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Grounding History Instruction: Engaging Place and Scale through Iterative Local Inquiry Design

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank the DeKalb County History Center and the McLean County Historical Museum for their commitment to bringing local history to local classrooms.

Introduction: Bringing History Back Home

From 1994 to 2009, Keith A. Sculle embarked on a project called the *Illinois History Teacher*. Sculle, the former head of research and education at the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, faithfully edited and collaborated with stakeholders across the state to produce a rich resource for Illinois teachers mandated to instruct on Illinois. The project produced a yearly volume or two around a designated theme, consulted reputed historians, and then enlisted Illinois secondary teachers to construct lesson plans around that theme. Themes included labor (v. 13:2, 2006), conflict and compromise (v. 2, 1995), and Illinois as the West (v. 15:2, 2009). Sculle's contribution and commitment to Illinois history education remains, to my reading, unparalleled in his effort to maintain *Illinois History Teacher*.

This resource has served as a reliable repository for localized lesson plan ideas, but since Sculle's valiant work to provide a consistent resource to Illinois teachers ended in 2009, the internet, historiographical trends, and state educational mandates have shifted. Notably, two new waves of Illinois Learning Standards in 2016 and 2022 have shifted the educational focus away from content-concept assessment to skill-building competencies that are more reflective of the *College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards* that was published in 2013.¹ Traditional models that favored drop-in instruction to insert Illinois history into the social studies classrooms has shifted towards a richer, deeper, and more discipline grounded mode of instruction: inquiry design.

One thing that has stayed consistent in Illinois education is the mandate to teach state history.² The presented challenge is to incorporate pedagogies and methods that highlight state history in a meaningful way for students. For a state like Illinois that is privileged to [currently] have standards that promote equitable teaching and learning, it is crucial to uncover and present stories of traditionally marginalized and underrepresented groups through an inquiry approach, allowing a diverse body of learners to intelligently engage with local source materials.

To review, an effective Illinois history teacher should promote disciplinary skill development, demonstrate content expertise using state mandated units of study, drive student-oriented history, and foster civic competence.³ This is a tall order: the list of mandated units of study seem to grow each year. As a result, it can sometimes feel like state history is the add-on to the curriculum design formula. How can teachers accomplish these ambitious goals at once? My contention is that grounding history instruction in local histories as an intentional and iterative methodology that simultaneously satisfies the demands of Illinois state history educators and does so with a determination towards excellence and collective teacher efficacy.⁴ If Illinois

¹ National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013). See also Ian Westbury, "State-Based Curriculum-Making: The Illinois Learning Standards," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 48, no. 6 (December 2016): 783–802. doi:10.1080/00220272.2016.1186740.

² Illinois Compiled Statutes, *105 ILCS 5/27 3 (from Ch. 122, par. 27 3)*.

³ This refers to the Illinois Mandated Units of Study that supplement and guide the Illinois Learning Standards. Taken together with the C3 Framework, the Illinois Learning Standards also place high value on opportunities for students to take informed action as a part of their inquiry.

⁴ Research from John Hattie states that the highest effect on student learning is caused by a factor termed "collective teacher efficacy." It is the collective of the staff of the school/faculty in their ability to positively affect students. This factor has been found to be strongly and positively correlated with student achievement. See John Hattie, Julie Harris Stern, Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey, *Visible Learning® for Social Studies, Grades K-12: Designing Student Learning for Conceptual Understanding* (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press Inc., 2020).

history educators are committed to local history inquiry, they can develop place attachment, civic competence, and deep critical thinking skills.

“No one lives in the world in general”: Thick Description and Place Attachment

In his afterward of *Senses of Place*, cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz correctly asserts that “no one lives in the world in general.”⁵ Geertz spent his career grappling with this idea, which is at one once simple, beautiful, and potentially overwhelming. Place as a construct can be problematic because it is a physically shared space that each of us perceives differently.⁶ In the social sciences, scholars typically take a thirty-thousand-foot view to uncover global trends and transnational phenomenon. Historians travel through time and space, exploring and observing people and events that are dim mirrors of our own existence. As content experts, we are trained to be keen observers of this world and of past worlds. Our studies take us to far off places. The abstraction associated with these pursuits of change over time, continuity, causality, context, and contingency can get our heads spinning. But at the end of the day, when the scholar closes their books and settles into their life, such intellectual pursuits do not make them any less local than we are at this moment. They will pull into the end of their driveway and walk into their houses where they tend to children who will go to school in a community. Even if energies are expended to global or abstracted thinking, every person is intrinsically local. No one lives in the world in general. Our students might get lost, disinvested, or disinterested in various parts of the content that we present. They struggle to see the connection, they cannot visualize the scenario, or they feel disoriented in the multiple forces at play unless instructors help tether students to a sense of place.

Geertz is most famous for his concept of “thick description,” which is especially apt for the purpose of localizing historical inquiries. He posited that explanatory work with cultures should specify details, conceptual structures, and meanings.⁷ He contends that anthropologists, and I would add, historians, approach “broader interpretations and more abstract analyses from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters.”⁸ In order to make sense of the big ideas of history or anthropology, we need to be able to connect to something or somewhere that we know intimately and deeply, like our backyards or the route to the grocery store.

One outstanding example of thick description is Victor Hugo’s epically long account of the Battle of Waterloo inside of *Les Misérables*. It has been criticized as an extraneous distractor for the book’s driving drama, but to Hugo, it was worth pausing his larger chronicle on a cliffhanger for a nineteen-chapter place orientation. The place-based interlude was meant to transport the reader and attach them to an otherwise distant reality that provided context for the character’s actions many years later. This thick description was compiled from Hugo’s dogged months-long research trip to the battlefield and its surrounding town. It was also informed by his nostalgia and his intention to make meaning of the Napoleon’s meteoric rise and fall. He described:

⁵ Stephen Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds. *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1996), 259-262.

⁶ van Eijck and Roth, 2010. “Towards a Chronotopic Theory of “place” in Place-based Education” *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 5(4), 869-898.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretations of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 315.

⁸ Geertz, “Thick Description,” 318.

The field of Waterloo resembles any other plain; it has the calmness of which is the impassive nourisher of man. But at night a sort of visionary mist rises from it, and the traveller who chooses to look and listen enters the hallucination of catastrophe. That monumental hillock with its nondescript lion vanishes, and the fearful event comes back to life. The battlefield resumes its identity, the lines of infantry undulate across the plain, furiously galloping horses cross the horizon. The startled dreamer catches the gleam of sabres, the sparkle of bayonets, the flame and thunder of cannon-fire... the ditches run with blood, the trees rustle, the sound of fury rises to the sky and over those stern heights, the spectral hosts whirl in mutual extermination.⁹

As the thick description continues in the book, Waterloo is transformed and animated. As readers, we come to understand the political backdrop to the story and the personal consequences for important characters, like Marius, who then contribute to the June 1832 Insurrection, the central historical moment of the novel. Without understanding Waterloo in a deep way, readers would have an abridged understanding of the anti-monarchist movement that barricaded themselves on streets of Paris, fighting forty-three years after the storming of the Bastille. Hugo demonstrated in *Les Misérables* that creating the thick description of place orientation can be long work. For teachers in the history classroom, it is a real struggle to get beyond a thin description of *any* given topic. Most teachers do not have the time to spend months wandering a battlefield to learn from its spectral hosts. Teachers are constrained by their limited resources and growing demands. But a heavy pedagogical reliance on “thin description” does not satisfy the human propensity to contextualize to make meaning and apply learning to daily living.¹⁰

A firm attachment to place through local contextualization could solve this common pitfall. Place informs social studies instruction as a lens to make meaning and connection for students and for the content they are tasked to investigate. To foster place attachment, the inquiry design model offers a way to integrate sets of local sources that can be used to answer a compelling question. Over the course of the inquiry as students engage with multiple sources from their local histories, they begin to develop the sense that their local context matters in the larger historical narrative. Students see the ways that *their* place is one where history occurred and corroborates or complicates dominant text narratives. In this case, place attachment is cultivated through students’ recognition that their community’s stories can allow them to answer broader questions about historical realities. Teachers might not be intentionally roaming the battlefield for historical insights, but we inhabit and roam our own local spaces and should foreground the ways our experience and attachment to place might inform us as teachers and content experts.

“Sit a Spell”: Grounding History Inquiry in Local Contexts

In most US history classrooms, teachers instruct from the dawn of time to the present day in abbreviated class periods over the course of an academic year. Because this is an impossible task, teachers must make choices about which material will be covered. Every historian, and thus

⁹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1862.

¹⁰ National Council for Social Studies, 2008.

every history teacher, makes a choice concerning the spatial and chronological dimensions of his or her object of study.¹¹

Units and topics generally follow a chronological order, marching through time, trying in desperation to make it to Reconstruction before Christmas. West of the 1763 Proclamation Line, students in the modern classroom get a sense of history over “there.” That is, the Revolutionary war happened over *there*. The Constitution was formed over *there*. For Illinois students, even as the timeline progresses past statehood in 1818, it remains a simple task to leave local experiences out of the historical conversations and center inquiries elsewhere according to an accepted national narrative and conventional teaching pattern. Then, when confronting hard truths about history, it is considerably easier to examine those unsavory historical moments from a posture of separation. They were racist over *there*. It absolves the learner of complicity with the insidious forces, moral failure, or overt wrongdoing that, if *here*, might seep into our present soil. This, of course, is not how it works.

Confronting hard local history can feel painful. Such investigations reveal buried stories whose legacies directly impact or relate to present inhabitants. In some cases, long-held wrongs are still largely unaddressed, due to a variety of factors. An honest reckoning with the local past paired with a pedagogical approach toward informed action – an approach that celebrates local communities, presses for mutually beneficial change, and promotes hope through local investments – should encourage skeptics to see that real forward progress begins with a shared understanding and acknowledgment of a collective past.

Grounding history instruction is an approach that seeks to build a love of the local and cultivate valuable critical thinking skills. “Grounding” is a therapeutic technique used for anxiety – that common sense of feeling overwhelmed – and helps users focus their thinking through a cognizant recognition of the space they presently inhabit.¹² Teachers can adapt a similar approach to our students’ interactions with people and worlds that exist outside of the paradigm of their own experience. Too much quick exposure and application of knowledge might have students in over their heads. This approach suggests that teachers orient and reorient students to their surroundings, activating the power of their own lived experience and previously built pathways as they continue to forge new connections.

A grounded historical methodology resembles the slow, careful rhythms of an evening of porch sitting. Leisurely rocking or casually sitting on a front porch, watching the world outside one’s front door, talking about everything and nothing at once. This tradition of indirect social interaction has been the center of oral tradition, where elders often pass down stories for the younger generation to absorb and assimilate into their developing senses of place. In the frenzied pace of history instruction, this is meant to deliberate and honor the local stories of the American tapestry, to sit at the feet of those who came before, firmly planted on familiar ground, drifting off to times and people gone by.

¹¹ There is a degree of urgency as well as self-consciousness that informs interest in this question. At least since the rise of the Annales school of history in the 1970s, these assumed categories of scale have been challenged by such concepts as the Braudelian “world” and the *longue durée*, and subsequently by the vogue of “microhistory.” In more recent years there has been the rise of global or world history, as well as “deep” history, which challenges historians to think not only in years or centuries but across the vast spaces of evolutionary and planetary time. Using scale to shift perspectives has led to incredibly rich historical breakthroughs like Kenneth Pommeranz’s *Great Divergence*, that contended for China’s developmental prominence over Europe until coal, colonies, and contingencies allowed for huge advantages to solidify its position as a world power during the Industrial Revolution.

¹² J.L. Oschman, G. Chevalier, and A.C. Ober, “Biophysics of Earthing (Grounding) the Human Body,” in P.J. Rosch, ed., *Bioelectromagnetic and Subtle Energy Medicine* (New York: CRC Press, 2015, 2nd edition), 427-448.

Grounding History in Practice

History teachers can advance arguments of larger historical narratives by effectively using small-scale subjects and local inquiries regularly in each curricular unit. This can be accomplished through the agile utilization of historical scale as an iterative practice. Teachers will need to creatively consider the working definition of a local context. As more teachers become invested in grounding their history instruction, there is a greater likelihood that statewide inquiries could provide geographic, demographic, and chronological diversity to local inquiries for each curricular unit. For example, teachers might rely on hyperlocal town or city histories, state, or regional histories to encompass a local context.

This table (Figure 1) illustrates an example of a localized topic plan for a US History course with Illinois based inquiries for each unit. Teachers can build a lesson plan or inquiry design model from this local lens to get students thinking about the broader themes and content that will be presented later in the unit. As a result, students become familiar with the development of their state over time. The inquiry topics for each unit cover all the Illinois State Learning Standards released in 2022. Additionally, the chosen topics seek to address a range of perspectives, centering diverse voices from local, state, and regional history.

Unit	Illinois Based Inquiry	Illinois Learning Standards	C3 Theme
Indigenous Civilizations	Cahokia	SS.9-12.H.8. Analyze key historical events and contributions of individuals through a variety of perspectives, including those of historically underrepresented groups.	Perspectives
Colonial America	Lafayette/Joliet	SS.9-12.H.14. Analyze the geographic and cultural forces that have resulted in conflict and cooperation. Identify the cause and effects of imperialism and colonization.	Causation and Argumentation
Revolutionary America	Illinois Campaign	SS.9-12.H.9 Analyze the relationship between historical sources and the secondary interpretations made from them.	Historical Sources and Evidence
Constitutional America	SCOTUS Case Studies	SS.9-12.H.3. Evaluate the methods used to promote change and the effects and outcomes of these methods on diverse groups of people.	Change, Continuity, and Context
Westward Expansion	Black Hawk War/Shabbona	SS.9-12.H.13. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.	Causation and Argumentation
	Homewood Indian Boarding School ¹³	SS.9-12.H.6. Analyze the concept and pursuit of the "American Dream" and identify the factors that could promote or present barriers to the pursuit of the "American Dream" for multiple groups of people.	Perspectives
Antebellum America	Illinois' Underground Railroad	SS.9-12.H.9 Analyze the relationship between historical sources and the secondary interpretations made from them.	Historical Sources and Evidence
	1853 Illinois Black Exclusion Law ¹⁴	SS.9-12.H.5. Analyze the factors and historical context, including overarching movements, that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.	Perspectives

¹³ Megan VanGorder, "Teachable Moment: Uncovering Comparative Indigenous Inquiries at the Homewood Boarding School in Peoria County," *Illinois Heritage Magazine*, Volume 26, no. 4, 2023.

¹⁴ Kate Masur, "Home," Black Organizing in Pre-Civil War Illinois: Creating Community, Demanding Justice - Accessed January 13, 2023. <https://coloredconventions.org/black-illinois-organizing/>.

Civil War	Lincoln’s Consolation Letter to Fanny McCullough ¹⁵	SS.9-12.H.8. Analyze key historical events and contributions of individuals through a variety of perspectives, including those of historically underrepresented groups.	Perspectives
Reconstruction	Sundown Towns/ Jim Crow North	SS.9-12.H.1. Evaluate the context of time and place as well as structural factors that influence historical developments.	Change, Continuity, and Context
Gilded/Progressive Age	1893 Columbian Exposition	SS.9-12.H.11. Analyze historical sources from multiple vantage points and perspectives to identify and explain dominant narratives and counter narratives of historical events.	Historical Sources and Evidence
	<i>The Jungle</i> , Public Health, Government Regulation	SS.9-12.H.4. Analyze how people and institutions have interacted with environmental, scientific, technological societal challenges.	Change, Continuity, and Context
	Red Summer ¹⁶	SS.9-12.H.10. Identify and analyze ways in which marginalized communities are represented in historical sources and seek out sources created by historically oppressed peoples.	Historical Sources and Evidence
20s/Great Depression	Dear Mayor Wellmerling (Bloomington, IL job requests to mayor)	SS.9-12.H.12. Analyze the causes and effects of global conflicts and economic crises.	Causation and Argumentation
WWII	Draft Stories, Oral Histories, Victory Gardens, War Bonds	SS.9-12.H.6.. Analyze the concept and pursuit of the "American Dream" and identify the factors that could promote or present barriers to the pursuit of the "American Dream" for multiple groups of people.	Perspectives
1950s/Civil Rights	DeKalb County Barriers to Racial Equity (Figure 2)	SS.9-12.H.11. Analyze historical sources from multiple vantage points and perspectives to identify and explain dominant narratives and counter narratives of historical events.	Historical Sources and Evidence
	“Resettlement”: Chicago Story of Asian Americans post-internment ¹⁷	SS.9-12.H.11. Analyze historical sources from multiple vantage points and perspectives to identify and explain dominant narratives and counter narratives of historical events.	Historical Sources and Evidence
Vietnam/ Culture Wars	1968 Chicago Convention	SS.9-12.H.13. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.	Causation and Argumentation
	Vietnam Case Studies, Oral Histories and Memoirs	SS.9-12.H.2. Analyze change and continuity across historical eras and identify what perspectives have typically influenced how historical eras are constructed.	Change, Continuity, and Context
	Disco Demolition Day ¹⁸	SS.H.7. Identify and analyze the role of individuals, groups and institutions in people’s struggle for safety, freedom, equality and justice	Perspectives

Figure 1 - Illinois-Based U.S. History Inquiries, by curricular unit. This table includes each of the 2022 Illinois Learning Standards and seeks to provide a variety of traditionally marginalized voices. Because this project is under development, there

¹⁵ See Megan VanGorder, “Lincoln’s Bloomington: Lincoln and McCullough,” <http://www.lincolnbloomington.com/lincoln-and-mccullough.html>.

¹⁶ Karen Sieber, “Visualizing the Red Summer,” 2015. <https://visualizingtheredsummer.com/>

¹⁷ Full Spectrum Features, “Resettlement: Chicago Story,” 2023. <https://www.fullspectrum.education/projects/rcs>

¹⁸ Megan VanGorder and Jacob Sladek, “Teachable Moment: Culture wars and 1979 disco demolition night,” *Illinois Heritage Magazine*, Volume 26, no. 3, 2023.

are regions and people groups that are recognizably absent and could be incorporated. Some citations point to helpful websites and resources to allow teachers to get started with their local inquiries.

To illustrate the iterative process and reciprocal scale agility that can be employed in a grounding history instruction approach, I have included an inquiry design model that could be used for a Civil Rights unit that centers Illinois stories.¹⁹ In a collaborative effort with the DeKalb County History Center (DCHC), I utilized local primary source material. After surveying the DCHC's site, createchange.today, I decided to frame the inquiry around the topic of local barriers to racial equality in DeKalb County, Illinois. Their site had sources organized topically: fear, exclusion, hope, and community. I was able to build the inquiry around work that had already been accomplished by local historians and organize them for classroom use. Many local historical societies have similar website projects as public historians and educators across the state attempt to provide educational materials for schools to use. If sites with ready-to-use sources are not available, university educators, K-12 teachers, district PLCs, or other curriculum developers need to cultivate professional exchanges. The curators of historical society archives hold a wealth of untapped material waiting to be read and harnessed for educational purposes.

For example, on Figure 1, the local inquiry for the 1920s and Great Depression unit mentions the “Mayor Wellmerling Letters.” I was introduced to these letters when the McLean County Museum of History and Illinois State University teamed up to provide professional development to local K-12 teachers.²⁰ The collection of over sixteen letters mirror those sent to the President and First Lady Roosevelt during the Great Depression. In the document set, hardworking and increasingly destitute citizens asked for jobs, housing, favors, connections, and other forms of relief from the mayor. Through an investigation of a local iteration of national phenomenon, students understand the specific ways that the Great Depression affected people from their town. Their local story informed the national narrative and students gained exposure to the ways that the Great Depression was not a distant event but a local reality. One year when I taught this document set, I had a student whose great-grandmother was related to one of the letter writers. The student brought in a photo of that relative from the period, leading to a rich discussion, image analysis, and local comparison to the analogous Depression-era images included in our textbook. Such a discovery and the explorations of local connective tissue would have been impossible without the connections made between the teaching and learning communities.

To stage the inquiry for DeKalb County, provided here as an exemplar for this type of inquiry, students review contextual materials about large-scale historical phenomenon like the nadir of race relations in the United States (global). Equipped with this wider context, students follow the Inquiry Design Model to perform several formative tasks that engage with local primary sources (local). For the summative task, students demonstrate their comprehension, critical thinking, and synthesis skills to answer the compelling question about racial equality in the northern United States (global). Finally, students are guided in informed action that causes them to extend this topic into the present day and thoughtfully compile actionable solutions to

¹⁹ If an instructor preferred a strictly chronological approach, most of this primary source material is in the 1920s and 1930s. This organization reveals a personal preference for instruction on the “long civil rights movement” that accounts for a continued struggle for equality that can be located back to the revolutionary periods.

²⁰ A special thanks to Dr. Richard Hughes at Illinois State University and Candace Summers at the McLean County Museum of History for inspiring me towards this journey to pursue local topics. For more information on the Wellmerling Letters, see the finding aid and contact the McLean County Museum of History for scans. Filed under Louis F. Wellmerling Collection, Folder 16, McLean County Museum of History, <https://mchistory.org/assets/resources/finding-aids/wellmerling-louis-collection-1.pdf>

historically rooted problems (local). Throughout the entirety of the inquiry, students are building a capacity to make meaningful connections between local events and global phenomenon. A critical examination of a local place through this very difficult history is supplemented by the sober recognition of wrongs and hopeful resolution for change.

How has racial exclusion manifested in the Northern US?	
Standards and Content	SS.9-12.H.6 - Analyze the concept and pursuit of the “American Dream” and identify the factors that could promote or present barriers to the pursuit of the “American Dream” for multiple groups of people.
Staging the Compelling Question	Ask the question, “Where was the Civil Rights movement located?” while students view the “ Fight School Segregation ” source. Reveal the full source and citation and discuss. What does this mean about the Civil Rights Movement in the United States? Why do textbooks focus on the South? Students read Civil Rights Movements in the Encyclopedia of Chicago for local context.

Supporting Question 1
Was DeKalb, Illinois a Sundown Town?
Formative Performance Task
Cite three pieces of evidence from this document set that make a case for whether DeKalb County was a Sundown Town or not.
Featured Sources
Source A: Exclusion Overview Source B: James Loewen Database information on Illinois Sundown Towns Source C: Virginia Sherrod Oral History Interview

Supporting Question 2
What was the response to the Ku Klux Klan in DeKalb County?
Formative Performance Task
Create a T-Chart that explains ways that White residents in DeKalb County <i>supported</i> or <i>opposed</i> Klan activity.
Featured Sources
Source A: KKK in Sandwich, Illinois (1920s) Source B: Sycamore Push Back to Klan Rhetoric (1923) Source C: Klan Rally in Sycamore (1924) Source D: KKK Cross Burning in Sycamore (1938)

Supporting Question 3
How did racial covenants in DeKalb County keep neighborhoods segregated?
Formative Performance Task
Using the blank DeKalb County map , visually depict how the racial covenants and redlining decisions of local officials excluded Black residents.
Featured Sources
Source A: Redlining and Racial Covenants, DeKalb (1925) Source B: Racial Covenants, Sycamore (1927) Source C: Johnson Subdivision, Sycamore (1948)

Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT: How has racial exclusion manifested in the Northern US? Using local sources, construct an argument (written essay, PPT presentation, or other appropriate medium) that discusses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from both historic and current sources while acknowledging competing views.
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	<p>VIEW: Agnes Ma “The Ellfield Addition” (Work in Progress); Jadakess Neal, “Young black child, how do you grow? With no sunshine. Only hope.” and “Hold on tight and don’t let go.”</p> <p>CONNECT these artistic expressions of racial exclusion and struggle to the documents that you read about DeKalb County. How is this art corroborated by historical evidence?</p>
<p>Taking Informed Action</p>	<p>Explore: This site organizes the data for DeKalb County in the 2020 U.S. Census. Using the “Map” feature, highlight “Black Population Percent” in the drop-down. Compare this to other races in DeKalb County. What does this tell you about DeKalb’s racial organization in 2020?</p> <p>Reflect: In the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020, hundreds of people protested for racial equality, supporting demonstrations that were occurring nationwide. Read this local newspaper article and consider the local connection to national movements for racial justice. How does this relate to the 1920s?</p> <p>Review: A recent local example of Klan presence and intimidation in DeKalb County.</p> <p>Read: Individually, read the Policy Solutions section of this article.</p> <p>Create: Use the Policy Template to guide your group’s decision on an appropriate local policy for the DeKalb/Sycamore community that would promote racial equality.</p>

Figure 2 – Primary source material for this inquiry was compiled by the DeKalb County History Center and Ellwood House Museum. The sources are housed on their “Arts in Action” website at [createchange.today](#). The Inquiry Design Model is the NCSS model created by Grant, Lee, and Swan (2017). All other sources used within this lesson are hyperlinked.

My ability to create this IDM was based on the utilization of tools and resources readily available in local historical archives. There is no question that a myriad of historical societies across Illinois (and other states) hold similar local documents that illuminate and complicate national narratives. Familiar with the national and regional phenomenon, I wanted to identify sources in three different categories of typical racial exclusion in the American North: sundown towns, white supremacist actions, and racial covenants. The DeKalb County History Center, through [createchange.today](#), had several sources that addressed KKK organizing efforts and helpful visual resources that illuminated local racial covenants. From those, I chose appropriate sources for the inquiry that would inform students from varied perspectives and push students towards answering the supporting question with a corroborative source set.

For learners at the middle or elementary level, source selection can be challenging, but it can be managed through careful and conscientious excerpting and summarizing. Teachers might need to provide more scaffolded guidance to younger or struggling learners if the source materials are complex. For text-based sources, excerpt and “chunk out” the text, providing opportunities to check for understand and provide definitions for content-specific vocabulary. Younger learners would also benefit from multi-modal and layered texts within the supporting question document set to provide learning materials that are more legible to digital natives.²¹ Finally, teachers should limit the source set to two or three sources for each supporting question, ensuring that they choose sources that speak clearly to each other and address the supporting question. I often find it easiest to create a draft of supporting questions based on a topic, find my sources, and then go back to revise the supporting question to ensure that the alignment is clear.

²¹ For more information on layering multimodal texts, see Gholdy Muhammad, “How to Select Culturally and Historically Responsive Text,” *Scholastic Teacher Store*, July 22, 2022. <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/teaching-tools/articles/professional-development/cultivating-genius-how-select-culturally-historically-responsive-text.html>

Confronting Hard History: DeKalb IDM Example

Students engaging in the DeKalb racial exclusion IDM will have to grapple with the documented presence of the Ku Klux Klan as well as their town's reputation as a sundown town. The community inflicted terroristic violence on the Black population, which swelled and thrived during the Great Migration. There was a massive KKK rally in 1924 where many current students continue to play youth baseball. Such a confrontation with a place that once welcomed hate is not an easy thing to assimilate into a paradigm of place. It would be much easier, in this instance, to keep history over *there*. But if we are aware that such a layered history continues to be enacted in a local place, it is important that both the hard history and the hopeful present be expressed as iterations of the local story.

Teachers should treat hard history with care and intentionality, recognizing the potential pushback and avoiding one-sided victim narratives. Students should be encouraged to hold a mirror to their own geographical location and understand the ways that racism was embedded into social and economic life in the North just as it was in the South. Like their southern counterparts, Northern town governments, private developers, and citizens engaged and perpetuated policies and actions that effectively excluded Black citizens from the fulfillment of their natural rights.

A thorough adoption of grounding history instruction in local inquiries includes sequencing inquiries that explore both the hard and hopeful histories of any community. Hasan Kwame Jeffries has encouraged critical educators that “hard history is not hopeless history.”²² To find the “promise and possibility” within hard histories requires practitioners to consider the lives of historically marginalized groups on their own terms. The local IDM model gently guides students in that direction, providing them with a variety of primary and secondary sources that center voices from multiple perspectives. The exemplar DeKalb IDM provides documentation on the exclusionary methods employed by White residents. Within that same community, there are incredible stories of resistance, organization, and reform that demonstrated the resilience and persistence of Black citizens in the long struggle for Civil Rights in the American North. Through thoughtful teacher guidance, open ended questions, and the opportunity to create individual argumentation, students can navigate hard histories from their own communities. This is especially true if they are empowered to be change agents in and outside of their classrooms.

The Centrality of Informed Action for Place Attachment in Local IDMs

Though it is the final step on an IDM, informed action is the imperative procedural culmination of the local inquiry model. This is the step that empowers students to harness their knowledge into positive community action. For those students who have spent classroom time wrestling with a hard local history, this is the step that allows them to lift themselves and their communities past intellectual knowledge and into actionable progress. To refer to the previous example of the KKK rally on the ball field, students could take part in a campaign to place a historical marker at the site. Teachers help the students harness their new knowledge, write a narrative for the marker that reckons with the past, and helps build community awareness in the process.

²² Hasan Kwame Jeffries, “The Courage to Teach Hard History,” *Learning for Justice*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/the-courage-to-teach-hard-history> .

On the DeKalb County IDM (See Figure 2), I proposed another set of activities for informed action to help remediate the reverberations of historical decisions to racially exclude non-white residents. As students view recent census data, they compare the distribution of racial categories to other races in DeKalb County. The results demonstrate that the town is still organized in an alarmingly segregated manner. Teachers should help students understand how impactful racial covenants, sundown towns, and the strong KKK presence have been in instigating long-term effects for past and current DeKalb residents. Many students will likely have anecdotal evidence and personal experience of the ways that this historical exclusion has affected them. For example, mostly Black students from the Ridge Avenue neighborhood do not attend a neighborhood school within walking distance but are bused to D428 schools around the district. Why is this? Do racist attitudes still exist in DeKalb? How can students and teachers work to affect change and provide equitable access for all DeKalb residents?

To begin to help answer these important questions, instructors can guide students towards the community's response to George Floyd's murder in 2020. It was a summer of racial reckoning during a global pandemic. Locally, hundreds of people protested for racial equality, supporting demonstrations that were occurring nationwide. Students can read a local newspaper article about the protest and consider the local connection to national movements for racial justice.²³ How does this action, led by the community's youth, promote change? How do such efforts towards equality relate to DeKalb County in the 1920s? By answering these questions, students engage in contemporary consequences and continued advocacy efforts towards resolution of long-fought American issues.

Then, with some debriefing and supportive guidance, instructors could show students a recent local example of Klan presence in DeKalb County.²⁴ The frightening reality of the continued prevalence of racial intimidation in DeKalb County may alarm some students. Others may have their own stories of prejudice, racism, discrimination, and threats of violence. Instructors should be aware that this type of document can evoke a range of emotions from students. Instructors should be aware and conscientious of their own positionality, the classroom dynamic, and the school culture when facilitating this discussion. Though it may be difficult and should be handled with sensitivity and great care, such discourse is essential to begin the change process within communities – from fear and exclusion towards hope and restoration.

Students can be effective change agents in their communities and history teachers can help them understand how such changes begin in the town square and in local governmental structures. With the linked resources in their IDMs, students can access resources and templates to guide a group discussion or decision on an appropriate local policy for the DeKalb and Sycamore community that would promote racial equality. They can create a presentation for the Town Council or School Board as final step.

Without a doubt, this approach takes time. And as previously discussed, time is of the essence and in short supply. This example may work for some teachers while others may need to revise and reduce the time spent on informed action. Whatever the final decision in consideration of time constraints on instruction, teachers should not skip this step. The completion of informed action serves as a powerful tool to attach students to the place where they currently live and take

²³ Eddie Carifio, "Hundreds march for black lives in Sycamore as fifth day of protests draws biggest crowd yet," *Shaw Local*, June 3, 2020. <https://www.shawlocal.com/2020/06/03/hundreds-march-for-black-lives-in-sycamore-as-fifth-day-of-protests-draws-biggest-crowd-yet/ak3avcy/> .

²⁴ "Fear: Ku Klux Klan, Sycamore from 2016-2022," *Arts in Action: DeKalb County History Center*, 2022. <https://createchange.today/ku-klux-klan-sycamore-2016-2022/> .

active ownership over positive change in their community. In this way, the history classroom becomes directly relevant to their lived experience.

Conclusion

For students' learning process, for the standards and mandates that we have been given, and for the continued scholarship within local contexts, an agility with historical scale in US history classrooms and a local to global to local paradigm carries reciprocal benefits. Reciprocal scale agility asks students and teachers to be *local* and to think *globally*. Then, they can turn that comprehensive, interconnected thinking into local growth and engagement. Once teachers effectively link the local with the global, students will be more likely to connect concepts to their place attachments, encouraging them toward civic engagement in their communities as stakeholders and potential change agents.²⁵

This iterative method is a vision of how teachers might maximize contextualized local resources. Such an approach will require a repository of updated and inclusive historical inquiries with a local focus that span the units typically taught in secondary classrooms. This does not presently exist in the same accessible format as Sculle's *Illinois History Teacher*. The Illinois State Historical Society is beginning to invest in these efforts along with some individual scholars, but the work is only beginning. As this method suggests, we must build it together, from the ground up.

²⁵ Angela Calabrese Barton & Christina Berchini, "Becoming an Insider: Teaching Science in Urban Settings," *Theory into Practice*, 52:1 (2013): 21-27.