How do you ensure that the content you teach gives an accurate depiction of history when white-centric history is so ingrained in your school’s curriculum?

The curriculum I was given to teach did not talk about BIPOC voices, did not talk about issues around racism or colonialism, and didn’t talk about women. Even with the understanding that you can’t teach all of US History in a single class, how can you pretend that what you’re teaching is in any way accurate when you don’t mention such huge chunks of the population? This country was not built on the backs of white men, yet that is the history that I was given to teach.

This was the dilemma that I continuously returned to throughout the 2020-2021 school year and so it became the focus of my project. I knew that in dealing with questions around systemic racism in school curriculum, I wanted to use something that felt solid—something that felt official, as if it had been given to me by my school the way my curriculum had been. My instinct had been to go with a textbook, but since I no longer had access to one, I decided to write my own. My textbook is broken up into the 4 units I was given to teach as a student teacher, and each textbook page is based off of a day’s topic according to the curriculum schedule I was given. My textbook cuts off without any content pages in the last unit as I left my student teaching before I fully taught that unit.

I tried to be intentional with each portion of my textbook. To start with, the unit pages are written to reflect the white-centered narrative I was given to teach. Each unit’s headline is worded aggressively and the “Imagine” scenarios are written to reflect the pro-military, pro-capitalist, white-washed history that had been pushed by the culture at my school. The informational pages are filled with “lorem ipsum” which is a textbox filler used by content writers when the actual words don’t matter to an overall webpage. I did this deliberately as I felt that during my student teaching, I wound up abandoning the textbook entirely since it did not seem to give an accurate depiction of American history. In my dilemma I talk about the inherent white-washing and problematic nature of textbooks, so I wanted to portray how useless and intentionally confusing our school’s textbook had been. I also include “notes” on each page that show the information that I felt was important but that had been missing from the curriculum. The notes are taped in just like I had to quite literally insert those topics into my lessons, but they are accompanied by word bubble quotes of pushback that I’ve received from different sources to emphasize that this process is still not fully accepted by all schools/parents/students.

I found the creation of this textbook took much more introspection and careful wording than I had initially expected. I tried to continuously process what I was typing to determine what I had actually been told to teach, what my interpretation of that was, and how teachers at my placement school had interpreted it all. I wanted to emphasize my point, but I didn’t want to completely overexaggerate or misrepresent the intentions of my placement school. I found myself working very hard to approach each page of my textbook with generous and skeptical lenses so I could be as true to my teaching experience as possible.

As I wrote my “notes” for each page I also tried to keep focused on what I had included for each topic during my actual student teaching to stay grounded in my experiences. In doing this I realized that though I had tried to include as many diverse narratives as possible, I was still heavily focusing on traumatic and dark events from American history. I had a few moments of celebrating Black or female accomplishments, but more often than not I was talking about events where BIPOC people had been hurt. I realize now that going forward, I need to be more focused on including moments of BIPOC successes and joy, not just pain, if I want to better disrupt these racist systems.
