

Teaching Difficult Knowledge of the Korean War through International Children’s Literature

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I am a teacher educator from South Korea. In this article, I introduce two international children’s books on the Korean War and a fifth grade lesson based on the books to teach the Korean War through a critical lens. Before proceeding, I first explicate why teaching about wars critically, including the Korean War, is vital.

Teaching about Wars in Classrooms

U.S. military actions—international, domestic, or both—have been ongoing since the nation’s founding.¹ Today, we have become a nation with 17.4 million war veterans, with nearly 800 military bases around the world, and having spent \$6.4 trillion in the post-9/11 wars.²

In the dominant discourse, our wars are generally presented as grim, but often necessary and inevitable events that are undertaken for the best interests of the country.³ In this discourse, our country does not choose to go to war, but is forced into conflict because there is no other solution except for violence to defend our people or to rescue other people who are suffering from evildoers. This dominant discourse has, however, long been debunked for its inaccuracy.⁴ Counternarratives show, for example, that World War II, the so-called “good war,” was not a purely “good” war given U.S. denial of civil rights to its own citizens, such as the racist incarceration of tens of thousands of Japanese Americans. There were atrocities as well, such as the killing of countless numbers of innocent civilians in the Philippines by the bombing and shelling of suspected Japanese targets from afar.⁵

Mainstream textbooks generally shy away from the not-so-glorious aspects of U.S. wars.⁶ Official curriculum often celebrates these wars by omitting content that might counter the dominant discourse. We fail to ask students to evaluate how the war was fought, whether U.S. military actions were just, and whether the U.S. played a role in creating conditions or conflicts that preceded the war.⁷ Instead, official curriculum tends to focus on key people and dates, with a typically nationalist theme.⁸

Many teachers stick to the curriculum and teach war as just another topic to cover.⁹ Teachers do so for various reasons. Primarily, many teachers worry about pushback from parents, administrators, or community members for being unpatriotic, anti-American, or anti-military if they teach U.S. wars critically.¹⁰ Teachers also worry about the psychic damage of the realities of war and try to protect children from the weight of the world.¹¹ Teachers may also lack content knowledge or the time to teach about U.S. wars through a more critical lens.¹²

Teaching Wars as Difficult Knowledge

Although challenging, it’s vital that we teach about the causes and consequences of wars. The popular belief that U.S. wars are strictly options of last resort ignores concurrent antiwar protests and debates that argued otherwise.¹³ The belief by many citizens that their nation’s wars are always moral and honorable hides the complex politics of warfare and the many environmental and human costs, including atrocities, that are the result of war.¹⁴

The belief in war as necessary for the “national interests” is also problematic because it assumes the entire nation shares a single set of interests, and it ignores the brutal consequences faced by marginalized groups.¹⁵ These dominant-yet-dishonest narratives need to be disrupted in classrooms if we want students to make informed decisions in the future about whether, why, and how our nation should go to war.¹⁶ Otherwise, students are left with only the dominant messages from the larger society.

Teaching about war, then, needs to move beyond just covering the key dates, people, and places included in the official curriculum. Instead, it needs to frame war as “difficult knowledge.” Difficult knowledge refers to social or historical content that carries an emotional burden for students and teachers because the content often involves state-sanctioned violence, refutes broadly accepted versions of the past, and thus creates discomfort or unease.¹⁷ A difficult knowledge approach to teaching about U.S. wars challenges students to explore the realities of war and to further evaluate why the United States went to war, how a war was fought, and what impact a war had on various groups of people.

(commons.wikimedia.org; photo by Stephan)



A view of the wild spaces of the DMZ in Korea, 2007

We must also examine the responsibility of the United States in starting or continuing a war and ask whether there is acknowledgement of the suffering it has caused.¹⁸ For

example, the US post-9/11 wars “have forcibly displaced at least 37 million people in and from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, Libya, and Syria. This number exceeds the total displaced by every war since 1900, except World War II.”¹⁹ Although it is challenging to provide realistic depictions of war that are appropriate for children, teaching war as difficult knowledge is vital if we want to empower students as “transformers of the world”²⁰ into a less violent, more peaceful place.

Children’s Literature for Teaching Difficult Knowledge of War

Children’s literature can help teachers address the difficult knowledge of war in an age-relevant way. Unlike textbooks, children’s literature can invite students into a more thorough and honest exploration of war and helps them see the human cost of war, develop empathy, and expand their circle of caring to include those both near and far.²¹ Children’s literature also allows the reader to evaluate the United States’ role in the war and to contemplate whether there might have been alternatives to going to war.²²

Of course, not all children’s books on war present difficult knowledge. In fact, traditional children’s books often tell war stories uncritically.²³ In these books, wars are always fought for glory, the enemy is dehumanized, and soldiers return home as heroes.²⁴ In contrast, many children’s books today have rejected such an uncritical notion of war. These books do not shy away from the loss of life, nor the harrowing tolls on both soldiers and civilians at home and abroad, nor do they present war in a glorified manner.²⁵ When incorporated into the teaching of a

Sidebar A. Proposal for a Peace Park in the Korean DMZ



This map can be found in an article by Seung-ho Lee, “A New Paradigm for Trust-Building on the Korean Peninsula: Turning Korea’s DMZ into a UNESCO World Heritage Site,” published in *The Asia-Pacific Journal* in 2010. Lee is President of The DMZ Forum (www.dmzforum.org), which is “dedicated to conservation of globally unique biological and cultural resources of Korea’s demilitarized zone (DMZ) by turning it into a UNESCO World Heritage Site,” as suggested by the circle of yellow dots on the map. The DMZ incorporates territory on both sides of the cease-fire line as it existed at the end of the Korean War (1950–53). It was created by

pulling back the respective military forces 1.2 miles (2 km) along each side of the line. It runs for about 150 miles (240 km) across the Korean peninsula. Within the DMZ is the “truce village” of P’anmunjŏm, the site of peace discussions during the Korean War and of various conferences over issues involving North and South Korea, their allies, and the United Nations.

Sources: Seung-ho Lee, “A New Paradigm for Trust-Building on the Korean Peninsula: Turning Korea’s DMZ into a UNESCO World Heritage Site,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* vol. 8, issue 25, no. 2 (August 30, 2010), apjpf.org/-Seung-ho-Lee/3404/article.html; *Britannica*, www.britannica.com.

specific war, such children’s literature can help teachers move beyond the dominant narratives on the war.

Children’s Literature on the Korean War

There are few children’s books available that impart difficult knowledge about the Korean War. Often referred to as the “Forgotten War,” the Korean War is often absent in the U.S. collective memory, and it gets relatively little curricular attention in U.S. schools.²⁶ When the topic does arise, the Korean War is generally regarded as a benevolent U.S. mission to rescue South Koreans from the communist North Korean invasion.²⁷

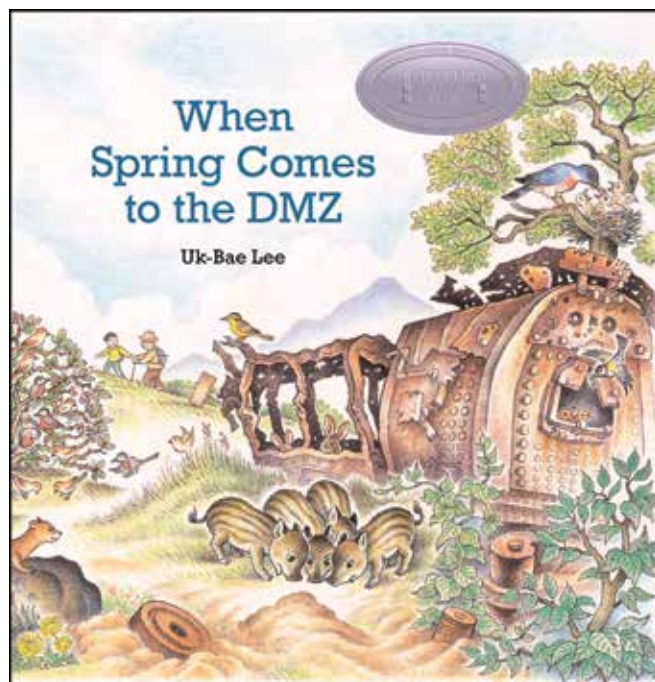
This remembering is limited, however. Counterstories reveal that, for example, the United States was not a pure liberator.²⁸ For 37 years in the early 1900s, Koreans had suffered from and fought against Japanese colonization. When the Japanese colonial power finally withdrew from Korea in 1945, the winners of World War II (the Soviet Union and the United States) denied the Koreans’ ability and desire for independence. Instead they divided Korea into two, and each power occupied one half of the Korean peninsula as a trustee.²⁹ This initial division planted the seed for the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.

Counterstories also reveal that atrocities were committed by U.S. troops and officers during the war. In the No Gun Ri massacre, for example, U.S. troops killed hundreds of South Korean civilians, and attacks by the U.S. Air Force killed countless others.³⁰ Some counterstories reveal that sexual violence was committed not only by “the enemies,” but also by U.S. troops during war and peacetime.³¹

Such difficult knowledge is missing in the curriculum of many states, as well as in children’s literature published in the United States. The few children’s books on the Korean War are informational books that are similar to textbooks in their avoidance of difficult knowledge. Moreover, very few of these books present the war critically. For example, *Sergeant Reckless* focuses on wartime animal heroism by telling a story of a horse that helped the U.S. Marines during the war.³² *My Freedom Trip* is another rare picture book, which tells the story of a young Korean girl who escaped North Korea prior to the war.³³ This book poignantly conveys the human cost of the war and provides historical context of the war. Yet, it presents an anti-communist binary of a dark, oppressive North Korea under the Soviet’s control versus a bright, free South Korea under the U.S. control. In doing so, this book obscures the oppressive and corrupt nature of the capitalist South Korean regime at that time. A chapter book, *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, tells a story of another Korean girl, who fled North Korea with her family.³⁴ Although it vividly depicts the human tragedy of the war and division, this book also presents a black-and-white account in which the communist Soviet and North Korean regime is portrayed as unequivocally evil, whereas the U.S. and capitalist South Korean regime is presented as unquestionably free and virtuous.³⁵

Teaching Korean War with international Children’s Literature

As a teacher educator from South Korea, I have noted a lack of children’s books published in the United States that address the difficult knowledge of the Korean War. This led me to collaborate with local school teachers to find and use international children’s literature in teaching about the war. In South Korea, traditional children’s literature used to tell only the official knowledge sanctioned by the military regimes, presenting the Korean War only from an anti-communist, anti-North Korean perspective.³⁶ Since the 1990s, however, when South Korea finally transitioned from a military dictatorship to a democratic government, children’s literature has moved away from the single nationalist narrative.³⁷ Below, I introduce two such books and present a fifth grade lesson based on them.



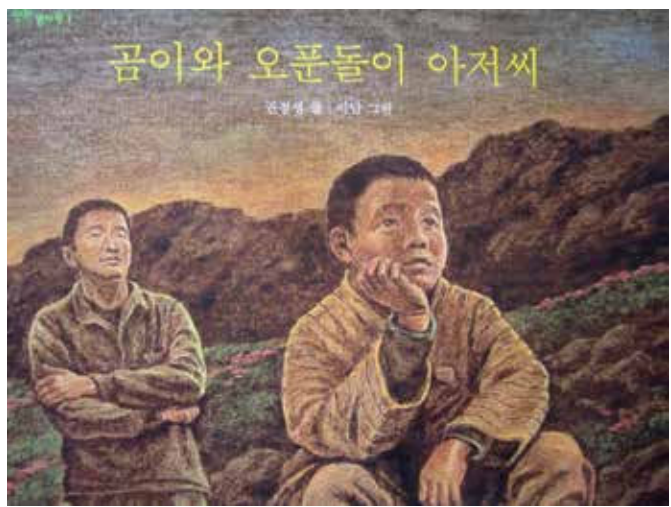
When Spring Comes to the DMZ, written and illustrated by Uk-Bae Lee, was originally written in Korean and published in South Korea, then translated into English and published in the United States.³⁸ This picture book was a 2020 Batchelder Honor Winner at the Youth Media Awards presented by the American Library Association, and also an Honorable Mention at the 2019 Freeman Awards, given by the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia. It portrays the human cost of the Korean War by describing what a young boy in South Korea and his grandfather see as they walk, in current times, in the natural landscape of Korea’s demilitarized zone (DMZ).

The DMZ is an unusual place, a “no-man’s land.” It’s about 155 miles long and varies in width (North to South) from 5 to 15 miles (**Sidebar A**). The Korean War remains suspended, not concluded, because the formal peace treaty was never signed after the ceasefire in 1953. Today, Korea is still divided into two: communist North Korea and capitalist South Korea.

Along the borders of the DMZ, the North and South Korean militaries stand against each other, and people cannot cross borders freely. Ironically, however, an untouched haven for wildlife has flourished inside the DMZ.

On each page, the readers can see beautiful wildlife thriving in the DMZ—which stands in juxtaposition to the severity of the soldiers on both sides of the DMZ conducting seasonal military practice. The readers can also hear the grandfather’s longing for a united Korea so that he can finally meet his long-lost family and friends in North Korea. When incorporated into teaching about the Korean War, this book can engage students into the unfinished history of the war playing out on the nightly news along with the human stories behind the news. The book also encourages students to contemplate a peaceful world without wars and walls. This book thus can be used in a text set focused on conflict and peace even if the curriculum does not include anything about the Korean War.

Komi and Op’undori, written and illustrated by Jung-saeng Kwon, is a picture book published in South Korea that has not been translated into English.³⁹ This book gives North Koreans a voice because the main characters, a young boy named Komi and a soldier named Op’undori, are North Koreans. The reader learns that both characters died during the Korean War. Fleeing North Korea with his parents, the character Komi died because of a U.S. air strike on civilians. Op’undori the soldier died on the battlefield fighting South Korean soldiers.



The story is set in the 1980s, three decades after their deaths. One night, the spirits of the boy and the man wake up at the top of a mountain and talk about their war experience. Here is one of the dialogues:

- Boy: Who were you fighting?
- Man: South Korean soldiers.
- Boy: What kind of people were they?
- Man: They were people just like me, protecting the same country.
- Boy: What do you mean “the same”?

Man: We are all Koreans. Only I lived in the North, and they lived in the South. That was the only difference.

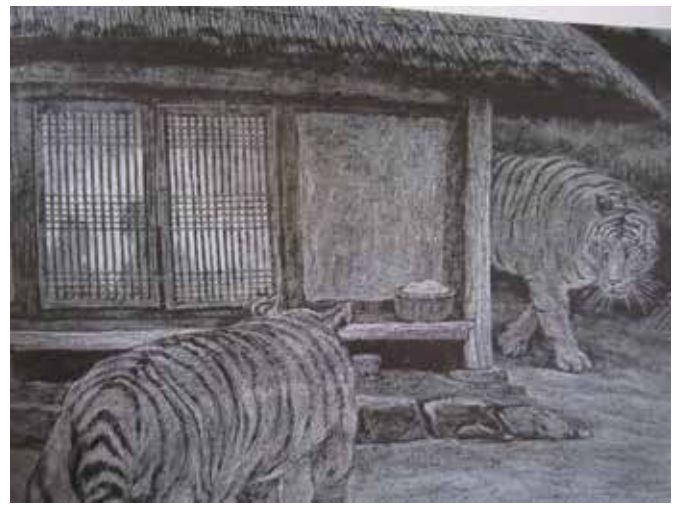
Boy: Did South Korean soldiers die too?

Man: Yes. We North Korean soldiers killed them. Their corpses were left in the North, and they can never return to their homeland.

Boy: Why did you do it? Why did you kill each other?

Man: [Instead of replying, the man shook his head.]

Soon, the boy and the man heard the growling of a tiger and recalled a Korean folktale, a story about a brother and sister who worked together to escape from a tiger. At once, the folktale was reenacted in front of the boy and the man, but with a twist. This time there were two tigers, and, unfortunately, the brother and sister could not agree with each other about how to escape the tigers. Soon, they were torn from each other and became the tigers’ prey.



Employing the folktale of the tiger, this book presents North and South Korea as “siblings” who were lured apart by two tigers, the Soviet Union and the United States. In doing so, it explains the Korean War as a foreign conflict conducted on Korean soil that preyed upon its people with devastating consequences. When incorporated into the teaching of the Korean War, this book can offer a different account from the dominant narrative in the United States, inviting students into a more interpretive nature of history.

A Sample Lesson

In Georgia, in the fifth-grade study of the Cold War, the Korean War is included. I have collaborated with fifth grade teachers in local schools to develop and teach a lesson building on the two books noted above. Although specific details have changed from classroom to classroom, the overall lesson outline has been similar to the one described below.

Regarding the C3 Framework and learning objective, the lesson aligns with Dimension 2 of the C3 Framework, including: D2. His.17.3-5. Summarize the central claim in a second-

ary work of history; D2. His.10.3-5. Compare information provided by different historical sources about the past; D2. His.4.3-5. Explain why individuals and groups who experienced the same historical period differed in their perspectives. The learning objective is for students to analyze and evaluate messages about the Korean War from varied sources with attention to the issues of voice and perspective.

Day 1. We start the lesson with a read aloud of *When Spring Comes to the DMZ*. Then, we present a photo slide show on the DMZ to show the unfinished history and legacy of the war (see Appendix for the suggested links to the photos). Next, we read *Komi and Op'undori*. Because it is written in Korean, I read the book in English using my own translation. After the read-aloud, I go through each page and invite the students to analyze how the war is described in the book. Then, students use a graphic organizer (**Handout 1**) to record their analysis of messages from the books.

Day 2. We guide students to dig deeper into the varied accounts of the war through international textbook analysis. Specifically, students analyze excerpts of textbooks from the United States, South Korea, and North Korea (**Handout 2**). Students continue to use the graphic organizer to record their analysis. After analysis, we present a photo slideshow on what happened during the war and the human cost of the war (see Appendix for the suggested links to photos). Then, we invite students to the whole group discussion centered on these questions:

- How similar or different are the textbooks and chil-



The monument “Earth Becoming One” was given by the South Korean government to the DMZ Museum in South Korea in 2005.

dren’s books in their explanation of the war?

- Why are there different accounts on the war across these different books?
- What questions do you still have about the Korean War?

Assessment. The graphic organizer and class discussions serve as the formative assessment. For the summative assessment, we offer two options, a and b.

- a. A Book Review. Students write a review of a children’s book on the Korean War. They can choose one of the

Sidebar B. Resources about the Korean War

U.S. Websites to Access Photos on the Korean War

“Costs of the Korean War” (Primary Source Sets), Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs (iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/korean-war-iowa#), Provides many photographs and documents, as well as a Korean War Set Teaching Guide.

Korean War Legacy Foundation (koreanwarlegacy.org/chapters/), Provides photos, documents, and veteran interview video clips.

Korean War Veterans Digital Memorial Project (www.kwvdm.org/collection.php?p=artifact), Provides photos, documents, letters, maps, and other historical artifacts.

International Children’s Literature on the Korean War

Lee, Uk-Bae. *When Spring Comes to the DMZ*. Waldorf, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2019.

Kwon, Jung-saeng. *Komi and Opundori*. South Korea: Pori, 2007.

U.S. Children’s Literature on the Korean War (for the Book Review Assignment)

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Choi, Sook Nyul. *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*. New York: Yearling, 1991.

McCormick, Patricia. *Sergeant Reckless*. New York: Harper Collins, 2017.

Park, Frances and Park, Ginger. *My Freedom Trip*. New York: Boyds Mills Press, 1998.

HANDOUT 1

Graphic Organizer: An Analysis of Children's Books and Textbooks on the Korean War

Your name: _____

Record your analysis. Depending on texts, not every cell will be filled.

Accounts of War	Cause How and why did the war begin?	Effect What was the effect of the war? Who suffered? Who benefited?	Conduct How was the war fought?	U.S. Role What was the US role in the war?	Legacy What is the legacy of the war?	Message What is overarching message from the text?
<i>When Spring Comes to the DMZ</i>						
<i>Komi and Op'undori</i>						
U.S. Textbook Excerpt						
South Korea Textbook Excerpt						
North Korea Textbook Excerpt						

Textbook Excerpts

Adapted from L. Lin et al., "Teaching Historical and Current Events from Multiple Perspectives: The Korean War and Six-Party Talks," *Social Science Research and Practice* 4, no. 3 (2009). 56–75.

North Korea Textbook, Excerpt (a)

Upset by the fast and astonishing growth of the power of the Republic, the American invaders hastened the preparation of an aggressive war in order to destroy it in its infancy....The American imperialists furiously carried out the war project in 1950....The American invaders who had been preparing the war for a long time, alongside their puppets, finally initiated the war on June 25th of the 39th year of the Juche calendar. That dawn, the enemies unexpectedly attacked the North half of the Republic, and the war clouds hung over the once peaceful country, accompanied by the echoing roar of cannons. Having passed the 38th parallel, the enemies crawled deeper and deeper into the North half of the Republic...the invading forces of the enemies had to be eliminated and the threatened fate of our country and our people had to be saved.

South Korea Textbook, Excerpt (b)

When the overthrow of the South Korean government through social confusion became too difficult, the North Korean communists switched to a stick-and-carrot strategy: seeming to offer peaceful negotiations, they were instead analyzing the right moment of attack and preparing themselves for it. The North Korean communists prepared themselves for war. Kim Il-sung secretly visited the Soviet Union and was promised the alliance of the Soviets and China in case of war. Finally, at dawn on June 25th, 1950 the North began their southward aggression along the 38th parallel. Taken by surprise at these unexpected attacks, the army of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) fought courageously to defend the liberty of the country....The armed provocation of the North Korean communists brought the UN Security Council around the table. A decree denounced the North Korean military action as illegal and as a threat to peace, and a decision was made to help the South. The UN army constituted the armies of 16 countries—among them, the United States, Great Britain and France—who joined the South Korean forces in the battle against the North.

US Textbook, Excerpt (c)

In June 1950, North Korea forces crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea. The conflict that followed became known as the Korean War. President Truman viewed Korea as a test case for his containment policy. He responded promptly. The United States appealed to the United Nations (UN) to stop the Communist move into South Korea. Sixteen nations provided soldiers for a UN force. However, U.S. troops made up most of the force and did most of the fighting. General Douglas MacArthur, former World War II hero in the Pacific, served as commander of all UN forces. ... In early fighting, the North Koreans pushed the South Koreans back almost to Pusan. This city was on the southeastern tip of the Korean peninsula. MacArthur reversed the situation by landing his troops at Incheon. This was a port city behind the North Korean lines. It was a daring, dangerous plan, but it worked. Squeezed between enemy troops coming at them from the north and south, the North Korean soon retreated across the 38th parallel. General MacArthur requested permission of his superiors to pursue the enemy into North Korea. The UN and President Truman agreed. The president hoped the invasion might lead to a reunion of the two Koreas. The UN forces pushed northward beyond the 38th parallel (latitude) toward the Yalu River, the boundary separating China from North Korea. The Chinese warned them to stop.

Sources:

- (a) *History of the Revolution of our Great Leader Kim Il-sung: High School*. (Ponyang, North Korea: Textbook Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 125–127.
- (b) Doojin Kim, *Korean History: Senior High*. (Seoul, South Korea: Dae Han Textbook Co., 2001), p. 199.
- (c) Jesus Garcia, Donna M. Ogle, C. Frederick Risinger, and Joyce Stevos, *Creating America: A History of the United States*. (McDougal Littell, 2005), pp. 795–797.

suggested books (see **Sidebar B**). In the review, students are to answer three questions: (1) What message does this book send to the readers about the war? (2) Whose voice or perspective is emphasized and whose is missing? and (3) Compare/contrast this book to one used in the lesson and describe how their messages are similar/different using details and evidence from the texts.

- b. A Photo Collage. Students create a photo collage on the Korean War. They are to select 5–10 photos of the war from the suggested websites (**Sidebar B**); curate the photos to tell a story about the war; and add a note next to each photo regarding its message about the war.

Student Learning. Teaching this lesson over the years, I have witnessed that fifth graders are able and eager to go beyond a feel-good narrative of the Korean War. They are intrigued by the conflicting accounts of the war including the U.S. role in the war. Students also feel empathy for those impacted by the war and ask why the war still continues and how to end the war. The two-day lesson is of course not long enough to answer all their questions fully. Yet, I believe it has been a critical piece of their future inquiry into the war and into U.S. wars in general.

Conclusion

Teaching the difficult knowledge of U.S. wars is not unpatriotic. In fact, it is patriotic if we define patriotism not as blind obedience to government actions but as loyalty to our national principles of liberty and justice for all.⁴⁰ When children are given the opportunity to examine and evaluate U.S. military actions past and present, they are better equipped to push the government to work for a less violent world. Regarding questions about whether elementary students are too young for serious discussions about wars, Mahatma Gandhi reminds us, “If we are to reach real peace in this world and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.”⁴¹ Indeed, research shows war-related attitudes begin to crystallize by age 7, and, by 15, students express a definite viewpoint about war.⁴² Research also shows that children can and want to discuss the difficult knowledge of war.⁴³

Given the limitations of textbooks, children’s books can be alternatives to communicate the difficult knowledge of war. When such books are rare, which is more likely when the topic is unpopular, collaboration with transnational scholars, parents, or communities can be a solution. Unfortunately, only 2 to 4 percent of the children’s books published in the United States come from other countries.⁴⁴ Thus, reaching out to such sources can help teachers locate and use international children’s literature to transcend a single nationalist story of U.S. wars. Regarding the Korean War in particular, please contact me. I would love to share transnational children’s literature and instructional resources with you. 🌐

Notes

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4. Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the United States* (Visalia, CA: Vintage, 2020); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003); James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995).
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