activism in Detroit. As teachers developed their text-sets, they navigated a variety of tensions related to their instructional goals, beliefs, and knowledge of students' identities and communities. We focus on two common areas of tension: how to teach the racialized history of Detroit policing while positioning students as sense-makers and while attending to students' affective well-being. Findings highlight the complex, situated nature of pedagogical reasoning and the promises and challenges of a critical historical inquiry approach to local, difficult history. Findings also underscore the value of teachers' multidimensional expertise in designing difficult history curricula.

Keywords

difficult history, local history, pedagogical reasoning, critical historical inquiry, activity systems

1 Introduction

Teaching local, difficult history offers opportunities to center students, their communities, and civic action. However, it also presents significant challenges for educators. Many teachers may avoid these topics due to concerns about controversy, sensitivity (Metzger & Suh, 2008; Swalwell et al., 2015; Zembylas, 2017), or fears of legal and professional repercussions (Goldberg, 2020). Others may struggle to attend to students' emotional needs (Zembylas, 2007) or racial identities (Chandler, 2015). These challenges highlight tensions within and between the various activity systems teachers navigate (Suh et al., 2024). For example, a teacher may face tensions in reconciling state-mandated curricular requirements with the socio-emotional needs of their students or the political orientations of their communities.

Given the complex interplay of professional responsibilities, personal beliefs, community values, student needs, and instructional goals, it is unsurprising we see difficult history taught

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in diverse ways. A civic education approach may emphasize connections between historical injustices and contemporary opportunities for civic engagement. Other approaches may encourage students to critically analyze why certain topics are labeled "difficult" and what this reveals about historical culture and the broader uses of history. However, such approaches remain underrepresented in U.S. curricula (Baildon & Afandi, 2018).

Teachers may opt for an inquiry-based approach when teaching difficult histories, guiding students to develop evidence-based claims through analysis of historical sources. This method prioritizes historical reasoning skills such as sourcing and corroborating evidence. While inquiry approaches equip students with valuable epistemic tools, they may fall short in addressing the political and personal dimensions of complex historical narratives (Blevins et al., 2020; Santiago, 2019).

One proposal to address the potential shortcomings of a disciplinary inquiry approach is to engage students through critical historical inquiry. Critical historical inquiry explicitly highlights marginalized historical perspectives (Blevins et al., 2020) and historical counternarratives (Cavallaro et al., 2019; Santiago, 2019) and promotes the development of critical literacy and thinking skills (Crowley & King, 2018; Santiago & Dozono, 2022). To effectively plan critical historical inquiry about local, difficult histories, teachers must draw on and apply a wide range of knowledge about history, social justice, local communities, students, and themselves (Blevins et al., 2020). As such, critical historical inquiry likely involves complex pedagogical reasoning, or the transformation of embodied professional knowledge into instructional practices (Lampert, 1985; Loughran, 2019; Shulman, 1987).

Our study investigated the pedagogical reasoning of six experienced, Detroit-area social studies teachers as they engaged in one core practice of inquiry planning: selecting sources (Fogo, 2014). In the study, teachers reviewed, commented on, reasoned about, and selected a set of sources related to the history of policing in Detroit (1957-1973). We then analyzed teachers' reasoning through two theoretical frameworks: critical historical inquiry and activity theory, highlighting the relationships between actors (e.g., a teacher), tools (e.g., primary sources), and objectives (e.g., creating a meaningful source set) (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

Five of the six teachers shared strong beliefs in positioning students as sense-makers and avoiding psychological harm. These beliefs often came into tension with other aspects of their activity systems, including student and community needs and values, their instructional objectives, and the sources themselves. These tensions echo findings from prior research, such as the need to design instruction or professional development that is responsive to teachers' identities (Suh et al., 2024), students' emotions (Suh, 2024; Zembylas, 2007), and students' racial identities and experiences (Chandler, 2015). We also found that teachers' pedagogical reasoning was animated by how they navigated these tensions, which often led to decisions that reflect critical historical inquiry practices, such as prompting students to inquire into connections between past and present. Sometimes, however, navigating these tensions led to avoidance or a desire to more tightly manage students' engagement with or interpretation of sources. Our findings reaffirm the complex activity systems that influence pedagogical reasoning and highlight the importance of navigating tensions in constructing local, critical history inquiry. We then discuss the relevance of our findings for researchers and practitioners doing work around critical historical inquiry and difficult history more broadly.

2 Background

2.1 Traditional and critical historical inquiry

In contrast to lecture-style teaching, a disciplinary inquiry approach asks students to analyze evidence and form conclusions in response to a question or hypothesis. In history classes, this is often done in abbreviated ways and under the guidance of a teacher who may furnish students with a central question and relevant source materials (van Boxtel et al., 2021). Historical inquiry can help students grasp the constructed nature of historical knowledge and develop their own nuanced understandings of the past (van Boxtel & van Drie, 2017). Inquiry teaching also supports students' historical literacy and analytical skills, such as sourcing, corroborating, contextualizing, and synthesizing evidence (Monte-Sano et al., 2014; Reisman, 2012).

When planning inquiry, teachers transform their historical pedagogical content knowledge (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2013) into pedagogical reasoning (Loughran, 2019; Shulman, 1987) to make crucial instructional design choices, such as how to develop a central or compelling question, how (and how much) information to introduce to students, how to compile a source set that represents multiple perspectives and relates to the central question, and how to make sources accessible to specific groups of students (Fogo, 2014; Monte-Sano et al., 2020). Reasoning through designing and facilitating inquiry-based instruction can be demanding for teachers. Teachers must consider how to respond to their students' thinking and support historical literacy, analysis, and argumentation (Fogo, 2014; Monte-Sano et al., 2020; National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Teachers must also consider how to balance their roles of instructor, listener, and facilitator. Some teachers may be reluctant to engage in this kind of instruction because they see it as conflicting with classroom management needs and content coverage goals (Barton & Levstik, 2003). Inquiry-based approaches can also be difficult for novice teachers who lack disciplinary knowledge (Monte-Sano & Budano, 2013). Even teachers with strong disciplinary knowledge may fall back on a more didactic style of instruction for various reasons (Vansledright, 1996), highlighting a potential lack of support for implementing inquiry learning (Martell, 2020).

Practitioners of critical historical inquiry teach students to use the disciplinary tools of history to investigate questions about dominant and counter-narratives and issues related to power, justice, and oppression (e.g., Blevins et al., 2020; Crowley & King, 2018; Santiago & Dozono, 2022). Reich et al. (2023) offer an inductive conception of critical historical inquiry as having three broad goals: 1) support students' critical historical consciousness, 2) equip students to identify and address pressing social problems, and 3) build bridges between coursework and students' experiences and identities. According to Santiago and Dozono (2022), critical historical inquiry can empower students to respond to social justice issues while also fostering civic participation and independent thinking.

In addition to the demands of traditional inquiry, critical historical inquiry asks teachers to attend to students' affective relationships with the subject and to facilitate learning experiences with clear relevance for students (Reich et al., 2023). Critical historical inquiry therefore expands the breadth of background knowledge that teachers need to support their students' learning and wellbeing. For example, teachers may need to develop acute emotional knowledge (Zembylas, 2007) and racial knowledge (Chandler, 2015) of their students, greater political and ideological clarity (Blevins et al. 2020), and deeper content knowledge beyond canonical narratives to include critiques and historical counternarratives (King & Brown, 2014; Santiago, 2019; Suh et al., 2021). Selecting accessible sources representing a range of perspectives is one key component to designing effective critical historical inquiry (Blevins et al., 2020).

2.2 Difficult history

Most research on teaching and learning difficult history builds on Britzman's (1998) concept of difficult knowledge, which examines how educators and curricula present traumatic events and how students respond to them (Pitt & Britzman, 2003). Scholars have proposed various definitions and frameworks for understanding difficult history (Epstein & Peck, 2018; Gross & Terra, 2018; Jones, 2023; Stoddard, 2022). Broadly, the term has been used to emphasize the emotional, cultural, and political complexities of teaching sensitive topics, distinguishing these approaches from more traditional methods of historical inquiry (Epstein & Peck, 2018). Gross and Terra (2018) provide five criteria for difficult history:

> (1) difficult histories are central to a nation's history... (2) tend to refute broadly accepted versions of the past or stated national values... (3) may connect with questions or problems facing us in the present... (4) often involve violence, usually collective or state-sanctioned... [which] cannot be easily dismissed as aberrations or exceptions... [and] (5) create disequilibria that challenge existing historical understandings (pp. 4-5).

They add that historical events are not "difficult" in the same way for everyone; individuals encounter histories differently based on their personal and social identities, experiences, and their positioning within political and cultural contexts across space and time. Recognizing the situated and power laden nature of difficult histories, Jones and Edmondson (2024) (and Jones, 2023, 2024) warn against reductive, binary uses of the term.

Compared to the cognitive perspectives that have dominated the study of traditional historical inquiry (e.g., Lee, 2005; Wineburg, 1991), scholarship in difficult history has adopted a broader lens, examining the political and social factors that frame teacher decision-making and students'

responses to historical content and pedagogy (Epstein & Peck, 2018; Harris et al., 2022; Stoddard, 2022). Researchers have explored these dynamics through a variety of often overlapping frameworks, including psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Garrett, 2011), emotion (Miles, 2019; Sheppard & Levy, 2019; Zembylas, 2014), historical inquiry (Suh et al., 2021), cultural historical activity theory (Suh et al., 2024), and critical sociocultural approaches that emphasize the role of culture and power in shaping instruction (Epstein & Peck, 2018).

Theoretical works in this field often grapple with epistemological questions, such as what counts as a difficult history, how do people acquire difficult knowledge, and what is the relationship between identity and knowledge of difficult history? (e.g., Garrett & Schmidt, 2012; Harris et al., 2022; Jones, 2024; Potter, 2011; Zembylas, 2014). Empirical work has largely focused on instructional materials (Fogo & Breakstone, 2018; Gaudelli et al., 2012), students' and teachers' knowledge and thinking about difficult history (e.g., Barton & McCully, 2005; Demoiny & Tirado, 2023; Garrett, 2011; Goldberg, 2013, 2017; Miles, 2019; Zembylas, 2017), or case studies of students learning about difficult history (e.g. Sheppard, 2010). For instance, Goldberg's (2013) study found that students' national, racial, or ethnic identity can shape their affective responses and engagement with difficult historical inquiry. Miles' (2019) case study of secondary students showed that students' affective responses to historical sources can influence how likely they are to accept or reject difficult historical knowledge.

Scholarship on difficult history pedagogy have identified a complex array of forces relevant to instructional decision-making. Demoiny and Tirado (2023) found that preservice teachers' racial identities and content knowledge significantly impacted their instructional decision-making at a difficult historical site. Studies have also found that educators may resist teaching difficult histories due to a perceived lack of community or administrative support (Stoddard, 2022) or concerns about emotional trauma (Zembylas, 2017). Though, a strong moral commitment to addressing these histories may counteract these challenges (Goldberg, 2017). Furthermore, contemporary political discourse and events, which permeate nearly all difficult history topics, often impact how such history is taught and learned (Harris et al., 2022; Jonker, 2012). Recognizing the complexity of these forces, Suh et al. (2024) highlight the importance of identity and activity systems — such as those in schools and professional development workshops — in understanding how teachers make instructional decisions around teaching difficult history.

3 Conceptual framework

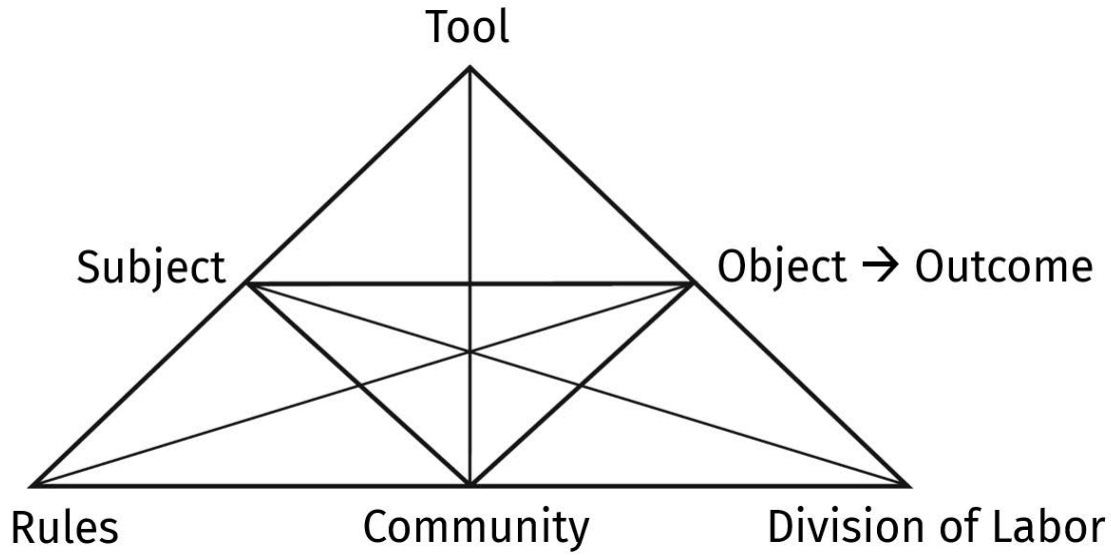
Our goal was to build on this prior work, particularly those recent studies which pay empirical attention to teachers' decision making and pedagogical reasoning around teaching difficult history through an inquiry-based approach (e.g. Demoiny & Tirado, 2023; Suh, 2024; Suh et al., 2021, 2024). Of this recent work, Suh (2024) and Suh et al. (2021, 2024) stand out for their exploration of experienced secondary history teachers' sense-making and lesson planning around difficult history topics. This contrasts with much of the work we found with participants composed of preservice teachers or a single teacher.

The challenges and tensions presented in the literature bring into view the inherent complexity in teaching and learning about the difficult past. Some scholars have attended directly to these challenges and tensions from an instructional perspective. For example, Kubota (2014), in the context of a second language classroom, identified contradictions between theory and practice for critical pedagogues who teach about controversial issues. In Chile, Magendzo and Toledo (2009) explored the experiences of history teachers who taught or avoided teaching about the difficult recent past. Their research identified moral dilemmas that arise when students "are actors in the history that is dealt with in the curriculum" (p. 454). For us, this literature emphasized that teaching about the difficult past through critical historical inquiry is messy, deeply situated in particular sociohistorical contexts, and fraught with nuanced tensions.

We sought a conceptual framework that would help us understand how experienced teachers navigate the complex decision-making process when teaching difficult historical topics through text-based inquiry. We specifically examined how teachers' choices are influenced by their interactions with students, sociocultural contexts, and historical artifacts.

Conceptually similar to Suh et al. (2024), we drew on activity theory to understand and represent aspects of difficult history instruction as socially and historically situated activities, wherein factors beyond an individual teacher's mental processes play important roles in shaping decision-making.

Figure 1: Engerström's (1987, p. 78) model of an activity system



We drew on Engeström's (1987) model of an activity system (Figure 1) to describe experienced teachers' pedagogical reasoning as an object-oriented interaction involving attention to *tools, norms/rules, the division of labor*, and *outcomes*. This perspective helped us position teachers as the subjects within dynamic, real-world environments and to consider the roles and interactions among aspects of those environments and how they contribute to shaping outcomes.

In our case, the focal activity was pedagogical reasoning about how to teach difficult history through a text-based approach. The *subjects* of our focal activity were defined as experienced secondary history and social studies teachers who had an interest in teaching the difficult history of policing in Detroit. The *object* of the activity was to curate a set of primary sources that could be used for inquiry. The *outcome* of our activity referred to a teacher's primary source set and its noteworthy characteristics. Our goal was to gain insight into the interactions within the activity system surrounding teachers' reasoning. This theoretical stance guided our data collection, analysis, and our presentation of descriptive findings.

4 Methods

We used an online survey, a Content Representation (CoRe) activity (Loughran et al., 2004), and two semi-structured interviews to investigate the following research question: *How can activity systems analysis help identify and describe teachers' pedagogical reasoning when selecting sources to teach a local, difficult history topic?*

In our analysis, we looked across the data sources to identify relevant aspects of teachers' activity systems, eventually focusing on how teachers navigated tensions in their pedagogical reasoning.

4.1 History of policing in detroit and study context

We designed this study in coordination with the release of a University of Michigan-led public history exhibit titled, *Detroit Under Fire: Police Violence, Crime Politics, and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Civil Rights Era*. Through its vast collection of primary sources, *Detroit Under Fire* tells the interwoven stories of policing victims, activists, police officers, and politicians. The following is a description of the project from its website:

> Detroit Under Fire is a multimedia digital exhibit that documents patterns and incidents of police brutality and misconduct, as well as 188 fatal shootings and other killings by law enforcement, in the city of Detroit during the era of the modern civil rights movement, from 1957 to 1973. The exhibit further chronicles the anti-police brutality struggle waged by civil rights and black power groups, and by many ordinary people, who demanded racial and social justice and sought accountability for systemic police violence (Lassiter & the Policing and Social Justice HistoryLab, 2021).

The project creators intended to include instructional resources to support local social studies teachers in using the exhibit with students. As former teachers, we also saw the potential value of this exhibit as a resource for teachers to engage their students in local, critical historical inquiry.

We conceptualized the history of policing in Detroit as difficult for several reasons. For one, the systematic police brutality, corruption, and cover-up belie the dominant mythology that unjust policing is the result of a few "bad apples" (Bains, 2018, p. 30). Though major reforms have improved policing in Detroit and across the country, many police departments continue to engage in and cover up illegal police conduct. Repeated instances of police brutality and injustices against Black people casts doubts on the dominant Civil Rights Movement narrative that racialized policing has been resolved. We also hypothesized that the politically and racially fraught nature of this history (amplified by being local history) might require teachers to make tough decisions when designing instruction with these materials. We also hypothesized that widespread protests and increased media and political attention toward racialized police violence at the time of our study may add to the difficult nature of teaching this topic.

4.2 Participants

Six teachers from the Detroit area participated in our study. We felt that Detroit was an appropriate site for our study for several reasons. Detroit has a long history of racialized policing and continues to be a crucible of Black activism in response to police violence. Additionally, thanks to *Detroit Under Fire*, teachers in the area now had unprecedented access to hundreds of primary source documents and historical accounts about local policing and activism.

We reached out to potential participants via listservs of regional social studies professional organizations. We used purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) to recruit teachers who self-identified as interested in teaching about the local histories of policing and activism. Below are brief descriptions of our six teacher-participants.

Table 1: Participant description and teaching contexts

Teacher description	Teaching context
Florence is a Black lifelong Detroit resident and activist with over twenty years of teaching experience.	Majority Black, urban school
Jessica is a Black Detroit resident with over five years of teaching experience.	Majority Black, urban school
Maryah described herself as Middle Eastern and has spent most of her life in Detroit. She has over 5 years of teaching experience.	Majority Black, urban school
Nicole is a White Detroit resident of over 15 years, with over 15 years of teaching experience.	Majority Black, suburban school
Robert is a White, lifelong Detroit resident who has been teaching for over ten years.	Majority Black, suburban school
Zach is a White teacher who grew up and lives in the Detroit suburbs and has over five years of teaching experience.	Plurality White, suburban school with few Black students

Our goal was to recruit a diverse sample of teachers in terms of race, ethnicity, teaching experience, and relationship to Detroit. We also considered their students' race, ethnicity, and proximity to Detroit. Three of our teachers identified as White, two as Black, and one as Middle Eastern. All but one taught in a majority Black school district.

4.3 Data collection

We collected data from teachers through four activities:

4.3.1 Survey

Each participant received an electronic, 18-question survey (Appendix A) that elicited short and extended responses about the participant's identity, knowledge of student demographics, teaching approaches, and ideas about teaching topics related to policing, activism, and Detroit history.

4.3.2 Document-based interview

We selected 17 documents (Appendix B) from the hundreds of documents available on Detroit Under Fire. Before selecting the 17 documents, we familiarized ourselves with relevant historical literature and consulted with a professional historian who worked with this content. Our goal was to present teachers with a range of sources to capture the era's significant developments and a range of perspectives, including:

- policing policies and violence enacted by police
- structure, aims, and activities of national and local civil rights organizations
- diverse civilian experiences and opinions on policing or activism
- other issues related to structural oppression, such as housing discrimination

Teachers spent one to two weeks reviewing and writing comments on the sources. We then conducted a 60-90-minute, semi-structured interview with each teacher to discuss their interpretations, reactions to, and decision-making process. According to Yamagata-Lynch, (2010), interviews can be a useful way to learn about participants' activity systems and observe their use of tools in relation to goals.

We spent the majority of the interviews discussing the five documents that teachers had indicated they would be most likely to teach with. We also asked clarifying questions about participants' survey responses. The survey and the interviews provided key information about teachers' activity systems, including their personal and professional beliefs, the norms of the profession, their school and community contexts, their instructional design approaches, and their interpretation and use of sources – among many other factors. The conversations were conducted and recorded via a video conferencing program and were then transcribed.

4.3.3 Content representation questionnaire

Several months after conducting the interviews, we sent participants an electronic Content Representation (CoRe) questionnaire (Appendix C). Our CoRe questionnaire was closely modeled on the one developed by Loughran et al. (2004) who designed the activity to see how science teachers transform disciplinary knowledge into pedagogy. CoRe also provided triangulating data to compare to participants' interview and survey responses. The instrument has since been applied in other disciplines, including a study of history teachers' PCK (Tuithof et al., 2021).

Our adaptation and use of the CoRe questionnaire departed from Loughran et. al.'s (2004) in two substantial ways. First, we altered Loughran's fifth prompt: "Knowledge about students' thinking which influences your teaching of this idea" (p. 380) to read instead "What knowledge about students (e.g., their thinking, experiences, or emotions) may influence your teaching of this idea?" We noticed in our first interview that teachers talked about their students more holistically than just their "thinking" processes. We thought this wording change was needed to reflect that. Second, we assigned our participants to complete the CoRe questionnaire independently rather than collaboratively. This enabled us to better observe how each teacher drew from their wide range of experiences, knowledge, and teaching contexts.

Although teachers completed the questionnaire independently, the content topics, or "big ideas," that were part of the questionnaire were drawn from common ideas expressed by the participants in the first interview or survey. For instance, Big Idea A: "Black Americans have and continue to be disproportionately targeted by policing policies and practices," was a content topic addressed by all teachers at some point in the study. Teachers were given three weeks to complete the CoRe questionnaire. All but one (Jessica) completed this stage.

4.3.4 Follow-up Interview

Following completion of the CoRe questionnaire, we conducted a 60–75-minute, semi-structured interview to ask each teacher clarifying questions about their responses to the first interview and the CoRe activity. We also member-checked some of our initial interpretations of teachers' reasoning. These interviews were also recorded and transcribed. All but one (Jessica) completed this stage.

4.4 Analysis

We began analysis using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where we identified and then open coded (Maxwell, 2013) moments of teachers' decision-making and pedagogical reasoning. These moments included when teachers reasoned about what sources to teach with, how to frame a topic, and what instructional approaches might be best suited for supporting students' thinking at different points in a lesson. In a second round of analysis, we coded factors related to teachers' decision-making. These factors included what teachers knew or felt about the topic, their school, their students, their students' parents, or the community more broadly. We also coded the knowledge tools teachers drew from in their reasoning (e.g., disciplinary knowledge, local knowledge, student knowledge, emotional knowledge). Last, we coded aspects of teachers' instructional contexts that they surfaced in the interviews, survey, or CoRe questionnaire.

In the second stage of analysis, we drew on activity systems theory to organize the data according to activity role. First, we created separate activity figures for each teacher. This entailed multiple rounds of each of us separately organizing data. Then, in conversation, we identified and resolve differences to build consensus figures for each teacher participant. During this process, we also noted tensions between the various parts of teachers' activity systems and the ways those contradictions were resolved or engaged with in some way. As an example, consider this quote from hypothetical teacher Ms. B. "I chose Source X because, even though it's very similar to Source Y, I know my students will be excited to talk about Source X because they will relate with the author." In this example, we would have identified a contradiction between Ms. B wanting to choose sources in line with a disciplinary perspective that values consideration of multiple perspectives (expressed by, "even though it's very similar to Source Y") and Ms. B wanting to choose sources that her students will relate to in ways that encourage their engagement (expressed by, "my students will be excited to talk about Source X because they will relate with the author."). Then we would have noted that Ms. B resolved this tension by prioritizing one over the other.

Last, we looked across participants to identify similarities and differences around the tensions which animated their pedagogical reasoning. We found that tensions both emerged from and animated teachers' pedagogical reasoning, and they are the focus of our findings below.

5 Findings

We found that teachers' reasoning about how to use primary sources to teach difficult history was structured by the negotiation of tensions among aspects of their instructional contexts. Analysis of teachers' thinking as shared during interviews and in their engagement with the CoRe performance task led to the identification of rules/norms (which we translate to beliefs), community members, tools, division of labor, and outcomes of teachers' pedagogical reasoning about how to construct primary source sets for teaching about difficult history. A composite representation of those components is included below in Table 2.

Table 2: Activity features of teacher-participants' pedagogical reasoning

Subject *predetermined*	Experienced, Detroit-area secondary history/social studies teacher
Object *predetermined*	To curate a set of primary sources to teach about the local history of police violence and community activism
Beliefs *Beliefs about teachers' responsibilities when teaching about local difficult histories*	Support students' disciplinary thinking, reading, and writing skills; facilitate students' historical content understanding; avoid causing students psychological harm or provoking emotions that might interfere with learning; avoid indoctrination of students; facilitate discussions related to power, identity, and social justice; design learning opportunities responsive to students and their communities; support students' historical empathy; activate students' civic mindedness
Community	Students; students' parents; members of the larger community; other teachers; school and district administration
Tools	Primary sources from the digital history exhibit *Detroit Under Fire*; teachers' pedagogical content knowledge
Division of labor	Interpreting the meaning of a source; considering the source in relation to instructional goals and norms; predicting how students might interact with a source; considering how to facilitate engagement with a source
Outcomes	Development of a curated source set

In addition to identifying the parts of the activity, we identified two tensions which animated teachers' reasoning, albeit in different ways:

- Tensions around teachers' belief/goal in supporting students as sense-makers
- Tensions around teachers' belief/goal in attending to students' affective well-being

Teachers' pedagogical reasoning emerged through their navigation of these different tensions.

5.1 Tensions around positioning students as sense-makers

We found that teachers held asset-orientations toward students, including the belief or goal that teachers should position students as sense-makers who construct knowledge through supportive opportunities to interpret sources and communicate evidence-based understandings. In trying to fulfill this goal, five of the six teachers surfaced tensions that animated their reasoning and reflected the unique features of their instructional contexts.

For Zach, a tension between his students' general sociohistorical position and his belief in positioning students as sense-makers led to the development of a primary source set which paired quantitative representations of data sources, such as graphs or tables, with testimonial, text-based sources. Zach expressed his alignment with a disciplinary perspective on historical inquiry, wanting students to construct their own historical understandings through careful interpretation and corroboration of primary sources. He told us, for example, that he chose primary sources that would enable him to support students, "in looking for the truth, as opposed to trying to sup-

port some preconceived notion or narrative" (DBI).[1] He also described the use of source-based instruction as a way of "murking everything up" and "introducing… gray area" (DBI) as opposed to lecture-based instruction and multiple-choice style assessments that imply right and wrong answers. When discussing how he might use his source set to support students' learning, Zach said that he would ask students to evaluate the reliability of Source 2 (Appendix B) to reinforce the disciplinary skill of document sourcing and to position his students as sense-makers (DBI).

However, Zach's source set also reflected the relationship between his students' community (a high socioeconomic status suburb of Detroit) and contemporary issues related to policing, race, and activism. Zach worried students may not pick up on subtle expressions of anti-Blackness embedded in the language of first-hand accounts and instead use the accounts as reason to reject historical facts about racism. According to Zach, sources that introduced "gray area" into source analysis might also create opportunities for some students to question the entire historical reality of racialized policing. He wanted to avoid positioning his students to make unjustifiable claims. Weighing this with his disciplinary goals, Zach wrote in his CoRe activity:

> In teaching a topic as thorny as policing, it's important to use authoritative sources as well as anecdotes. Data on arrests should be coupled with testimonies to provide unassailable evidence of unequal policing. This is important so that privileged students do not dismiss evidence of unequal policing as 'biased' or untrue.

Zach's assembly of his set of primary sources was animated in part by a tension between his students' sociohistorical positioning and his belief in positioning students as sense-makers by providing opportunities for students to interpret the meaning of sources. This tension contributed to the construction of a set of primary sources that paired testimony with quantitative representations.

Tensions between teachers' multiple beliefs also contributed to their development of primary source sets. Like Zach, Nicole also wanted to shift the intellectual burden in the classroom by asking students to interpret the meaning of primary sources. For Zach and Nicole, this belief came into tension with their belief in supporting students' understanding of the often subtle ways that anti-Black racism was expressed. This tension emerged in Zach and Nicole's reasoning as they explained why they included a specific source in their source set: Source 11 (Appendix B)—a letter from a White Detroiter opposing a citizen review board. They each wanted their students to understand that many White people supported racialized policing without using explicitly racist language. Zach and Nicole navigated the tension between this belief and their belief in supporting students to draw their own conclusions in different ways.

For Zach, the relationship between his students and the historical topic left him unsure how he might address the intra-belief tension. He told us, "what I would want to give my students is just that kind of really mild-mannered racism that comes out of a lot of White people in this time period and even today, right?" Zach worried, however, that if, hypothetically, the language of the Source 11 was more "agreeable," "some students might identify with that source… Their parents might identify with the views of someone in that source." He went further, telling us, "I'm not sure how I encourage my students to get to that conclusion without just hoping that some of them do… because it's tricky to kind of make people read between the lines" (DBI).

Nicole, like Zach, thought some of her students may sympathize with the implicitly racist arguments made by the author of Source 11 and come to the conclusion that the source did not express a racist sentiment. Nicole resolved this tension differently than Zach, suggesting she would support her students to use a close reading strategy that would illuminate the "racialized undertones of the letter." Nicole explained that she might stop and ask, "When Mr. so and so is writing the letter, [he] is talking about 'young punks.' What color are those young punks? Who do you picture? Why? Do you think he was picturing people of the same color?" (DBI). Nicole offered a way out of the tension through the use of a close reading disciplinary approach.

For Maryah, another teacher, a different intra-norm tension played a large role in structuring her reasoning about how to teach difficult history through primary sources. Similar to Zach and Nicole, Maryah also expressed a belief in supporting students as sense-makers through source interpretation and text-based discussions. However, Maryah also expressed a belief in the need to remain politically neutral and avoid the indoctrination of her students. While Maryah had substantial background knowledge relevant to the history of structural racism and policing, she struggled through how she might introduce and use sources to support students without cross-

1 DBI = Document-based interview; CoRe = content representation activity; FUI = follow-up interview

ing an ethical line. For example, Maryah wondered, "How do I present [these sources] in a way where I'm not attempting to lead my students toward a prepackaged conclusion?" She went on,

> I want them to take a look at history as objectively as possible, and then draw their own conclusions. And I realize it's borderline impossible. But this is teaching all about police brutality as it is associated with race, so it's so tough to try not to push an ideology (DBI).

Though she understood the relationship between policing and structural racism in the US ("it is ingrained in the system"), she did not feel comfortable "formally" introducing the concept of "structural racism" in class (DBI). Rather, she hoped that having students "objectively" analyze the sources would lead them to see structural racism in the history of policing (DBI, CoRe). She preferred to introduce these primary sources as part of, from her perspective, a less controversial topic. For Maryah, the tension between these two beliefs resulted in a general hesitancy around centering difficult contemporary topics in the classroom.

Another teacher, Jessica, also expressed an intra-norm tension related to positioning students as sense-makers. Like the rest of the teachers, Jessica expressed a belief in supporting students to make up their own minds in debates about difficult topics. However, in contrast to Maryah, Jessica believed it was important to let her students know where she stood on the topic of racialized policing. In explaining her selection of Source 14 (Appendix B)—a photograph of a police tank—Jessica said, "What I actually try to do is present opposing opinions to have them think. But they know that I have a problem with the militarization of police. I think that's important that I say that" (DBI). Within Jessica's reasoning, a different tension emerged compared to what we saw with Maryah. For Jessica, there was an intra-norm tension between her commitment to sharing her beliefs about contemporary political topics with her belief in preserving students' agency to interpret sources and grapple with differing perspectives.

5.2 Tensions around attending to students' affective well-being

As a personal belief or professional norm, five of the six teachers discussed wanting to avoid causing students psychological harm or provoking emotions that might interfere with learning. Teachers' reasoning about source selection was animated by the tension between this belief and their objective to create meaningful source-based instruction. The school and community contexts played a major role in this tension as teachers considered the positions and values of community members and students' experiences with police and feelings about police. Considering these factors, teachers reasoned about what sources might trigger anger, trauma, resentment, resistance, and hopelessness as well as what sources or approaches might engender awareness or civic action. Navigating these tensions led teachers to different outcomes. Four of the five teachers of majority Black students discussed strategies they felt would mitigate or redirect their students' anticipated negative emotional reactions, such as managing how their students interacted with a difficult source, reframing sources to humanize police officers, and choosing sources to highlight local activism. Zach, the only teacher who did not teach mostly Black students, chose sources he felt might provoke an emotional response in order to raise greater awareness among his students. At the same time, he relied on the framing of structural racism to combat anticipated emotional resistance to certain sources.

Jessica and Robert grappled with the tension that certain sources, though critical for understanding the history of Detroit's racialized policing, would likely provoke extreme feelings of sadness or anger toward police. Both Robert and Jessica drew on their understanding of their students' orientations toward police and the reality of policing in their communities when navigating this tension. If Robert picked a source that he thought might "rile students up" or provoke further "anti-police mentality" (CoRe), he considered ways of framing and introducing that source to "control those emotions" (DBI). For instance, Robert chose Source 3 (Appendix B), but explained, "I wouldn't want my kids to read that. I would want to read that for them… There's so much negativity in their lives. My students deal with death on a darn near monthly basis" (DBI). In our follow up interview, he clarified that by reading the source aloud, he could give students a chance to "feel that emotion… and then bring you back to some normalcy right afterwards." But if students were left to engage with the document on their own, he worried that they might be too "angry" to meaningfully engage with it. Ultimately, Robert navigated this tension not by avoiding the document but by choosing a strategy to contain its emotional effect.

Recognizing that many of her students have felt "dehumanized in their interactions with police" (DBI), Jessica chose an oral history interview of a Black former police officer and po-

lice chief (Source 1, Appendix B). She thought it was important to include a source featuring a Black officer, because "sometimes students forget that officers, or people in law enforcement, are people too and [those people] have had experiences similar to their own. It's like a binary sometimes, like us and them" (DBI). Through teaching with this source, she thought that some students might not only "shift their opinions" of law enforcement, but might be better able to process their trauma related to policing (DBI).

Relatedly, four of the teachers of majority Black students navigated tensions around sources they thought might arouse feelings of "hopelessness" (DBI, CoRe, FUI). Maryah selected a report by the NAACP on police brutality (Source 1, Appendix B) because she thought it was historically significant but worried that it "would reinforce the idea that things haven't changed and, maybe, perhaps never will change. That sense of hopelessness. That's what I think just from hearing [students]" (DBI). When we asked Jessica how she intended to use a first-hand account of police violence (Source 3, Appendix B), she replied,

> Sometimes I get torn about sharing things like that because—I don't feel hopeless, but in some ways, you do. It's like, okay, give them this information, and then what are they to do with it? So, I haven't figured that out yet, to be honest (DBI).

Later, Jessica explained, "You have to tackle the hard stuff, even if it's difficult, even if they probably can't handle it… the world doesn't really care, so they have to know it anyway" (DBI). For Jessica, the object of having her students confront the historical and present reality of policing in Detroit outweighed the risk of violating a norm about engendering a sense of hopelessness among her students.

Nicole, Maryah, Jessica, and Robert attempted to mitigate the risk of "hopelessness" by including sources that highlighted Black reformers and activists. Justifying her selection of the interview of a former Black police chief (Source 2, Appendix B), Maryah explained,

> I think seeing figures of similar ethnicity in these positions where they are making an impact and influence and seeing that—you know, not only did they come from your city, they had a perhaps similar upbringing and similar experiences. I think that can be very helpful to my students—very much so, motivational, inspirational. At least that's my hope (DBI).

Nicole, Jessica, and Maryah also talked about teaching with a student-created flier for a school "strike" (Source 17, Appendix B) (DBI). The flier included a list of students' demands, such as the removal of police officers from the school. Jessica said about this document, "I like the idea of students protesting because I just think they need to get involved" (DBI). For Nicole, Jessica, Robert, and Maryah, the selection of activist or reform focused sources helped to bring a positive framing toward the inquiry, but it did not resolve all tensions associated with the risks of provoking anger or hopelessness.

Zach, who teaches in a wealthy, plurality White suburb, navigated different tensions between beliefs, community, and instructional objectives. Sources that other teachers worried would provoke anger or resentment, Zach found useful for generating awareness in his students. His students, he told us, "are not really familiar with instances of police brutality… I find myself needing more sources so that they can be aware of police brutality and what it looks like" (DBI). In justifying his selection of Source 2 (Appendix B), he explained, "I kind of like it for the shock value to some extent…I think this [source] is kind of a reminder of the starkness of the issues that Detroit was facing and this time, right? Just how different it is than in the community that they live in" (DBI).

If anything, Zach assumed that, given the community of his students, there might be resistance to learning about this history. In particular, he discussed students with police family members who "can't imagine police officers doing these terrible things" (FUI). For these students, vivid and personal instances of violent policing might lead to further resistance. To get through to these students, Zach explained that, "You have to be able to talk about this [history] as a structural problem built into policing, but that doesn't mean that your dad or your uncle wasn't someone doing this right" (FUI). In this sense, his instructional objective of teaching the racist structures of policing in Detroit's history resolved some of the tension of potentially vilifying individual police members — especially for those students and families with close personal ties to police.

5.3 Florence: An unconflicted activist

Of our six teachers, Florence was the only one who did not seem to surface tensions when selecting or reasoning about sources. A lifelong Detroiter, teacher, and activist, Florence saw the sources as a way to share her own experiences with students and to introduce them to local civil rights groups, issues, and Black media. As with other teachers, Florence frequently connected her source selections to a deep understanding of her students, but she also tied the sources to a need for activism in her community. At one point in the conversation, she explained,

> You need to know the history. How did we get here? From where did we come?... They need to know so that they understand where and why their position here in the city of Detroit is so important. I hate to hear kids say, "When I get grown, I'm leaving Detroit." I hate to hear that because there's so much good here. And I'd like to train soldiers to do what's necessary to stay here and make this a better place (DBI).

She also connected the sources to specific organizations she wanted her students to consider joining or to Black media she wanted them to be familiar with. For instance, when we asked why she had selected the NAACP's report on policing (Source 1, Appendix B), she told us, "It would be an introduction to the NAACP... I would like for them [students] to become members [of the NAACP]... They have a good youth component. [M]y whole purpose is to get them involved" (DBI).

Florence was the exception among participants. Her decisiveness in choosing sources could be attributed to several factors, such as her knowledge of and personal connection to local history, her understanding of students, or her ideological clarity about the purpose of teaching this difficult history.

6 Discussion

In order to select a source set to teach a local difficult history, the experienced teacher-participants engaged in complex, situated pedagogical reasoning which often involved identifying and navigating tensions between their beliefs, community, and instructional objectives. The outcomes of teachers' decision-making highlight the promises and challenges of a critical historical inquiry approach to local, difficult history topics. Above all, the findings underscore the importance of teachers' multidimensional expertise in designing difficult history curricula.

6.1 Situating pedagogical reasoning in activity systems

Through our work with six experienced, Detroit-area teachers, we found that pedagogical reasoning around teaching source-based, local difficult history was an incredibly complex process, involving considerations of a host of factors, including curricular constraints, parent resistance, community values, local and national political events, student engagement, and student emotions.

Using an activity system approach, we were able to make sense of this complex process by focusing on how the teachers navigated, and often resolved tensions between different aspects of the activity system. We found that five of the six teachers grappled with tensions between the object of teaching the racialized history of Detroit policing and their beliefs in positioning students as sense-makers and avoiding psychological harm. The teacher's knowledge of the community – including students, families, and policing – often shaped or amplified those tensions.

Echoing previous research on teacher learning in difficult history (Suh et al., 2024), we found that pedagogical reasoning around local, difficult history may be best explained as situated within specific activity systems. This stands in contrast to pedagogical reasoning around "traditional" inquiry topics, where issues of identity, emotion, and community knowledge and experiences may be less salient.

6.2 The role of navigating tensions in pedagogical reasoning

Surfacing and negotiating tensions was an important feature of how five of our participants engaged in pedagogical reasoning. Reasoning through these tensions often led teachers to instructional design decisions intended to maintain the object of their activity without negating their beliefs or understanding of community needs and values. Zach, for instance, thought that

a structural framing of the history of policing as an institution would help to mitigate the resistance or resentment of students who have police family members. Jessica, on the other hand, chose a source she thought would humanize police officers in an attempt to problematize her students' existing antagonism toward the police in their community.

Not all teachers' pedagogical reasoning was animated by tensions and not all tensions led to outcomes that maintained teachers' beliefs or instructional objectives. Florence's instructional objective of civic awareness and civic action did not seem to be in tension with her beliefs about teaching or her knowledge of the community. For other teachers, certain tensions were not resolved or may have increased their resistance to the topic. At one point in the first interview, Maryah told us that, "I'm not African American, so I think it's tough for me to bring up those topics, just because of who I am and the fact that maybe I don't feel like it's my place..." (DBI). Other times, navigating tensions led teachers to decisions that seemed to belie their stated beliefs in positioning students as sense-makers, such as providing a pre-formed interpretation of a source.

Nevertheless, navigating tensions seemed to be an important and often productive part of teachers' pedagogical reasoning, particularly when it came to aligning the object of designing a source set with their beliefs and their communities.

6.3 Critical historical inquiry and local difficult history

Teacher participants' pedagogical reasoning underscored the challenges of "traditional" inquiry approaches to politically and emotionally fraught histories (Blevins et al., 2020; Santiago, 2019). Participants' pedagogical reasoning about source selection often led them to outcomes that reflected dimensions of critical historical inquiry, such as beliefs in raising critical awareness (Zach, Jessica, Florence, Nicole), sparking civic engagement (Florence, Nicole, Jessica), and directly connecting historical content to students' lived experiences and identities (all teachers) (Reich et al., 2023).

It is important to note that our teacher participants were not specifically trained in critical historical inquiry. Like other inductive research on critical historical inquiry teachers (e.g., Blevins et al., 2020), our teachers came to these practices through their ideological commitments, knowledge of students, and wealth of experience. Though our sample was small and non-representative, the results of this study suggest that critical historical inquiry approaches may be a natural fit for experienced, justice-oriented teachers when approaching local, difficult history topics.

That being said, inquiry (including critical historical inquiry) may not always be the preferred approach to teaching local, difficult histories and it certainly was not always the approach taken by our participants. At times, the participants resisted certain topics and framings or chose to tightly manage students' interpretations of or interactions with a particular source. Nevertheless, inquiry-based instruction was by far the most common framework for selecting and justifying sources.

7 Conclusion

Inquiry-based history instruction can empower students as sense-makers and help them to develop critical thinking skills; however, some teachers may lack the pedagogical knowledge or support to engage students in effective historical inquiries (Martell, 2020; Monte-Sano & Budano, 2013). Teachers are likely to face additional tensions when designing critical historical inquiry, which often centers around sensitive issues and difficult histories.

In this study, we looked at how a group of experienced secondary social studies teachers reasoned about selecting primary sources, a core practice of inquiry teaching. We found that teachers' reasoning was animated by tensions around how to teach about policing while positioning students as sense-makers and managing students' affective responses.

Variations in teachers' reasoning reflected differing realities and understandings about their and their students' racial and geographic identities and experiences with policing. It also reflected their varying narratives of local and national history, knowledge and stances on historical inquiry, and ideological clarity. Commitments to humanizing figures or engaging students in "objective" inquiry may cause tensions when trying to teach an accessible narrative about systemic racism — especially when those historical figures and sources are complex. Balancing the need to make students aware of the reality of policing without feeding student antagonism

or hopelessness will also likely continue to be a source of tension for many teachers in urban or majority-Black areas.

Overall, findings appear to complicate "traditional" notions of inquiry-based history instruction for such histories and highlight the situated nature of pedagogical reasoning. For many of our teacher-participants and their students, the history of policing in Detroit is not at all removed from the current realities where they live. The clear connections between present and past make this history meaningful but also visceral and political. For these reasons, teachers felt an additional responsibility of managing historical narratives, source interpretations, and emotional responses that often ran counter to their regular disciplinary stances. For these teachers, surfacing and grappling with these tensions was a key part of how they reasoned about inquiry.

As our teacher participants shared their thinking about how to choose and use sources to teach about a difficult past, we heard echoes of various teaching approaches: disciplinary, use-of-history, civic education, and critical and racial literacy frameworks that often reflected critical historical inquiry (Blevins et al., 2020; Santiago, 2019). When it comes to making history classrooms meaningful for students in a politically and emotionally fraught context, teachers may need to recognize and respond to the balance between their disciplinary goals and their responsibilities around students' affective well-being.

7.1 Limitations

One limitation of our project is that our teachers were not designing curriculum for an immediate or actual teaching context. Rather, in order to elicit teachers' pedagogical reasoning, we designed a simulation to approximate the process teachers might go through when selecting inquiry sources. Inevitably, the simulation in some ways departed from how teachers might make decisions about what to teach or how to teach their students. In future projects, we hope to further explore teachers' reasoning and teaching about difficult local history in more realistic conditions and with a research design that enables us to also ask and answer questions about resulting student experiences and learning.

7.2 Implications

Further research is needed on teacher pedagogical reasoning in difficult history. Given the socially complex and inherently political nature of local, difficult history, researchers may find the frameworks of activity theory and critical historical inquiry useful to unearth and explain tensions and practices. Additionally, as Suh et al. (2024) found, teacher learning and decision-making may shift as teachers "boundary cross" from one activity system to another. More research is needed to understand how "boundary crossing" shapes teachers' pedagogical reasoning.

Regarding those who are responsible for the design and facilitation of professional learning experiences for in-service teachers, our study emphasized the need to recognize the dynamic local conditions, including historical culture, that contextualize teachers' professional lives. This implication aligns with existing research on supporting teacher learning and the importance of grounding teacher learning experiences in relevant contexts (Monte-Sano et al., 2023). To do so, teacher educators and those who offer professional development for history teachers should foster authentic relationships and collaborate with teachers as expert partners in designing teacher learning curricula and resources.

For teacher educators, our findings offered a potential heuristic to support preservice teachers' critical pedagogical reasoning. Tensions could be used like classroom case studies, as instructional tools to prompt novice or future teachers' reasoning in response to hypothetical but realistic dilemmas. For example, teacher educators could ask novice teachers to identify and track tensions that emerge as they design a lesson plan and then use those tensions to support class discussion among a group of novice teachers. Or, teacher educators could draw on existing tensions identified in qualitative case studies of expert teachers' thinking and practice and ask novice teachers to reflect on and respond to them.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. Please consider this question with your students in mind. What do you think are the most important aspects of Detroit history for your students to learn? Please explain each answer you give.
2. Do you identify with a certain race or ethnicity? If so, what?
3. Do you identify with a certain socioeconomic class? If so, what?
4. How would you describe your relationship to Detroit?
5. How would you describe the neighborhood where you live, now?
6. Where do you teach (district and school)?
7. Please briefly describe the student body at your school.
8. What subject(s) and grade level(s) do you teach?
9. What subject(s) and grade level(s) have you taught in the past?
10. How many years have you been a teacher?
11. Why do you think studying history is important for your students?
12. Describe a typical history lesson in your class.
13. Briefly explain your interest in teaching the history of activism and policing in Detroit.
14. Are there any personal experiences that have influenced why or how you teach history or social studies? If so, please explain.
15. Does the topic of policing or police violence ever come up in your teaching? If yes, please briefly describe an example.
16. Does the topic of community activism ever come up in your teaching? If yes, please briefly describe an example.
17. Explain why you think your students would or would not be interested in studying the history of community activism and police violence?
18. Do you have any concerns about teaching these topics? Please explain.

Appendix B

Primary Source List

Source 1: Police Brutality Complaints Reported to the Detroit Branch of the NAACP
Source 2: Former DPD Chief, Isaiah McKinnon Recounts Attack by Police as Teen
Source 3: Retired Officer, Joynal Muthleb Testimony to the US Commission on Civil Rights (1960)
Source 4: Black Detroiter, Iris Cox Writes to the Detroit News (1961) about News Coverage
Source 5: NAACP Housing Discrimination Picketing Campaign (1963)
Source 6: Protest of the Police Killing of Cynthia Scott
Sources 7 & 8: Black Activists Respond to Scott Killing
Source 9: Adult Community Movement for Equality (ACME) Flyer
Source 10: 1965 Cartoon About Police Violence
Source 11: David Lobsinger Letter to Mayor Cavanagh on Subject of Policing and Opposing the Idea of a Civilian Review Board
Source 12: Number of Black and White Officers by Precinct (1958-1963)
Source 13: Detroit Police Recruitment Brochure (1966)
Source 14: Detroit Police Department Tank in DPD Brochure (1965)
Source 15: Detroit Police Commandos Beat Two Demonstrators (1965)
Source 16: Police Commissioner Ray Girardin Speech to DPD Officers on Warrantless Arrests (1965)
Source 17: Central High Strike Flyer

Appendix C

Content Representation Questionnaire

Participants answered each of the following questions for each of the eight "big ideas" below.

Questions

1. What do you intend students to learn about this idea?
2. Why is it important for students to know this?
3. What else do you know about this idea (that you do not intend students to know yet)?
4.What difficulties/limitations are connected with teaching this idea?
5. What knowledge about students (e.g., their thinking, experiences, or emotions) may influence your teaching of this idea?
6. What other factors may influence your teaching of this idea?
7. What teaching procedures or practices would you use (and reasons for using these to engage with this idea)?
8. How will you ascertain students' understanding or confusion around this idea (including likely range of responses)?

Big Ideas

a. Black Americans have and continue to be disproportionately targeted by policing policies and practices.
b. Individuals and activist organizations use different methods for bringing about change.
c. Positive social change is often the result of sustained activism.
d. White citizens' and organizations' support for (or silence about) the status quo can prevent or slow change from occurring.
e. Within any group, the individuals who belong to the group represent a wide range of experiences and opinions.
f. Institutions, such as police and governments, go to great lengths to maintain their positions of power.
g. Studying the past can help us understand and/or take action in the present.
h. If you have a big idea that's not listed, please type it here: