

Unraveling the Threads of Difficult History in the Classroom: A Systematic Literature Review

Tsabit Azinar Ahmad^{1,2}, Agus Mulyana¹✉, Wawan Darmawan¹, Erlina Wiyanarti¹

¹ Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, ✉ agusmulyana66@upi.edu

² Universitas Negeri Semarang

Article history

Received : 2023-09-03

Accepted : 2024-03-04

Published : 2023-04-04

Keywords

Difficult history,
Historical empathy,
History education,
Teacher challenge

Abstract: This systematic literature review aims to comprehensively examine and synthesize existing research on teaching difficult history in the classroom. Difficult history includes emotionally charged, controversial, or challenging topics for educators and students. Twenty-three publications from the Scopus database from 2014-2023 were selected for review using PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Then, four research questions were used to guide the review and analysis centered on difficult history content, pedagogical approaches, teachers' challenges to offering a comprehensive understanding of difficult history learning in schools, and the impact of difficult history on students. Reviews reveal that scholars are increasingly interested in studying difficult historical topics and highlighting dark events in various regions worldwide. Teaching difficult history requires multiple pedagogical approaches, including affective learning, experiential learning, and inquiry-based learning. Teaching difficult history contributes to empathy, critical thinking skills, and historical consciousness to encourage students to connect past events to present-day issues.

Abstrak: Reviu literatur sistematis ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji secara komprehensif dan mensintesis penelitian yang ada tentang pengajaran sejarah pelik (difficult history) di kelas. Sejarah yang sulit mencakup topik-topik yang bermuatan emosional, kontroversial, atau menantang bagi pendidik dan siswa. Dua puluh tiga publikasi dari database Scopus pada tahun 2014-2023 dipilih untuk ditinjau menggunakan pedoman PRISMA 2020. Reviu dan analisis dipandu oleh empat pertanyaan penelitian, yang berpusat pada konten sejarah pelik, pendekatan pembelajaran, tantangan guru pada pembelajaran sejarah pelik di sekolah, dan dampak sejarah pelik pada siswa. Reviu mengungkapkan bahwa para sarjana semakin tertarik untuk mempelajari topik-topik sejarah yang pelik, serta menyoroti beragam peristiwa kelam di berbagai wilayah di seluruh dunia. Mengajarkan sejarah pelik memerlukan berbagai pendekatan pedagogi, termasuk pembelajaran afektif (*affective learning*), pembelajaran berdasarkan pengalaman (*experiential learning*), dan pembelajaran berbasis inkuiri. Mengajarkan sejarah pelik berkontribusi pada empati, keterampilan berpikir kritis, dan kesadaran sejarah untuk mendorong siswa menghubungkan peristiwa masa lalu dengan isu-isu masa kini.

Cite this article: Ahmad, T.A, Mulyana, A., Darmawan, W., Wiyanarti, E. (2024). Unraveling the Threads of Difficult History in the Classroom: A Systematic Literature Review. *Paramita: Historical Studies Journal*, 34(1), 161-173. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15294/paramita.v34i1.47346>

INTRODUCTION

Teaching history is not a mere chronicle of events; it is a journey into the complexities of the past, a struggle with diverse perspectives, and a confrontation with the challenges inherent in understanding human experience. In the past three decades, democracies worldwide have increasingly grappled with their national pasts' problematic and traumatic aspects (Goldberg, 2020). Monuments, museums, memorials, and curricula reflect this urgency in public areas (Bell, 2016; Goldberg, 2020; Lehrer



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et al., 2011; Reeves & Heath-Kelly, 2020; Stoddard, 2022). Scholars, in the last decade, have underscored the connection between history education and traumatic narratives in the past (Stoddard, 2022; Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021). This emphasis on difficult history—topics marked by emotional intensity, controversy, and complexity—underlines the relevance and importance of our research.

Difficult history is intricately connected to difficult knowledge (Epstein & Peck, 2017; Harris et al., 2022; Sheppard, 2010). The difficult knowledge refers to including social trauma in the curriculum and how individuals engage with these issues in learning (Pitt & Britzman, 2003). Britzman first introduced the concept of “difficult knowledge” in 1998 when examining the teaching of Anne Frank’s Diary in the school curriculum under Holocaust education. Britzman has shown that the diaries of survivors have provided an opportunity to ask difficult questions about painful encounters between students and victims of violence, aggression, and hatred (Zembylas, 2014).

Difficult knowledge and history are closely related but not always regarded as synonymous (Miles, 2019). Difficult knowledge is closer to the psychological aspects of a person’s encounter with a traumatic narrative. Meanwhile, difficult history is a broader term that refers to efforts to teach and study a traumatic, sensitive, or violent past. Psychoanalytic approaches commonly guide the study of difficult knowledge. Educational research on difficult history draws from various theories and approaches, including historical thinking, historical consciousness, sociocultural theory, critical theory, feminism, and affect theory (Epstein & Peck, 2017).

Difficult history is seen as a narrative that examines past events involving conflict, trauma, and violence, creating a shared sense of identity through collective memory among individuals engaged in history and triggering intellectual, moral, and emotional responses based on one’s identity (Suh et al., 2021). Difficult history is based on the trauma, suffering, and severe oppression, including racism, apartheid, genocide, conflict, and violence experienced by social groups. The complexity lies in the facts and deriving lessons from historical narratives of violence (Harris et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2017). Portraying grim occurrences can lead to unease in acquiring knowledge (Harcourt, 2020; Harris et al., 2019; MacDonald & Kidman, 2022). Therefore, events and studies within difficult historical contexts can spark disputes. Instances like this are what render traumatic narratives “difficult.”

Difficult histories are central to a nation’s

history, often involving collective or state-sanctioned violence that challenges existing understandings (Gross & Terra, 2018; Rodríguez, 2020; Tribukait, 2021). They often refute widely accepted versions of the past and connect with contemporary issues (Miles, 2019). Difficult histories often involve extreme suffering due to oppression and injustice, evoke traumatic reactions in students, and create disequilibria, disrupting established historical understandings (Harris et al., 2022; Wallis, 2019). Overall, difficult histories encompass sensitive and traumatic events that implicate the identities of individuals today and require careful consideration in educational settings.

Difficult history is a challenging historical subject and poses unique pedagogical dilemmas. These characteristics highlight the unique nature of difficult history and its pedagogical challenges in teaching and learning about the past. As a result, scholars have shown interest in investigating it in recent years, as seen from several previous studies focused on understanding past acts of violence. The research examines how teachers, students, and other stakeholders understand the difficult history in the present (Goldberg et al., 2019; Gross & Wotipka, 2019). Furthermore, studies examine the possibilities, prospects, obstacles, and practical applications of connecting traumatic stories to learning. This study examines the impact of challenging historical events on the development of specific abilities, including historical thinking, historical empathy, and reconciliation, as discussed by Gross (2014), Harrison et al. (2022), and Honig & Porat (2021). Moreover, some studies examine the portrayal of challenging historical events in historiography and public discourse (Bell, 2016; Miles, 2021; Patterson & Shuttleworth, 2020; Richardson, 2021; Trofanenko, 2011; Watson, 2018; Widawski & Oleśniewicz, 2023). The other study also examines innovation development in applying difficult history teaching (Gaudelli et al., 2013; Grever & Van Nieuwenhuyse, 2020). Although research on educational approaches and classroom practices is increasing, there is still a necessity for further investigation of difficult history in the classroom. Therefore, recent research suggests many opportunities to explore difficult history subjects, such as through literature reviews.

As a result, to fill the gap, this study aims to conduct a systematic literature review (SLR) to consolidate knowledge on teaching difficult history in the classroom, as prior SLR studies are limited. This systematic literature review seeks to uncover the complexities surrounding teaching difficult history

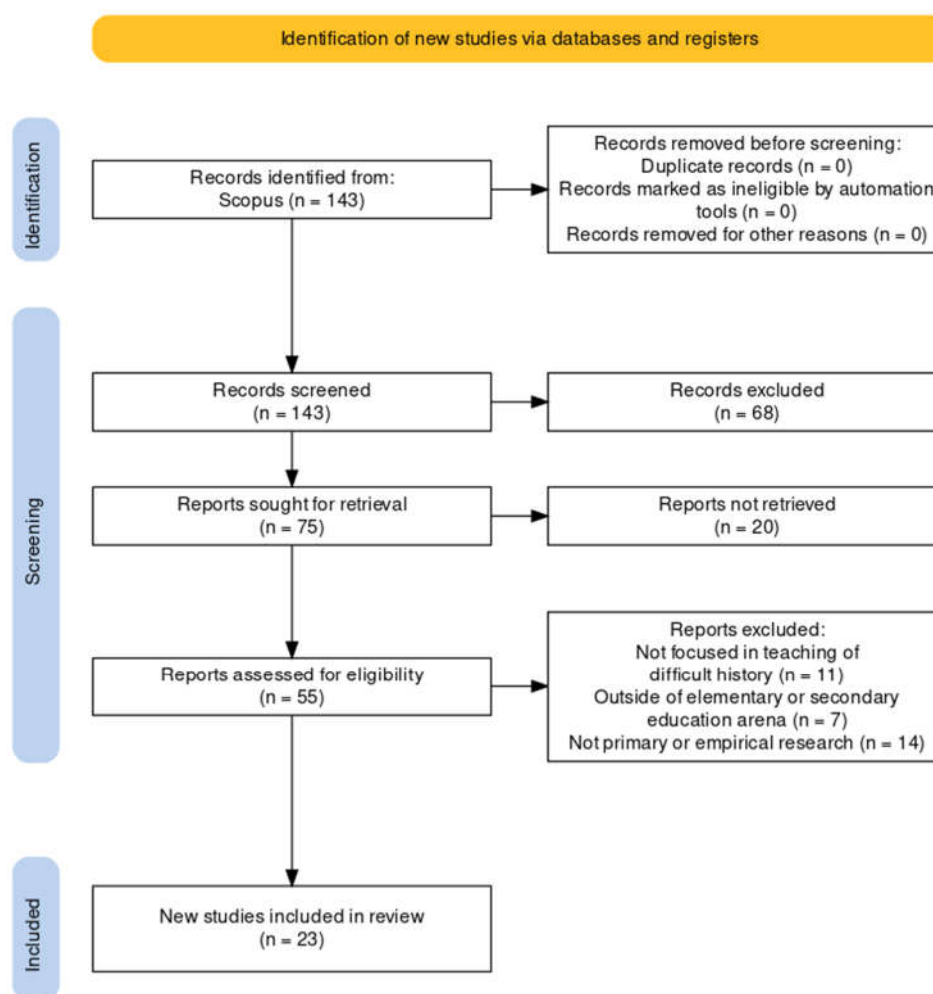


Figure 1. Study identification and selection process based on PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Haddaway et al., 2022; Page et al., 2021)

in educational settings and answer the following research questions: (1) What topics are associated with difficult history in educational settings? (2) What pedagogical approaches are commonly used to teach difficult history in the classroom? (3) How do educators overcome the challenges of teaching difficult history, and what strategies are used? Moreover, (4) How does difficult history teaching affect students' cognitive and affective outcomes? By engaging with the difficult complexities of teaching history, educators can foster a deeper understanding of the past and empower students to engage in critical discussion with the world around them.

METHOD

The study utilized the systematic literature review approach to summarize and synthesize current literature findings on a specific research topic or field (Donthu et al., 2021). We initially searched the papers using keywords from titles, abstracts, or contents in various databases and then vetted them ac-

cording to PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). After that, we selected the Scopus database due to its comprehensive search results, reliable search results, and advanced search functions (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2021). We use the Scopus website (<https://www.scopus.com/search/form.uri?display=basic#basic>) to identify papers related to difficult history. During the identification process, we applied keyword searching to find relevant studies, which included topics, titles, and abstracts containing the search words. With the consideration of research questions and the content of the appraisal, the search keywords were decided as "difficult history" OR "difficult past" OR "hard history" AND "school" OR "classroom" OR "education" OR "learning" OR "teaching."

The identification was conducted on 25 December 2023 and identified 143 articles. The initial screening stage selects articles by filtering the database according to criteria like period, subject area, document type, and language. The article criteria used for the next stage are (1) articles published in

the 2014–2023 period; the period represents a decade of recent scholarship, capturing the latest trends, methodologies, and findings in teaching difficult history. Focusing on this timeframe allows the review to present an up-to-date synthesis of current research and thought. (2) subject areas in the fields of (a) social sciences and (b) arts and humanities; (3) articles written and published in the journal; and (4) English language articles. Therefore, 75 articles were left. The author then located the full text of the article and identified 55 accessible articles. The 55 articles must meet inclusion criteria to be eligible for review: (1) the study must focus on teaching difficult history topics; (3) the study must be within the arena of elementary or secondary education; (4) the study must conduct primary or empirical research.

Subsequently, we assessed the eligibility of 55 articles by thoroughly examining their abstracts, research methodologies, and findings, applying specific criteria to ensure their relevance. The result showed eleven publications were unrelated to teaching difficult historical issues in school, and seven articles did not address learning in elementary and high schools. We also excluded 14 articles because they were conceptual papers or review pieces. At the last stage, there were 23 articles remaining for review.

The analysis of the identified 23 publications was guided by four proposed research questions, which centered on the content of difficult history, the pedagogical method, and the teacher challenge to offer a comprehensive understanding of learning difficult history in school and the impact of difficult history for students. All papers were thoroughly read and summarized, covering each study's objective, contents, method, findings, and conclusion. Then, we used summaries to determine the answers to the four research inquiries in each work. After that, we created the synthesis by thematically analyzing the responses to the study questions. Next, we composed the synthesis in the Results section using the themes identified in the codes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scholars have shown interest in studying difficult historical topics in recent years, albeit to a limited extent. In the last ten years, there have been eight publications and an increasing focus on studying challenging historical topics. Between 2021 and 2023, 14 publications surpassed the nine articles published between 2014 and 2020.

Various research methods were employed to investigate difficult histories. Case studies and

mixed methods are the most commonly utilized research methodologies, each with five papers. Then, four studies employ ethnographic strategies, and three articles utilize phenomenological methods. Other methods include auto-ethnography, constructivist-interpretive, narrative, qualitative content analysis, and survey.

Empirical research on difficult histories has been conducted in multiple countries. Research from 27 countries formed the basis of the assessed articles. Some cross-country studies were undertaken (Goldberg et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2022; Jovanović & Marić, 2020; Tribukait, 2021). The United States has the highest number of research locations, with 9, followed by Israel and New Zealand with 3. Two papers each examined Australia, France, Germany, and Serbia. Table 1 displays the articles we analyzed.

The Difficult History Content

Reviews indicate a diverse, difficult history in many regions around the globe. In the United States, the difficult histories are as follows: slavery (Demoiny & Tirado, 2023; Hughes, 2022; Moffa, 2022); the Holocaust (Gross, 2017; Gross & Kelman, 2017; Harris et al., 2019); World War II (Gross & Kelman, 2017); Japanese American incarceration (Rodríguez, 2020); and issues related to racial sentiment, including school desegregation (Hughes, 2021; Suh et al., 2021).

Several studies in Europe characterize World War II as a difficult history (Goldberg et al., 2019; Tribukait, 2021), particularly focusing on the Nazis and the Holocaust (Gross, 2014; Tribukait, 2021). Tribukait (2021) also highlights the problems surrounding colonialism and decolonization. In the Western Balkans, the difficult history encompasses the wars of the 1990s and the armed conflict in Macedonia in 2001 (Jovanović & Marić, 2020). Then, the issue of Palestine has become difficult in Israel (Goldberg, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2019; Tribukait, 2021). Other issues of concern are intra-national strife and armed conflict (Goldberg et al., 2019; Tribukait, 2021); the Troubles in Northern Ireland (McCully et al., 2021); the Altalena affair in Israel (Honig & Porat, 2021), Islamophobia in Austria (Goldberg et al., 2019), and Socialism (Tribukait, 2021).

Several studies have focused on colonialism and internal conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. Issues related to indigenous violence related to colonialism have become a difficult history in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Harrison et al., 2022; MacDonald & Kidman, 2022; Miles, 2019; Yukich,

Table 1. Articles concerning teaching difficult history, short by year published

Author(s), Year	Locus	Methodology	Contents
Gross (2014)	Poland	Mixed Method	Holocaust
Goldberg (2017)	Israel	Survey	Holocaust; Palestinian refugee
Gross & Kelman (2017).	The United States	Mixed Method	Holocaust; World War II
Gross (2017)	The United States	Mixed Method	Holocaust
Goldberg et al. (2019)	Austria, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Serbia, The Netherlands.	Survey	Palestinian refugee (Israel); History of Islam (Austria); World War II; intra-national strife and armed conflict
Harris et al. (2019)	The United States	Case Study	Holocaust
Miles (2019)	Canada	Case Study	Indian Residential School
Jovanović & Marić (2020)	Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia.	Survey	Wars in the 1990s; military conflict in Macedonia in 2001;
Rodríguez (2020)	The United States	Case Study	Japanese American incarceration
Honig & Porat (2021)	Israel	Constructivist-interpretive	The Altalena affair
Hughes (2021)	The United States	Ethnography	Racism
McCully & Weiglhofer (2021)	Northern Ireland.	Mixed Method	The Troubles
Riyani et al. (2021)	Indonesia	Phenomenology	Conflicts in Aceh
Suh, Daugherty, Hartsfield (2021)	The United States	Qualitative Content Analysis	School Desegregation
Tribukait (2021)	Slovakia, Hungary, France, Germany, Portugal, Croatia, Spain, Italy.	Phenomenology	Colonialism and decolonization; intranational and interethnic conflicts; Europe under Nazi rule, including the Holocaust; and Socialism
Yukich (2021)	New Zealand.	Narrative	Treaty of Waitangi
Zembylas & Loukaidis (2021)	Cyprus	Phenomenology	Cyprus Issue (interethnic violence)
Harrison et al. (2022)	Australia and New Zealand	Autoethnography	Colonial violence (Violence and massacre of Aboriginal people)
Hughes (2022)	The United States	Mixed Method	Slavery
MacDonald & Kidman (2022)	New Zealand	Ethnography	Colonial violence
Moffa (2022)	The United States	Case Study	Slavery
Davies (2023)	Australia	Ethnography	Racism
Demoigny (2023)	The United States	Case Study	Slavery

2021). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the studies on the difficult history focused on the Aceh conflict (Riyani et al., 2021).

Pedagogical approaches to Teaching Difficult History

Reviews confirm the use of several pedagogical approaches in the educational setting. Teachers' pedagogical approach varies based on individual characteristics, school environment, political climate, and historical context (Goldberg et al., 2019; Jovanović & Marić, 2020). The widely used learning approach in teaching difficult history is affective learning (Davies, 2023; Demoigny & Tirado, 2023; McCully et al., 2021; Yukich, 2021). Affective learning engages students with personal viewpoints and emotional vulnerability (Yukich, 2021) and focuses on exam-

ining self-other relations and critical reflection on racial identities to promote reflexive practice (Davies, 2023; Demoigny & Tirado, 2023). For example, critical museum engagement also employs affective learning (McCully et al., 2021) that involves thinking and feeling, like when students visit museums, and their emotions help them see history in new ways. Affective learning was chosen because difficult history disrupts an individual's sense of self and existing meaning, and emotions play an important role in understanding and processing that history. Affective disruption, as conceptualized by Zembylas, highlights the importance of addressing emotions rather than relying solely on pedagogical techniques to help teachers and students deal with the emotional legacy of the past (Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021).

Concepts similar to affective learning are the pedagogy of remembrance (Goldberg, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2019) and trauma-informed pedagogy (Harrison et al., 2022). The pedagogy of remembrance involves authentic engagement with uncertainty and unfinished stories. It is used to learn from testimony and trauma. Trauma-informed pedagogy integrates knowledge about trauma into policies and practices. Empathy is performative in reconfiguring interactions between narratives and memories (Harrison et al., 2022).

Many difficult history teachings use experiential learning (Gross, 2014, 2017; Gross & Kelman, 2017; Harris et al., 2019; Jovanović & Marić, 2020; MacDonald & Kidman, 2022; Miles, 2019; Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021). Experiential learning strategies include teachers' survivor testimonies (Gross, 2017; Harris et al., 2019). Teachers also used their emotional experiences to intertwine with their pedagogical practices (Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021). Some teachers visit sites or locations related to difficult pasts, such as engaging with difficult histories at sites of colonial violence (MacDonald & Kidman, 2022). Some use historical photography sources, such as historical photographs, to teach about the Indian Residential Schools (Miles, 2019) and photo elicitation activities with seven WWII photographs for student responses (Gross, 2014). Through experiential learning, students can hear survivors' testimonies, participate in workshops, and collaborate with others to create meaningful projects (Gross, 2017). This approach helps students develop a deeper understanding of difficult history by immersing themselves in the course material and reflecting on their experiences (Rodríguez, 2020). Experiential education programs successfully transferred past histories into present-day issues. So that, students be more aware, socially responsible, and inspired to act (Gross, 2017).

This review reveals that teachers often use inquiry-based learning in teaching difficult history (Hughes, 2021, 2022; Suh et al., 2021). Inquiry-based learning is recommended for teaching about racial oppression. For instance, scholars use the historical inquiry method to delve into African American history (Hughes, 2022). When using this approach, teachers must plan well. The historical inquiry focuses on change and continuity, causation, multiple perspectives, and sources. It included multiple perspectives and historical sources in lesson plans. Therefore, historical inquiry focused on change and continuity, causation, multiple perspectives, and sources. Then, the lesson plans included multiple perspectives and historical sources (Suh et

al., 2021).

Another approach teachers use is the pedagogy of discomfort (Honig & Porat, 2021; Rodríguez, 2020; Tribukait, 2021). Teachers use a pedagogy of discomfort to challenge students' beliefs. A pedagogy of discomfort with critical hope fosters engagement with difficult histories. Teachers used open-ended, multi-perspective, source-based learning approaches for teaching controversial issues (Tribukait, 2021). This approach is called by Honig (2021) the "fight" approach. The 'Fight' approach involves facing conflicts head-on for meaningful discussions. The "fight" approach promotes multiperspectivity by exposing students to diverse viewpoints and encouraging critical thinking and rational discourse by exposing various sources and research assignments (Honig & Porat, 2021).

Apart from the approaches above, civic pedagogical methods are also used. The civic pedagogical method also centers on the debate (Moffa, 2022). Then, the application of cognitive behavioral therapy is crucial for peace education (Riyani et al., 2021). Not infrequently, teachers also apply a "flight" approach to avoid historical figures to maintain a quiet lesson, and a "light" approach balances teaching controversial events with sensitivity (Honig & Porat, 2021).

Teacher Challenges in Learning Difficult History

Teaching difficult histories poses several challenges, stemming from the sensitive nature of the topics, potential emotional triggers for students, and the complexities of navigating diverse perspectives. One challenge is the lack of content knowledge and developmentally appropriate resources, which may deter elementary social studies educators from addressing difficult histories in the classroom (Rodríguez, 2020). Difficult history requires skilled teacher decision-making and critical self-reflection (Demoigny & Tirado, 2023). Besides that, teachers' diverse cultural origins can hinder learning, as some white teachers may refrain from discussing enslavement because of racial beliefs (Miles, 2019). They also faced challenges due to a lack of formal social studies training (Honig & Porat, 2021). Teachers in the Western Balkans lack coordination and support for teaching, and teachers view recent wars in the classroom as a risk-taking (Jovanović & Marić, 2020). Teachers faced challenges in planning to teach difficult histories effectively and connecting past events to present-day issues (Suh et al., 2021).

Additionally, the fear of upsetting parents and limited time for teaching substantive social studies further hinder the inclusion of difficult his-

tories in the curriculum (Gross, 2017; McCully et al., 2021). Teachers face resistance to promoting difficult conversations in contested societies (Goldberg et al., 2019). Teachers face affective dilemmas in peace education efforts. Balancing social norms with pedagogical values creates emotional challenges for teachers (Gross, 2017).

Another challenge is the belief that young children are incapable of understanding the implications of race and racism central to difficult histories, leading to avoiding such topics (Demoigny & Tirado, 2023). Then, teachers face challenges in fostering intercultural capabilities in students (Davies, 2023). Also, limited mentorship, disinterested students, and racial tensions hinder academic success (Gross & Kelman, 2017). Furthermore, a lack of interest leads to reluctance to teach difficult history fields (Hughes, 2021). These challenges highlight the need for teachers to navigate the sensitive nature of difficult histories and find appropriate ways to engage students in learning about these important aspects of history.

The Impact of Difficult History

The review indicates that teaching difficult history has dual impacts. Initially, it may provoke disruptive responses. Difficult history can evoke strong emotions and discomfort in students (Tribukait, 2021; Yukich, 2021; Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021). Difficult histories lead to cognitive biases and unconscious history emergence (Riyani et al., 2021), prompt uncomfortable yet inspiring experiences for students (MacDonald & Kidman, 2022), and can trigger trauma in students and teachers, disinterest, and silence in the classroom (Jovanović & Marić, 2020; Moffa, 2022).

Conversely, teaching difficult history has a more beneficial impact. There is a strong correlation between empathy and difficult history (Goldberg, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2022; Tribukait, 2021). It is also related to historical consciousness to encourage students to connect past events with present-day issues and reflect on ongoing problems' contributions (Demoigny & Tirado, 2023; Gross, 2017; Hughes, 2021, 2022; Suh et al., 2021). Teaching difficult history is also relevant to enhancing critical thinking and civic engagement (Goldberg et al., 2019) and developing sensitivity, tolerance, and exposure to multiple perspectives (Honig & Porat, 2021). Besides that, it makes students appreciate multiculturalism, expands their understanding of national narratives (Gross & Kelman, 2017), and inspires students to become advocates against injustices (Rodríguez,

2020). In post-conflict societies, teaching difficult history will be useful for fostering peacebuilding and reconciliation (McCully et al., 2021; Riyani et al., 2021).

Discussion

Difficult histories are central to a nation's history, often involving state-sanctioned violence, and tend to challenge broadly accepted versions of the past or stated national values (Miles, 2019; Rodríguez, 2020). These histories may also connect with contemporary societal tensions and disrupt self-identity (McCully et al., 2021). Therefore, we can argue that every nation has a difficult history, as its impact extends beyond the past and continues to shape present-day societies. However, the distribution of studies on difficult histories is uneven. Developed countries like The United States, Australia, and New Zealand have conducted numerous studies. Developed countries predominantly observe the prevalence of studies on challenging historical topics.

Several factors can cause more research on difficult history in developed countries than in developing countries. The developed countries often have more resources and infrastructure to support research and education, allowing for greater focus on specialized areas such as difficult history (Harris et al., 2022). Additionally, developed countries tend to have a longer academic history and critical examination of their past, which can lead to more difficult recognition and exploration of history (Gross & Terra, 2018). Developed countries' social and political contexts may be more conducive to open discussions and debates about difficult histories. In contrast, developing countries may still grapple with ongoing conflicts or political sensitivities that limit exploring these topics (Wallis, 2019). Conflicts in Aceh and the Western Balkans, for example, continue to link past violence to the present in several developing countries. Thus, the wounds caused remain in society. Therefore, teaching difficult history in developing and post-conflict countries needs special intervention, especially in the availability of resources and developing teacher capacity to mitigate challenges in learning praxis.

The most widely studied content is about the Holocaust. It is not surprising because the Holocaust is one of the most frequently addressed traumatic events in schools around the world. Israel's Holocaust education focuses on commemoration and remembrance, while Germany's focus is on national identity and responsibility. Some countries, such as Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Estonia,

and Hungary, include Holocaust education in their curricula (Levy & Sheppard, 2018). The violent past in Europe and Israel is closely linked to the Holocaust.

Extensive media coverage has led to the widespread recognition of the Holocaust as a significant tragic event. Encyclopedias, dictionaries, bibliographies, atlases, and picture collections provide information about the Holocaust. Books, essays, memoirs, diaries, document collections, and journals all contain Holocaust-focused historiography. The historiographic issues cover the history of the Holocaust, the prosecution of war criminals, racism and antisemitism in Germany and Europe before World War II, the roles of perpetrator, victim, observer, and rescuer, and the legacy of the Holocaust post-1945. Certain journals are dedicated to discussing the Holocaust and related themes. Aside from printed historical accounts, filmographies, electronic resources, and memorials like museums offer insights into the Holocaust (Gilbert, 2009; Laqueur & Baumel, 2001; Niewyk et al., 2003). Therefore, the availability of various historiographies, public acceptance of past violence, and policy support in the curriculum are prerequisites for teaching difficult history widely.

The literature has explored various approaches to teaching difficult history. Some scholars argue for avoidance, believing that young children cannot handle the uncomfortable truths of history and should remain innocent (Rodríguez, 2020). Others argue for teaching difficult histories, emphasizing the instructive nature of learning from the past to avoid repeating mistakes (Harrison et al., 2022). Besides that, teaching difficult histories can be seen as a form of moral and social justice education, helping students develop a deeper understanding of human rights and inspiring them to be advocates against injustices (Gross, 2017). Approaches to teaching difficult histories involve balancing distance and empathy, examining historical evidence, and challenging dominant narratives. The impact of these approaches on student engagement and understanding can vary. However, experiential education programs that involve interactions with survivors have shown positive outcomes, fostering empathy, trust, and social justice-oriented students.

Several countries' studies of difficult history confirm the United States' close connection to slavery and racial sentiment (Gross & Wotipka, 2019; Shuster et al., 2018). In Europe, trauma from the World War and the Holocaust became the main topic (Gross, 2014; Tinning, 2022; Wylegała, 2017). In Australia and New Zealand, the theme of coloni-

al violence against indigenous people is a central theme in difficult history (Harcourt, 2020; Zarmati, 2015). However, there are still studies that have not received widespread attention. Difficult history in the African region has not been studied adequately, for example, the issue of apartheid in South Africa (Wassermann, 2017), genocide in Rwanda (Freedman et al., 2008; Schulz & Sentama, 2020), and Conflict in Northern Africa (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2022). Furthermore, South America, including Latin America, still has minimal studies on difficult history, even though here it has long been a violence-prone continent. No other region of the world knows higher homicide rates nor has such a variety of violence. Political violence, guerilla movements, civil wars, bloody revolutions, brutal dictatorships, domestic violence, criminal violence, and youth violence are all well-known throughout history (Imbusch et al., 2011).

Despite the involvement of several Asian countries in various conflicts and violence in the past, studies on the Asian region have not received much attention. Post-colonial Asian states often face political tensions due to their multi-ethnic makeup and the inability to fully represent the interests of their ethnic minorities (Kingsbury, 2011). Some difficult pasts are Japan in World War II and the Korean War (Nisa, 2019; Suh et al., 2013). In East Asia, there have been numerous cases of state-sanctioned violence, including the Tiananmen Square crackdown in China, the Khmer Rouge massacre in Cambodia, and the Okinawan killings by the Japanese army (Ganesan & Kim, 2013). The Indian sub-continent has also experienced cultures of violence, such as terror strikes, political deadlock, riots, and attacks on minorities (Malreddy & Purakayastha, 2017). Southeast Asia's history post-1945 has a complex history characterized by mass violence events, ethnic and racial killings, crimes against humanity, genocide, and authoritarian regimes that gave rise to difficult histories (Zucker & Kiernan, 2021).

In Indonesia, studies regarding the teaching of difficult history are feasible, especially after the President held a press conference on 11 January 2023 that recognized 12 events in the past as gross violations of human rights. The events are (1) the 1965-1966 events; (2) the mysterious shooting incident (1982-1985); (3) the Talangsari incident, Lampung (1989); (4) the Rumoh Geudong and Pos Sattis Incidents, Aceh (1989); (5) the incidents of forced disappearances of people (1997-1998); (6) the May 1998 riots; (7) the Trisakti and Semanggi events I & II (1998-1999); (8) the witchcraft witch

murder incident (1998-1999); (9) the Simpang KKA incident, Aceh (1999); (10) the Wasior incident, Papua (2001-2002); (11) the Wamena incident, Papua (2003); and (12) the Jambo Keupok Incident, Aceh (2003) ” (*Tentang Pelanggaran HAM Berat Di Tanah Air*, 2022). Hence, these events allow researchers to study the practicalities of difficult history in various countries, especially Indonesia.

Teaching difficult history lacks a single approach due to the multifaceted nature of the subject matter and the diverse needs of learners. However, teachers tend to use affective and experiential learning. By incorporating affective learning, teachers can create space for students to engage with the complexity and uncertainty of their emotional responses to difficult histories, thereby enabling more nuanced understanding and critical engagement with the subject matter (McCully et al., 2021; Zembylas & Loukaidis, 2021). Then, experiential learning fosters empathy and encourages students to become active participants in overcoming current problems related to difficult history. By connecting the past with the present, experiential learning allows students to see the relevance and importance of studying difficult history, ultimately encouraging a more comprehensive and critical understanding of the subject matter (Gross, 2017; Rodríguez, 2020).

However, no research disputes the connection between teaching difficult history and empathy. Historical empathy refers to the ability to understand and connect with the perspectives, beliefs, values, and circumstances of people in the past (Endacott & Brooks, 2018). It involves both cognitive and affective dimensions. The cognitive aspect, known as perspective recognition, focuses on understanding why historical actors responded as they did in their historical context. The affective aspect, referred to as caring, involves having concern for the lives and experiences of those in the past (McCully et al., 2021). Subsequently, historical empathy allows individuals to go beyond their present-day perspectives and immerse themselves in the experiences and motivations of historical actors. It is a crucial tool in historical understanding, as it helps to humanize the past and fosters a deeper connection to historical events and individuals. Therefore, teachers tend to choose affective learning and experiential learning approaches. This condition aligns with several other findings that show that historical empathy can be grown through experiential learning (Conner & Graham, 2023; Utami, 2019) and affective learning (Karn, 2023).

Fostering care can strengthen historical empathy. Barton and Levstik (2004) elaborate that “care is a term that covers a variety of related meanings, but each involves some relationship between learners and the object of study, and these relationships often include emotional commitments or feelings or personal relevance.” Historical education involves four forms of caring: *caring about* individuals and occurrences in the past, *caring that* specific events occurred, *caring for* historical figures who endured injustices or oppression, and *caring to* change our beliefs and actions in the present based on our study of the past (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Cultivating care is crucial in post-conflict society because it is the foundation of reconciliation efforts’ healing and reconciliation processes (McCully, 2012).

Difficult histories often include events or periods marked by violence, injustice, or suffering, thus strengthening historical thinking skills. It is closely related to one of the historical thinking concepts: understanding the ethical dimension of the past (Seixas & Morton, 2012). The ethical dimension addresses the ethical aspects of historical events and the necessity of making ethical judgments while considering the historical context. It emphasizes the importance of caution in applying modern standards to historical events and using historical understanding to inform contemporary judgments. The ethical dimension adds depth to historical understanding by recounting what happened and engaging with the moral complexities of historical events, encouraging a thoughtful and nuanced exploration of the past (Seixas & Morton, 2012).

No one denies that teaching about difficult history has various challenges, as confirmed by several other studies (Epstein & Peck, 2017). The challenges in teaching difficult history come from the difficult nature of the material, teacher competence, material limitations, student responses, and socio-political conditions that are less supportive of the implementation of learning in the classroom. Teachers encounter difficulties when teaching “difficult histories” due to the proximity of these events to social lives and the recent occurrence of these events. Some are still in progress. Moreover, socio-political contexts significantly also influence the effectiveness of teaching challenging historical topics.

Teaching difficult history is crucial, as it enables individuals to get a more profound comprehension of past events characterized by violence, oppression, and trauma. It helps to challenge and

disrupt existing beliefs and perspectives, encouraging critical thinking and empathy (Harris et al., 2022). Difficult histories often elicit emotional and painful responses, so engaging with such histories is necessary to foster dialogue, reconciliation, and social cohesion (Epstein & Peck, 2017). By teaching and studying difficult histories, individuals can confront the complexities of past violence and its impact on marginalized groups, fostering a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the past (Gross & Terra, 2018). Engaging in difficult history also requires accepting discomfort and considering alternative perspectives, resulting in a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of historical narratives (Wallis, 2019). Thus, studying difficult history is essential to creating ethical representations of the past and forming a more informed and empathetic society.

CONCLUSION

Scholars are increasingly interested in studying difficult history topics, highlighting a diverse history in various regions worldwide. In the United States, difficult histories include slavery, the Holocaust, World War II, Japanese American incarceration, and racial sentiment issues. In Europe, World War II is characterized as a difficult history, with a focus on the Nazis and the Holocaust. Besides that, the 1990s wars and Macedonian armed conflict are also challenging in the Western Balkans. While in the Asia-Pacific Region, colonialism and internal conflict, particularly indigenous violence, are also concerns.

Affective learning, experiential, and inquiry-based learning are the approaches that are widely used in teaching difficult history. Teaching difficult histories presents challenges due to their sensitive nature, potential emotional triggers for students, and the need to navigate diverse perspectives. Several things play a role in teaching difficult history, such as empathy, historical consciousness, critical thinking, civic engagement, sensitivity, tolerance, and exposure to multiple perspectives.

However, teaching difficult history can provoke disruptive responses and trauma in students and teachers, leading to disinterest, silence, and disinterest in the classroom. Hence, educators must know the impacts of teaching difficult history and adopt strategies that maximize the benefits while mitigating potential challenges. That includes creating a safe and inclusive learning environment, providing appropriate support for emotional well-being, promoting critical thinking and empathy, and engaging in ongoing reflection and professional

development.

Teaching difficult history is essential for understanding past events characterized by violence, oppression, and trauma. It encourages critical thinking, empathy, and dialogue, fostering social cohesion and understanding of marginalized groups. However, engaging in difficult history requires accepting discomfort and considering alternative perspectives, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of historical narratives and ethical representations of the past.

This review has several limitations. The research is limited to the Scopus database and does not cover publications from other databases like Web of Science and ScienceDirect. Hence, it is hoped that future studies can be more thorough in utilizing database variability. In addition, this research primarily emphasizes the learning process in schools. In the future, we suggest broadening the scope of the research to include other learning components, such as planning, assessment, and comparative analysis of teaching materials. Besides that, future studies are encouraged to examine the incorporation of difficult history in public areas. Furthermore, this research mostly focuses on the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand due to the limited knowledge of the challenging histories of Africa, Asia, and South America. Due to their intricate and ominous history, these regions could serve as research sites. Hopefully, further research will investigate difficult histories, especially in developing countries and post-conflict regions.

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