

A Time for Social Studies: Talking with Young People about Ferguson and Staten Island

Beth C. Rubin

There has been a great deal of discussion about the failure of grand juries to indict white police officers in the deaths of unarmed African American men in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York. Foremost in my mind, as an educator, researcher, and citizen, is the way in which diverse young Americans grapple with and come to understand these events, and the critical role that schools, and, more specifically, social studies and social studies teachers can play.

Over the past decade, I have been conducting research on youth civic identity development—how young people come to see themselves in relation to the nation—in varied public secondary school settings in the United States. I've been in many schools and spoken with hundreds of students, and one thing is clear: Young people of color in high poverty communities have radically different experiences with civic institutions and their agents (schools, police, teachers) than do their more affluent peers in predominantly white communities.

In 2003, I decided to take a look at how young peoples' daily experiences with civic institutions shaped their sense of themselves as citizens. This took me into the social studies classrooms of four distinct public schools: a racially and socioeconomically homogenous high school with a largely white and affluent population; a racially and socioeconomically diverse high school; a low-income, urban middle school with

a predominantly Black and Latino student population; and a middle income, racially and ethnically diverse suburban middle school. In these settings, I watched as students discussed the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights, and I then interviewed individual young people to follow up on the ideas they expressed during these discussions.¹

I found, as will be discussed in more detail below, that young peoples' ideas about themselves as members of a civic community are deeply impacted by their daily civic experiences, and that these experiences varied sharply across racial and socioeconomic lines. This led me to my next project in which, together with social studies teachers at three different high schools, I worked to create, implement, and study the implementation of a thematic U.S. History curriculum designed to develop active citizenship through essential questions that were personally and civically relevant. The curriculum drew on key civic dilem-

mas (e.g., Who is an American? Are all Americans equal?) and, concurrently, developed the discussion, writing, and inquiry skills essential for civic engagement.² Along the way, we discovered some of the complexities of engaging students in civic inquiry, and I deepened my understanding of how diverse young people experience civic life in the United States and the consequences of these experiences for their democratic engagement.³

"Cops can come up to you, beat you up and you can take it to court, but you're not going to win. They'll just make up a lie right out. Whatever they say goes," said Anthony,⁴ an African American high school student in an urban community, his view echoed by many of his peers in similar settings. In contrast, I've also spoken with many students who held views like that of Stephanie, a white student from an affluent community, "I think the reason the country is so great is because people are individuals and can be individuals ... I always feel safe."

My research in social studies classrooms across the gamut of demographic configurations led me to propose a typology of civic identity (depicted in Figure 1 on p. 29) based on how young people felt about their daily experiences in rela-

tion to the stated ideals of the United States. Young people in middle class and high-income settings, often white, but sometimes with other racial and ethnic backgrounds, felt there was a great degree of “congruence” between what they had learned were the ideals of the United States—liberty, equality, justice—and what they had experienced in their daily lives. As Frank, a white student at a high school in an affluent, suburban community, reflected, “The Pledge is a way to show your appreciation and dedication to the country who’s provided so much for us.”

On the other hand, young people in high poverty settings, often black and Latino, expressed a stark “disjuncture” between their experiences and those ideals. “You know how you’re supposed to have the right to privacy,” an urban middle school student began, “Well, one time, me and my brother were at home and the cops bust in through the window and through the front door... And that went against the Fourth Amendment rights, search and seizure at your house.” In a class of 18 students, 15 shared stories of Fourth Amendment violations, indicating a pervasive sense of mistreatment at the hands of those who were supposed to protect them. The resulting disjuncture impacted students’ feelings about their value as citizens. “I don’t think I have to pledge to a flag to show honor for my country when the words that we say are not true ... there’s still not justice—liberty and justice—for all people,” said Zaria, an African American eighth grader in an urban school, during a class discussion about the Pledge of Allegiance.

It is exactly this disjuncture that is being revealed today, in the full glare of the public eye. And while many white Americans seem shocked by both the grand jury decisions and the reaction to them, many African American citizens are unsurprised by these events, and weary of explaining why rage might result from such inconsistency in the application of much vaunted American ideals of equality and justice.

So what does that have to do with

social studies? Well, I noticed that in classrooms in which students directly engaged in activities and discussions about both the ideals and the shortcomings of this country, about their rights as citizens and successful struggles for social change, students who felt *disjuncture* also tended to express empowerment, a belief in the ability to contribute to meaningful change. “I see myself standing up for what I believe in,” said Brandy, in an urban middle school. “Now that I am aware of [injustice], I know that since I am a citizen I can do something about it.” In Brandy’s school, the social studies teacher employed a number of strategies for teaching her students about their civic rights and engaging them in learning about civic processes, participating in simulations, discussions, and writing activities. Zaria recounted learning about “freedom of speech, freedom of petition, freedom of the press and search and seizure.” Before that, she said, “I had no idea about the amendments ... and about our rights.” In contrast, many students who did not have such opportunities expressed deep *discouragement*, a belief that no change was possible.

A section of this article (see pp. 24–28) presents the ways in which six social studies teachers in a number of schools in New Jersey and Virginia guided discussions in their classrooms about the events in Ferguson and Staten Island. The descriptions of the discussions show the kinds of challenges that need to be overcome to convert discouragement into empowerment.

My earlier research in four different schools showed that in more affluent, less diverse settings, in which students did not participate in lessons about inequality and social justice, it was common for them to voice *complacency*, a sense that all was well in the United States and no change was necessary. Privileged students in classrooms in which they engaged in such discussions, on the other hand, expressed an *awareness* of injustice and a desire to work for change.

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Resources

There are many excellent resources to help teachers plan lessons on these issues:

Rethinking Schools, http://rethinkingschools.org/static/archive/29_02/RS29_02_watson.pdf

PBS, www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/daily_videos/how-can-teachers-talk-to-students-about-ferguson/

Teaching for Change, www.teachingforchange.org/teaching-about-ferguson

Teaching Tolerance, www.tolerance.org/blog/students-are-watch-ing-ferguson

Zinn Education Project, <http://zinnedproject.org/2014/11/teaching-about-ferguson/>

Morningside Center for Social Responsibility, www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment

San Francisco Unified School District (prepared by public school librarians), <http://sfusd.libguides.com/blacklivesmatter>

Social Studies Classrooms Face the Challenge

Here is how six teachers have guided class discussions about events in Ferguson and Staten Island and related issues.

Cienai Wright-Wilkins

Cienai Wright-Wilkins teaches social studies at a predominantly African American high school in Virginia in a community in which, similar to Ferguson, Missouri, recent demographic shifts are, as of yet, unmatched by shifts in the power structure of the town. After Trayvon Martin was killed in 2012, students at the school held a walkout, marching to the school board wearing hoodies, to encourage the prosecution of George Zimmerman.

When this school year began, students were already upset and talking about the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson. Immediately after the grand jury decided not to indict officer Darren Wilson, Wright-Wilkins's students contacted her through social media to ask if they could talk about it in class. They also asked her how she felt about the verdict, which she declined to answer. "I don't like to share my opinions," she says, "I want them to find their own opinions."

In class, she asked students to write in their journals about how they felt and then to discuss their points of view. Students shared their feelings about the police. "They are supposed to be there for protection," one said, "but I've never felt protected by police officers." The following week, after the Staten Island grand jury's decision, students were even more upset at how, even with video footage, the officers were not indicted. The discussion that followed their journal writing that day was "very powerful to listen to."

Wright-Wilkins, who is African American, believes in providing her students with a place to discuss their feelings, but she is also adamant that they need to become active in making things better. She tells them,

When you see things, your job as citizens is to create the change in your own communities. You can be upset, but what's the point in getting upset if you aren't going to do anything about it.

"While it may not always seem as if students have power," says Wright-Wilkins, "they actually do." She tells them,

Once you figure out what the grievances are, it is then your turn to take action to work on finding a solution to them. It just takes some organizing and collective action in order to get your voices heard. Do some research on the topic, gather the facts that support your claim, and then create an action plan for how you want the injustices to be corrected. Your findings and the action plan should then be shared with both the people who make the laws and the ones who are expected to abide by them. This can be done through letters, emails, tweets to lawmakers, holding public forums, creating petitions, and staging

peaceful assemblies to bring awareness to the issue. This awareness will then allow you to push for change so that policies can be affected.

Jonathan Meyer

Jonathan Meyer teaches AP and Honors-level U.S. History and an elective, Cultural History, at Montclair High School in New Jersey. With a student population that is 40% African American, 48% white, 7% Latino and 18% economically disadvantaged, the school is more racially and socioeconomically integrated than most suburban U.S. high schools.

On the morning after the grand jury decision not to indict police officers in the Staten Island killing of Eric Garner, Meyer threw out his prepared lesson plan and decided to talk about issues related to the deaths of Garner and Michael Brown and the decisions not to indict police officers in both cases. The discussion that ensued gave students a chance to express themselves and learn from each other in the safe setting of the classroom. Meyer describes the day,

There was no planned lesson, nor even a viewing of the videos. We just talked. I did show them the *Daily News* and *New York Post* front pages, along with a political cartoon. I have several young black men in my first period Cultural History class and they spoke openly about their experiences with police and their own fears. One young man said that while he is afraid of any police—white, black, or otherwise—that ultimately, young black men need to stop committing acts of violence against other young black men, if police are going to change their mentality towards black lives. I thought it was an interesting perspective, though he did not equivocate ... he believed the decisions in the Brown and Garner cases were unjust. You could tell the exasperation in his voice. It's almost as if there is, sadly, a growing expectation that this is going to happen to him, or others like him.

The "discouragement" described in the typology of civic identity was palpable.

Reflective of the academic tracking patterns at his school, Meyer's AP U.S. history class has only one black student out of 30. In this class, Meyer initiated a discussion about white privilege, contrasting his own childhood as a young, white man with the conversations that many parents of African American boys have with their children about experiences they might have with the police. Driven by student concerns, the conversation covered a broad range of related topics, including police use of military equipment, gun laws, gun control, the grand jury system and whether communities of color need to see more men and

women of color in police roles for things to change. Much was discussed, “but as you probably can guess, no resolution.”

Providing resolution, however, is not the teacher’s role. Rather, says Meyer, “I think it really is up to teachers to challenge their students’ acceptance of what is culturally disseminated to them on a day-to-day basis, to teach relevant curriculum, to be able to hold discussions that are meaningful to their individual lives as young adults.” He feels that, “Most of all, students need to see the connections between their studies of history and their present place in the world.” His role, therefore, “is simply to act as a guide and always ask questions that require them to consider that place in society while using the past as the starting point.”

For Meyer, empowerment means that his students can understand, analyze and discuss the forces shaping their lives; he promotes this through his curriculum. In a U.S. History unit on gender, for example, his class read “From Rosie the Riveter to I Love Lucy” by James Davidson and Mark Lytle and discussed the (mis)representations of women in popular culture after World War II. They read the first chapter of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* to understand how gender has been constructed historically. They analyze the documentary *Miss Representation* (2011) to see how media presents women in power (regardless of political affiliation). They then interview a woman in their lives, focusing on images and representations of gender, to apply their newfound analyses. He explains,

From a teacher's perspective, I can't expect my students to feel empowered if I don't at least give them the opportunity to discover and debate the issues that are the reality of their lives, and to feel safe in doing so, where right/wrong is not really the end-goal. Seeing that they have a place at the table, so to speak, is the first step and my job as a teacher is to welcome them to that table with open-arms.

Nicole Cooper

Nicole Cooper, who teaches U.S. History and African American Studies in an urban high school with a predominantly African American and Latino population in New Jersey, says that when the Ferguson grand jury decision came in, “my students came into the classroom asking me about it, before I even got a chance to say anything.”

As they were in the middle of a unit on the U.S. Constitution, she had her students relate the Ferguson case to the Bill of Rights, analyzing whether the rights of Michael Brown and those protesting were violated. In the unit on the Bill of Rights, her students read each amendment in the Bill of Rights, wrote about the limitations of each, and identified Supreme Court cases connected to each amendment. After the verdicts in Ferguson and Staten Island, Cooper saw “a really good opportunity for them to apply the knowledge that they already know to real life situations.” She asked her class to discuss these recent events in

light of the Bill of Rights.

Dynamic discussion ensued. Some students felt that police in Missouri had violated protesters’ First Amendment rights to freedom of speech. Others argued that Brown’s killing violated the Eighth Amendment barring cruel and unusual punishment. Some students felt that Eric Garner, in Staten Island, had been denied his Sixth Amendment right to a public trial by an impartial jury. They pointed out that the right his family had to file a civil suit was guaranteed by the Seventh Amendment.

Cooper sees this linkage between the study of the Bill of Rights and students’ own lives as critical, as students do not know their rights. She explains, “I don’t think they realize the rights they do have. They don’t have anyone to tell them, to teach them that they actually have more rights than they think.” For example, “at school, they don’t realize they don’t have to talk to the administration when a parent isn’t present, and no one tells them otherwise.” Knowing one’s rights seems critical to being “empowered” rather than “discouraged.” As Cooper says, “Social studies seems like the only place where they are going to learn it.”

Cooper wants her students to both be able to express their emotions and also to think critically about the information they receive and promote. In class they talked about conflicting reports on social media. “There are things that could be more damaging than helpful,” she explains. “Some people can fuel the fire. Kids had false information. I want them to understand that even though people do have the right to say what they want to say, we have to be mindful that there are consequences.”

For Cooper, who is African American, the subject is deeply personal. “People are actually genuinely scared. And so are these kids too. This is fear that people live with on a daily basis.” She reflects,

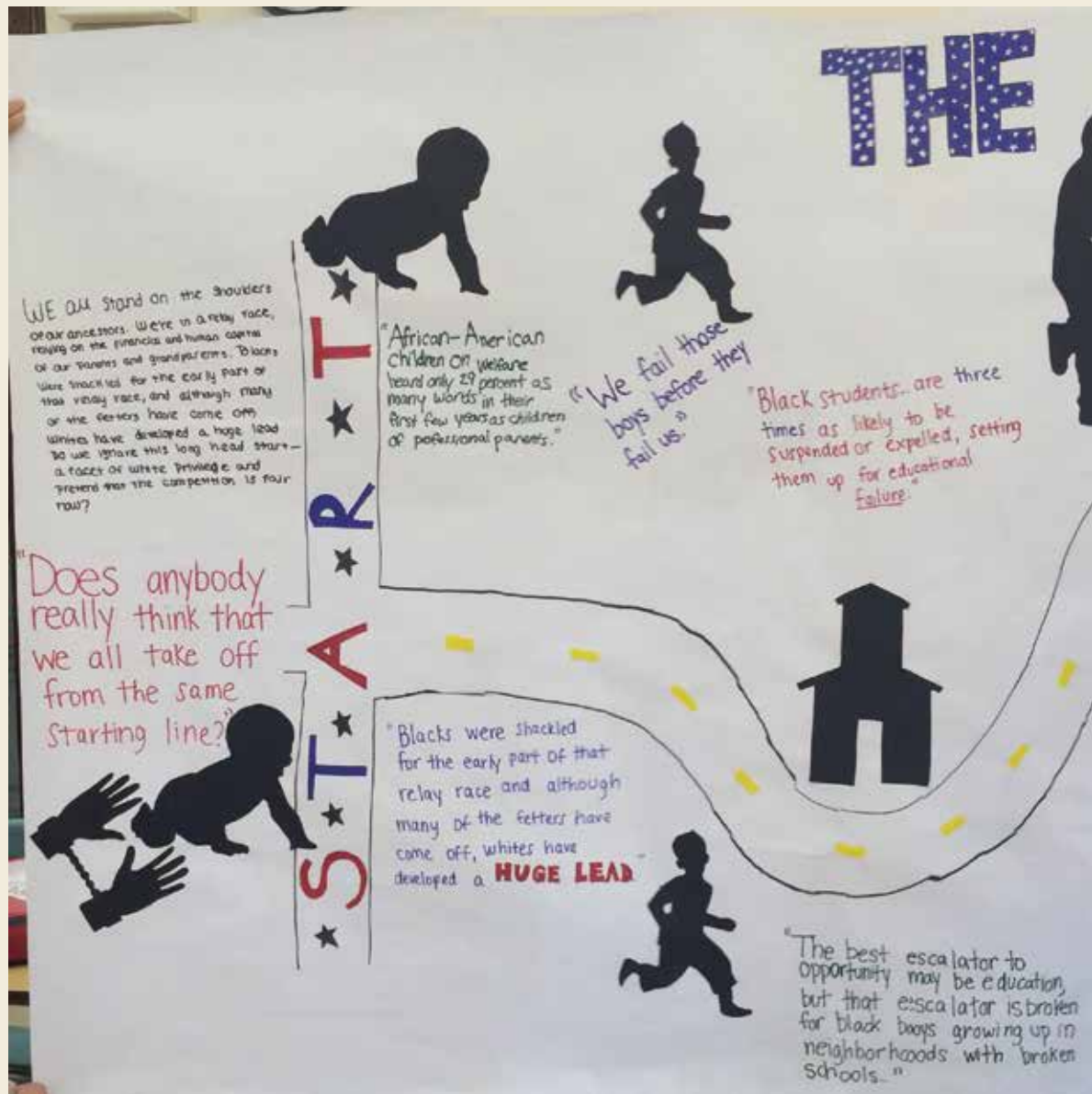
I may sound dramatic, but after all that has transpired between Trayvon, Mike and now Eric I find myself thinking about my husband ... I think about my brothers, one of whom is a state trooper, my dad, my cousins who are all black men, and worry if they look or say the wrong thing or say it in the wrong way, if they'll have the same fate.

Cooper’s students expressed the discouragement described in the typology of civic identities. One student, in response to her question about what can be done in the wake of the grand jury decisions, responded, “nothing,” telling the class that such things have been going on for years in their community and “probably won’t ever stop.”

She wants to move her students to more empowered civic identities. “I tell the students, the system is flawed because human beings are flawed. There’s never going to be a perfect justice system. We should try our best to do our best with what we have.”

Cooper believes that by developing students’ knowledge of the country’s legal and political systems and understandings of the historical context of today’s issues, social studies teachers can help move students’ from discouraged to empowered civic

This mural was created by Shana Stein's students at Montclair High School, Montclair, NJ. It depicts what students called the "race race," and portrays the unequal opportunities for advancement in U.S. society. The students had read and discussed a series of columns on that issue by Nicholas Kristof for the *New York Times*.



identities. She tells her students,

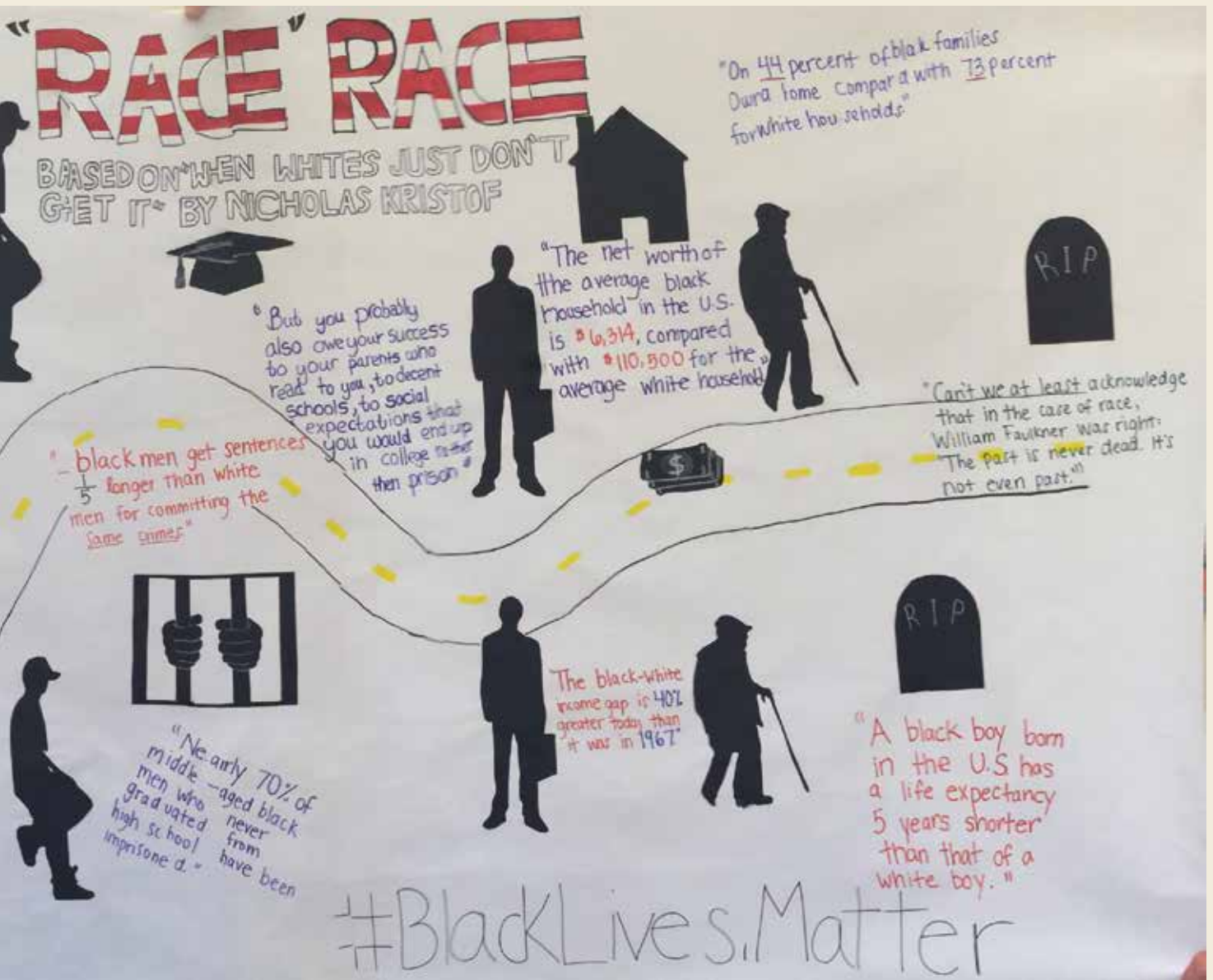
If there's something going on in your neighborhood that you don't like or you think is unfair, do something about it. Something as simple as finding some like-minded people and using resources like Facebook or Twitter in a positive way, can be the catalyst to something greater. The world's most famous movements started by a few people who came together to make a change.

One of Cooper's goals is to have her students approach situations objectively. "Sometimes students get tainted by what they see and hear on television or social media when running into situations involving law enforcement; it can build resentment and make them feel discouraged." In discussion, she encourages students to express these emotions, and then guides them toward a less emotional response.

Shana Stein

In Shana Stein's Cultural Pluralism class at Montclair High School, the small group of white, black and Latino students taking the senior elective had just come to the end of a unit on race and racism, during which students learned about the history of race in the United States. "We go all the way back to 1676, to Bacon's Rebellion and the purposeful creation of race as a way of mitigating class conflict," she explains. Thinking it would provide the material for a perfect one-day lesson to wrap up the month-long unit, Stein brought to class Nicholas Kristof's "When Whites Just Don't Get It," a five-part *New York Times* op-ed series on historical and current disparities among white and black Americans.

"I wanted them to visually represent it," she explains, "because there are so many statistics, in those articles. I was thinking they could help make sense of it in a visual way." Her students worked in pairs to pick out and circle what she calls "gems": quotes,



statistics, and points that made an impression on them. She then opened the floor for students to discuss how they were going to visually represent these gems. That's when the students' excitement took over, turning what she had planned to be a one-day activity into a weeklong project, holding students' full attention for six class periods.

"They had a debate," she explains. "I let them debate. They nominated a facilitator; I sat back and really let them argue it." An African American student came up with the idea of having babies at a starting line as the basis of the representation. "It's like a race," the student said, explaining Kristof's view of the relative life opportunities of black and white Americans. The students debated whether to represent the ideas in the series through an image of one baby in the middle, with a variety of possible life choices, or images of two babies, one black, one white, beginning a race at different starting points. In the end, they concluded that "no, Kristof is really saying that there really is a black baby

and a white baby, that there are two different versions of America, and there are two different babies, one affected by the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow."

Although the class began the project before the grand jury decision was rendered in the Michael Brown case, "Once the decision came out, there was no stopping them." They created a large mural on paper, measuring 9 x 6 feet. They posted it in the school hallway to share what they knew about the context surrounding the current events in Ferguson and Staten Island, wanting to, in their words, "start a conversation in this school." Excited to take part in the national conversation, the students set Stein up with her own Twitter account, so she could tweet the mural to Nicholas Kristof. The mural was later featured in *The New York Times's* Learning Network ("A Mural Project Inspired by *New York Times* Columns on Race," January 16, 2015).

"Teachers are so afraid not to have the answer, they are afraid to talk about structural racism," says Stein, who is white. "It's not

clean, it's messy. There are no answers. But I want them to know the history, the historical context. Because it is so easy to just look at the situation and assign blame downwards."

To build on this awareness, Stein and her class discussed the organizing taking place under the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, talking about the large rallies in D.C. and N.Y.C. Her curriculum will connect more deeply to the idea of social and political movements, as her class turns to looking at the movements surrounding civil rights and identity, such as the Chicano movement and the gay rights movement. Their final exam will be an auto-ethnography with a "self" component where they will write about how their racial, class, ethnic and gender identity has shaped who they are and how they go about in the world.

Keith Benson

Keith Benson teaches at Camden High School, a school of 75% African American and 25% Latino students in a low-income community in New Jersey. Benson says that his students, in general, have a profound distrust of police. He wanted to make sure that his students understood what had actually happened in the Ferguson grand jury.

Students came into class with a lot of misinformation, some of which they learned at school. In another class a teacher had explained, mistakenly, that Darren Wilson had been judged "not guilty" by the grand jury. To try to better understand what had happened, his class read articles about Michael Brown's death in Ferguson and witness testimony from the grand jury. They used this material to do a physical reenactment of the incident, and to get a sense of the specifics of what had happened in lieu of video footage. "The people watching it as witnesses got all into it when, in officer Wilson's account, he says that he shot at Michael Brown and then Brown turned around and charged at him. When they saw what that would look like, they said it was a lie. They felt at core that it was a lie; how could anyone not see that."

Benson said that his students "clearly saw it as an issue of race." They were shocked by the decision not to indict in the Eric Garner case, and even more disturbed by the killing of Tamir Rice in Ohio, a 12-year-old boy who was shot by police while holding a BB gun. "In their final estimation," Benson says, "they feel like it is okay in America for black persons to be killed by police. When they saw the cops just pulled up, no talking with the boy, no 'put down your gun,' he was just killed right on the scene, the kids really took issue with that. Their distrust for authority was reaffirmed." Students voiced discouragement. "They look at it as 'this is the way life is,'" Benson says. "They've had their own run-ins."

For Benson, who is African American, talking about Ferguson and Staten Island was part of an ongoing dialogue he has with his students about race, inequality and economic disparities. "Having the conversation isn't difficult," he says, "we talk about inequality every day." He says, "I try to tell them, you have to

be informed about what is going on in other parts of the country, we have to think about things that we may do that help to create an environment that makes police officers view us a certain way, to think about what can they do in their daily lives to change things on their end."

Heavy on his mind is his mission to make students more aware of the perspectives they "consume and accept" from the media and popular culture. Benson feels that accepting these "messages," particularly those found in rap songs and videos glorifying violence, drugs and crime, can have "dire consequences." "Not only do such media messages communicate how you (my students) should behave and what you ought to value," Benson explains, "they also inform other people not familiar with who you are personally how to perceive and interpret you when they see you." He wants his students to be critically aware of the "behavioral models portrayed in videos and music that can end up harming them and their communities."

Tristian Cox

Tristian Cox teaches ninth grade World History to his African American and Latino students at Plainfield High School in low-income Plainfield, New Jersey. The day after the grand jury verdict in the Eric Garner case, he presented his class with pictures of Garner being taken down by police and of Brown lying on the ground after being shot. He asked students to respond in writing to the photos, and to reflect on how they felt and what they knew about these events. Students shared these responses in small groups, and then with the whole class. Cox then showed the video of Eric Garner and a video taken after Brown was shot, and asked the student to write about how they felt the police officers handled the situation and how they themselves might have reacted.

Cox, who is African American, was surprised by many of the things that students shared during the ensuing discussion. "My students spoke about how African Americans represent ourselves as thugs," he said, "saying we need to think about how we represent ourselves in low income communities; this really blew me out of the water." In addition to this self-critique, however, they were clear that they felt the police actions were wrong. "They said the issue of race was there, but their main concern was police relations. White, black or indifferent, they felt the police officers were wrong in how they acted. They said that you see thousands of people selling loose cigarettes, and they were surprised the guy just didn't get a summons, that the cops were not handling situations appropriately."

Cox distributed permission slips, and, with student volunteers, put together a video response to the events in which students express their feelings about the situation. Cox explains, "I wanted the students to create something that was tangible, to create something that they could look back on 10 years from now and see why they should never stand for injustice."

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Students in these classrooms spoke of in-class discussions of racism, projects to involve students in civic action, and curricular units on social justice movements as sources for their emerging thinking about civic issues. The typology of civic identity I developed from this qualitative research is depicted in the figure below.

Figure. **Typology of Civic Identity**

		Students' Experiences in Relation to the Learned Ideals of the United States	
		Congruence	Disjuncture
Students' attitudes toward civic participation	Active	Aware Change is needed for equity and fairness.	Empowered Change is a personal and community necessity.
	Passive	Complacent No change is necessary; all is well in the U.S.	Discouraged No change is possible; life in the U.S. is unfair.

Courageous social studies teachers across the country are wading into these difficult, sensitive topics in ways that have the potential to move young people from discouragement to empowerment, from complacency to awareness.

In these classrooms, six of which are described on pages 24–28, teachers are guiding students in discussion of these complex and emotionally loaded issues, rather than avoiding the topics of race and inequality that so mark students' lives. These are not easy discussions that lead to neat resolutions. As Shana Stein remarks, "It's not clean, it's messy. There are no answers." Making the space for students to discuss, analyze and contextualize these painful events, however, is critical to moving them toward more empowered and aware civic identi-

ties. And, as Nicole Cooper points out, "Social studies seems like the only place where they are going to learn it."

Our schools are the key civic institution in the lives of our youth. They are the "laboratories of democracy," as John Dewey put it, in which it is possible for people to come together to engage with difficult, relevant and meaningful issues;⁵ and social studies classrooms are the places where this can happen. Let us not lose this chance to make these

classrooms places where young people can learn and express themselves about the deep divides and challenges facing this country. We can, using our tools of curriculum and pedagogy, begin to move students away from discouragement and apathy toward more aware and empowered civic identities. It is time for social studies to step forward and take a leading role in this challenge. 🌍

Notes

1. This research is described in Beth C. Rubin, "There's Still Not Justice': Youth Civic Identity Development Amid Distinct School and Community Contexts," *Teachers College Record* 109, no. 2 (February 2007): 449-481.
2. Described in Rubin, *Making Citizens: Transforming Civic Learning in Diverse Social Studies Classrooms* (New York: Routledge, 2012), and Rubin, "Youth Civic Identity Development in the U.S. History Course," *Social Education* 74, no. 3 (2010): 144-147.
3. Described in Beth C. Rubin and Brian Hayes, "'No

Backpacks' vs. 'Drugs and Murder': The Promise and Complexity of Youth Civic Action Research," *Harvard Educational Review* 80, no. 3 (2010): 149-175.

4. Pseudonyms are used for the names of the students mentioned in this article. Names and schools of teachers are included with their permission.
5. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938/1965)

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Teaching the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework: Exploring Inquiry-Based Instruction in Social Studies

Edited by *Kathy Swan and John Lee*, with *Rebecca Mueller and Stephen Day*
NCSS Bulletin 114, 156 pp.

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