



“There’s still not justice” Challenging, structuring and re-creating social studies content to disrupt oppression

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**Dr. Beth C. Rubin**

Professor at the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Beth C. Rubin uses school-based, ethnographic study to explore how young people come to see themselves as citizens and as learners amid the nested contexts of classroom, school, community and society, with particular attention to how civic identity takes shape within local contexts marked by historical and contemporary inequalities. She collaborates with educators to design and study curricular and pedagogical innovations, and develops approaches to teacher education that attend to this critical, sociocultural understanding of youth civic learning. Her work can be found in the *American Educational Research Journal*, *Teachers College Record*, *Harvard Educational Review*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Theory Into Practice*, *The Urban Review*, *Social Education*, the *Journal of Teacher Education* and elsewhere; her most recent book *Making Citizens: Transforming Civic Learning for Diverse Social Studies Classrooms* (Routledge, 2012), is designed to help pre- and in-service social studies teachers integrate meaningful, critical civic learning into their practice. Current projects include Creating Civically Engaged Districts, a socially transformative design project integrating youth civic voice into school district practices; an investigation of civic and historical learning in intentionally integrated schools in countries experiencing conflict; and a forthcoming book on design-based research in the social studies. Dr. Rubin’s research has been supported by the Spencer Foundation, the Fulbright Foundation, CIRCLE, the Overbrook Foundation, among others.

**Abstract:**

In this working paper, Dr. Beth C. Rubin considers the links between social studies content and oppression. Drawing on examples from social studies classrooms and other educational settings, the paper highlights the ways that school-based and educative framings of United States history center whiteness and otherize Native Peoples, African Americans and other groups that are marginalized within the national story. Such approaches perpetuate a “white social studies” (Chandler and Branscombe, 2015) that protects white dominant narratives and sidesteps discussion of institutionalized racism. The paper explores alternate ways to structure content in the social studies, approaches that connect the past to the present and open up the liberatory potential of social studies content. Finally, the paper offers an example of how, through youth-directed research, students themselves can take part in the re-creation of content, an approach that can educate us all about perspectives and experiences that are often overlooked in traditional approaches to social studies.

## **“THERE’S STILL NOT JUSTICE” CHALLENGING, STRUCTURING, AND RE-CREATING SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENT TO DISRUPT OPPRESSION**

The 2018-19 Teaching Works seminar series focuses on a provocative question: **(How) does knowing content matter for disrupting the persistence of oppression?** This question probes a vexing issue at the juncture of teacher education and knowledge production, that of what exactly we should be teaching our pre-service teachers to teach. In this paper, I will consider this issue in relation to the social studies curriculum, centering my reflections with the following questions:

- How is content linked to oppression in the social studies curriculum?
- What does this mean for students’ understandings of themselves, others, and of society?

I will address these questions with three distinct offerings. First, I will challenge typical approaches to social studies content, making connections between this status quo and enduring, oppressive understandings of history and of contemporary inequities. Next, I will describe how different ways of structuring social studies content can render visible or invisible the ways that historical oppression shapes and persists within contemporary society. Finally, I offer an example of how students might take part in the re-creation of content, educating both themselves and others about perspectives and experiences that are often overlooked in traditional approaches to social studies.

### **I. CHALLENGING CONTENT: SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENT AND OPPRESSION**

#### **My Colonial Character Journal**

“Dear 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Families” read the letter home.

The 4<sup>th</sup> grade students have recently begun a social studies unit on the study of colonial America and the American Revolution. During this unit, the students will be working on a long-range project entitled “My Colonial Character Journal.” ...

For this project, students will travel back in time, create a Colonial character, and write about events that took place during Colonial times from the **perspective** of this Colonial character. Since actually traveling back in time has not occurred yet, the students will be taking a **Virtual** Field Trip back in time!!! They imagine that character they created has been given a journal to record his/her thoughts regarding life during Colonial times. There are 6 journal entries the students will be required to complete. A 7<sup>th</sup> entry is optional for those who wish to extend their learning.

Lisa (a pseudonym), an African American 4<sup>th</sup> grader in a largely white, upper middle- class school district brought this assignment home this fall. As Lisa and her mother read through the assignment together, daughter turned to mother, and said,

“Mommy, wouldn’t I have been a slave back then?”

I know this story because a student in my Education and Society course for EdD. students is a colleague of Lisa’s mother. In my class, I had given an assignment – to write a vignette describing something they had seen or experienced in an educational setting that troubled them. We used those vignettes throughout the semester, examining them through multiple lenses as we delved into critical theory in education.

This event, as you can imagine, was deeply disturbing for Lisa’s mother, and she agonized over how to respond, both to her daughter, and to the school. Lisa’s mother brought this dilemma to her workplace, where she talked about it with her colleagues, including my student. They talked over how she should best approach the school so as not to anger the teachers or create an uncomfortable situation for Lisa. When my student first shared this story as her vignette, I was already thinking about this working paper and the corresponding TeachingWorks seminar series talk, and I asked her if Lisa’s mom would be

open to letting me share both the school's assignment and her response with others. She checked with Lisa's mother, who readily agreed.

In this case, the fourth-grade curriculum was constructed with a narrowly defined and colorblind view of history. There is, of course, no version of colonial history in which there are no slave owners, enslaved people, or dispossessed Indigenous peoples. There isn't, for that matter, a colonial history in which the opportunities of white girls, or of poor white girls and boys, weren't sharply curtailed; the assignment leaves out a lot.

But some might say, "this is a curriculum for 4<sup>th</sup> graders, right? Should we really be tackling big issues of justice and white supremacy with 9 and 10-year-old students?" Brown and Brown (2015) note that "curriculum is about memory making, or the way a nation imagines and shapes what people come to know about the past and present" (p.104). Therefore, we should be asking ourselves, what are students coming to know about the past and the present through this assignment? By learning a history that centralizes whiteness and generally avoids discussion of race, what vision or understanding of U.S. history are white students developing from not learning about the experiences of African Americans, in this case, during the colonial period? What might African American students be learning from this assignment – that the story of enslaved Africans is not central to the American story, that it is legitimate to present a history that hides race or makes it invisible while they know from personal and community experience that it is a central feature of past and present life in the U.S.?

Racial knowledge is partially constructed in school settings, through engagement with the social studies curriculum. As Brown & Brown note,

The degree to which a young person is able to learn about race via the school curriculum will inform his or her understandings of race, both its significance and impact in the present. This racial knowledge in forms the present-day sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) of students about their own place in a racialized society, whether they are part of a dominant racial group or a historically underrepresented racial group" (2015, 104).

Yet, as Shear, Knowles, Soden, and Castro (2015) assert, "despite recent movements to address social justice issues and the one-sided nature of US history textbooks, social studies scholarship routinely finds that Euro-American voices dominate the textbooks and content standards" (p. 69).

After discussions with her colleagues at work and with her husband, Lisa's mother wrote the following letter to her daughter's teachers:

Good morning.

I wanted to send you a note of concern regarding the Colonial Character Journal assignment recently given.

In reviewing the assignment, my husband and I are extremely concerned about the journaling that requires Lisa to go back in time and discuss her life during the colonial period. As I am sure you are aware, African Americans were slaves during the colonial period. In fact, slavery existed in every colony; slave labor was used for farming and tobacco cultivation; slaves lived on plantations and were subjected to inhuman treatment; children were brutalized and ripped away from their parents – these are the things Lisa would be asked to revisit and reflect on through this assignment. Thus, we hope you can understand why we would be concerned about Lisa being asked to journey back to that time and to journal about her experiences. The narrative of her experiences as a young 9-year old during the colonial era would include her life as a slave. We cannot abide with Lisa being asked to revisit such a painful time in our nation's history – a time when her ancestors were treated as property and subjected to chattel slavery.

While we support our daughter learning about American history – the good, the bad, and the ugly – we remain concerned that assignments of this sort can be harmful to a child when it is not a true reflection of history. While the assignment may be asking Lisa to "pretend" to be someone else in history traveling back in time, she has already had experiences rooted in history. During the summer entering 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Lisa attended a summer program...During summer camp at the school, Lisa was called a derogatory name by a fellow camper who is also a fellow classmate at

school. Because she was taught at home (as much as you can talk with an 8-year old) about African American history she knew enough to know that she should not be called this and immediately told the teacher. The incident fell under the HIB act and was investigated accordingly and an outcome was rendered by the school board. Our daughter had some awareness of history to know this derogatory name was unacceptable. Thus, we have to continue to educate our daughter about the honest version of history because she already has experiences that speak to its ugliness.

We recognize that teaching about American history is hard work – explaining this country's long and violent history and helping students to understand how the present relates to the past is hard! Still, we cannot in good conscience support this activity or allow Lisa to participate. We are happy to meet with you and/or the school's leadership to discuss our concerns and identify an alternative assignment that is culturally sensitive for Lisa to complete.

Please note, our attention in sending this email is to simply bring awareness to the narratives of other students in the class, whose history is different from others.

In some ways, this letter holds everything I'd like to share in this paper. Notice that in the second paragraph, Lisa's mother provides a more detailed and accurate view of the time period than does the school assignment. She also describes her child's, and Black Americans', direct, personal, and painful connection to this part of history, a connection that cannot be erased, should not be ignored, and needs to be considered and treated with care and sensitivity by teachers. She then makes the connection between past and present, between individual experiences and institutional or structural racism, and between slavery, white supremacy, and contemporary racism. She calls out the danger in presenting a version of history that elides white supremacy, a danger we have experienced in the recent political moment, with groups that explicitly espouse racist ideologies, so visible in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

The extent to which Lisa's parents are the ones who are truly educating their daughter about race, racism and history, is striking, as is how important it was for Lisa that they had done so. School did not equip her to understand or respond to her direct experience of racism; her parents' teaching did. Lisa's mother puts into words the primary problematic at the center of this paper: "We recognize that teaching about American history is hard work – explaining this country's long and violent history and helping students to understand how the present relates to the past is hard!"

### **Learning about the Slavery and the Confederacy**

Let us consider another example. Recently, two reporters spent several months researching the history and the financing of Confederate monuments and sites (Palmer and Wessler, 2018). Figure 1 shows a photo from their tour of the Jefferson Davis Home and Presidential Library in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Jefferson Davis was a cotton farmer, a slave holder, and the one and only President of the Confederate States from 1861-1865. The photo is of a school tour of Beauvoir, Davis' post-war home, and a federally financed historical site. Reporters Palmer and Wessler (2018) shared that,

After a discussion of the window treatments and oil paintings, the other visitors left, and we asked the guide what she could tell us about slavery. Sometimes children ask about it, she said, "I want to tell them the honest truth, that slavery was good and bad." While there were some "hateful slave owners," she said, "it was good for the people that didn't know how to take care of themselves, and they needed a job, and you had good slave owners like Jefferson Davis, who took care of his slaves and treated them like family. He loved them."

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the August 2017 white nationalist Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which resulted in over 37 people injured and the death of one counter-protester:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/11/us/white-nationalists-rally-charlottesville-virginia.html>;  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-protest-white>

**Figure 1: Students Touring the Jefferson Davis Home and Presidential Library in Biloxi, Mississippi**



Palmer & Wessler, December 2018, *Smithsonian.com*

In the tour guide's version of history, which she shared with her young visitors, slavery was not an institutionalized system that was the foundation of contemporary economic and political inequality (Brown & Brown, 2010), but rather an arrangement between individuals that really was not that bad. While acknowledging the potential for violence and brutality, she claimed that slavery was sometimes beneficial, and failed to contextualize it as part of a larger system of the exchange of people for goods which, over the course of three centuries, wrenched 12 million Africans from their homelands with devastating consequences – death, disease, generations of servitude - for them and their descendants, reshaping the world and human history in the process.

How did the African American children and their families who came to tour the Davis home feel about the experience? Palmer and Wessler (2018) write,

During the Fall Muster at Beauvoir, the Jefferson Davis home, we met Stephanie Brazzle, a 39-year-old African-American Mississippian who had accompanied her daughter, a fourth grader, on a field trip. It was Brazzle's first visit. "I always thought it was a place that wasn't for us," she said. Brazzle had considered keeping her daughter home, but decided against it. "I really do try to keep an open mind. I wanted to be able to talk to her about it."

Brazzle walked the Beauvoir grounds all morning. She stood behind her daughter's school group as they listened to re-enactors describe life in the Confederacy. She waited for some mention of the enslaved, or of African- Americans after emancipation. "It was like we were not even there," she said, as if slavery "never happened."

"I was shocked at what they were saying, and what wasn't there," she said. It's not that Brazzle, who teaches psychology, can't handle historic sites related to slavery. She can, and she wants her daughter, now 10, to face that history, too. She has taken her daughter to former plantations where the experience of enslaved people is a part of the interpretation. "She has to know what these places are," Brazzle said. "My grandmother, whose grandparents were slaves, she told stories. We black people acknowledge that this is our history. We acknowledge that this still affects us."

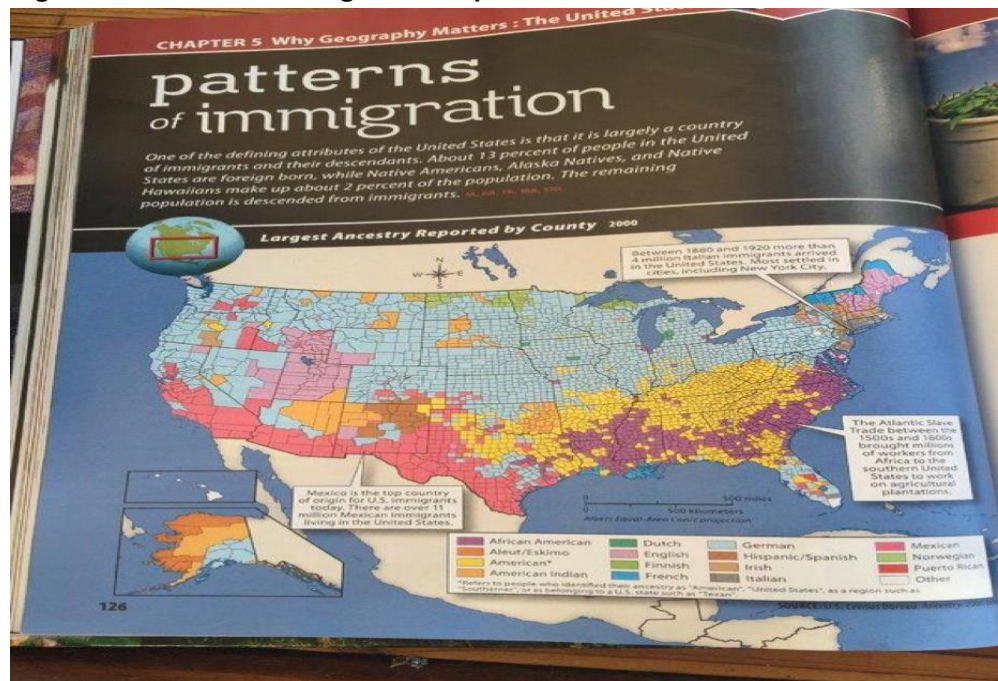
There are around 700 Confederate monuments in the South. They are not markers for historic events and people made at the time. They were explicitly created and funded by Jim Crow governments



– Southern governments that passed state and local laws enforcing racial segregation, reestablishing white supremacy in the after the Reconstruction period, and enforced until 1965. They were created “to pay homage to a slave-owning society and to serve as blunt assertions of dominance over African-Americans,” (Palmer and Wesler, 2018) and they were strongly opposed at the time of their creation. The authors also point out that their upkeep is still being publicly financed – over the past 10 years at least 40 million in taxpayer funds have gone to support Confederate monuments – “statues, homes, parks, museums, libraries, and cemeteries – and to Confederate heritage organizations.”

The defanged version of history given by the tour guide shows up in textbooks as well. Consider, for example, this map in a Texas social studies textbook, noticed in 2015 by Coby Burren, a 15-year-old freshman.

**Figure 2: Patterns of Immigration Map**



*World Geography, McGraw Hill-Education*

Coby saw this map, with its captions, and immediately texted a photo to his mom, Roni Dean-Burren<sup>2</sup>. In the textbook’s description, Africans were “workers,” implying voluntary; they were “brought,” not by European and American slavers, but by the ex-nominated “Atlantic slave trade,” a nameless, blameless force. McGraw Hill-Education issued an apology, and promised to change the text in upcoming editions. With more than 100,000 copies of the textbook already in the hands of Texas school children, the company offered “to replace the textbook, provide a sticker with the rewritten caption to cover up the old one or supply a lesson plan free of charge to teachers on cultural sensitivity “to create an opportunity for a richer dialogue” (Fernandez and Hauser, 2015).

This solution – a sticker and a lesson plan on “cultural sensitivity” - does not come close to the revision necessary to excavate and connect to a national history that continues to touch and shape the experiences and beliefs of Americans today. As Stephanie Brazzle points out, “this is our history. We acknowledge that this still affects us.” This still affects us. Those words are the siren call for the creation of a relevant, meaningful curriculum that connects past to present, painful past to painful present. Recent pain and protest echo past pain and protest; there is a past and present that calls out for understanding and explanation, that we ignore and paper over at our peril.

<sup>2</sup> For Dean-Burren’s response, see:

<https://www.facebook.com/roni.deanburren/videos/vb.1423354683/10208248919206996/>

## Educative-Psychic Violence

I want to offer one more curricular example to illustrate how attempts by teachers to incorporate the difficult conversations of U.S. history can often do more harm than good as they are frequently based on problematically narrow views of history. In a set of math problems given to third grade students in Norcross, GA, not in 1912, but rather in 2012, a teacher attempted to make interdisciplinary connections with a social studies unit on Frederick Douglass. Douglass was, of course, an illustrious and formidable African American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman who became a national leader of the abolitionist movement after his escape from slavery in Maryland in 1838, speaking and writing widely and to great acclaim until his death in 1895. Below are several of the math questions posed to students:

- 1). Frederick had 6 baskets filled with cotton. If each basket held 5 pounds, how many pounds did he have all together?
- 2). If Frederick got two beatings per day, how many beatings did he get in one week? Two weeks?
- 3). Each tree had 56 oranges. If eight slaves pick them equally, then how much would each slave pick?"

(Reproduced in King & Woodson, 2016/17, p. 6)

What is going on here? King and Woodson point out that not only are textbook description of slavery narrow, they also “typically focus on the subjugation of black bodies” while “ignoring black agency” (p. 4). This formulation shields whites from responsibility and normalizes racialized violence (King & Woodson, 2016/17). The math problems in question reflect this narrow view of history, stripping Douglass of his agency and ignoring his remarkable accomplishments.

Leonardo and Porter (2010) use the concept of educative-psychic violence “to describe the negative effects of conversations about race that minimize or ignore the significance of racism” (p. 5). Brown and Brown examined 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade textbooks for depictions of racial violence, which they found to be limited and under analyzed, “detached from the larger structural and institutional ties that supported and subsequently benefited from those actions” (2010, p. 139). This leaves us unable to grapple with and historicize contemporary racial violence

Or, I should say, we are unable to do this in school. It is being done elsewhere, by young people across the country, as they make connections between history, structure and violence, and craft-activist responses (i.e. Kemal, 2018; Mire, 2014; Simonton, 2016; Smith, 2017; Walker, 2014). Social studies content, curriculum, and instruction can and should address these problems of educative-psychic violence.

## “Clash of Cultures”: Teaching Indigenous History

Let us now go back to the original example of the “My Colonial Character” assignment. On Day three, students were assigned to write a journal entry:

Clash of Cultures: Colonists and Native Americans. The characters are now 11- years-old and over time have noticed some similarities and differences between the Colonists and the Native Americans. After reading about the Native American way of life, students are asked to compare and contrast both cultures.”

In this example, Native Americans and colonists are framed as two “cultural groups” with “similarities and differences.” Sabzalian and Shear (2018) note that attempts at multicultural approaches to elementary social studies education remain what they call “colonial blind,” a play on the term “color blind” that typifies the way that social studies tends to handle issues of race (p. 153). These approaches ignore notions of tribal sovereignty and self-determination – the actual legal status of tribes as separate nations, in relationship through treaty agreements with the government of the United States, and the context of historical and continued colonization in which sovereign Native American nations were

dispossessed.

Likewise, in the assignment, Native Americans are framed, even explicitly named, as a cultural group, and not as a sovereign nation. The assignment asks students to perform a compare and contrast, to create a balanced depiction of a relationship that was anything but balanced, and certainly cannot be defined as centrally a clash of cultures, but rather as a struggle between two nations, with quite unequal powers, characterized by deception. Sabzalian and Shear note that “too often social studies educators disregard the unique government-to-government relationship between Indigenous nations and the federal government, casting tribal-federal political relations inaccurately as racial relationships” (p. 163) or, in this case, as cultural encounters, a framing of the past which strips Indigenous groups of their agency and status as sovereign nations.

Indigenous people are generally presented in the curriculum as belonging to the distant past. Shear and colleagues (2015) studied how Indigenous people are represented in state U.S. history standards and found almost every reference to Native Peoples in state standards related the time period before 1900 (p. 68). As the “My Colonial Character” assignment hints, the theme of “cooperation followed by conflict” dominates the depiction of Native peoples’ relationship with Euro-Americans. The Westward expansion theme that follows the early cooperation-to-conflict theme then positions Indigenous people as “temporary barriers in the way of American progress” (p. 87).

In many state standards, Westward expansion is the end of the story of Native Peoples; the conquest and physical destruction of Native peoples and lands is framed as inevitable and disconnected from enduring systems of oppression. After Westward expansion, Indigenous people no longer figure significantly; indeed, 17 states’ social studies standards contain no mention at all of Indigenous Peoples after 1900. Although some academics estimate that approximately 175 million Indigenous people may have died between 1492 and 1900 in the Western Hemisphere (Smith, 2017), due to disease and warfare, genocide is only mentioned in relation to Indigenous peoples in the standards of one state: Washington state.

Federally sanctioned violence against Native Peoples, such as the 1862 execution in Mankato, Minnesota, of 38 Dakota Indians by the US government, the largest mass execution in US history (This Day in History, n.d.) does not appear in textbooks or state standards. Journalist Jon Weiner (2012) writes,

Minnesota was a new frontier state in 1862, where white settlers were pushing out the Dakota Indians—also called the Sioux. A series of broken peace treaties culminated in the failure of the United States that summer to deliver promised food and supplies to the Indians, partial payment for their giving up their lands to whites.”

Acting in self-defense, the Dakota rebelled, killing 490 white settlers. They were executed, under orders from President Lincoln. Weiner continues,

[President Abraham] Lincoln’s treatment of defeated Indian rebels against the United States stood in sharp contrast to his treatment of Confederate rebels. He never ordered the executions of any Confederate officials or generals after the Civil War, even though they killed more than 400,000 Union soldiers.

All of this leaves little room for students to develop an understanding of Native Peoples that would help them to make sense of contemporary events, such as the 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline protests, led by the Standing Rock Sioux tribe. The Tribe’s position is that the pipeline violates their treaty rights, which guarantee them “undisturbed use and occupation” of reservation lands. Acting as a sovereign nation, in 2015 the tribe passed a resolution stating that “the Dakota Access Pipeline poses a serious risk to the very survival of our Tribe” (Treaties Still Matter, 2019). These very questions of sovereignty are obscured by the clash of cultures frame.

### **Connecting citizenship, oppression and identity**

With all these examples in mind, let us return to the original questions: How does knowing content matter for disrupting oppression? What is the relationship between advancing justice and the

teaching of content? I suggest that there is no such thing as “knowing content” in social studies if “knowing” is defined as a neutral, un-situated act. Content is always shaped and framed by people. It is always deeply political, even when it is adamantly apolitical, it is intimately connected to peoples’ lives, even when most assiduously disconnected, it is felt intimately and distinctly and is closely related to oppression, liberation and understanding.

In her keynote address to the 2016 Democratic National Convention, First Lady Michelle Obama said, “I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves” (Obama, 2016; PBS News Hour, 2016). She received a standing ovation from the crowd and both acclaim and reprobation on social media, where Rush Limbaugh compared slavery to a husband cheating on his wife, and said the Obamas needed to get over it, while Bill O’Reilly contributed that “Slaves that worked there were well-fed and had decent lodgings provided by the government.” But her words clearly struck a chord; there was an outpouring of support and approbation on social media as well (Blay, 2016; Shephard, 2016).

History itself had not changed, but by voicing her intimate, emotional connection to the enslaved people who were fully and problematically part of this nation’s creation, listeners felt the shock of understanding the dissonance of the contradiction and the ramifications of acknowledging the humanity of the enslaved peoples through whose forced labor this country was literally constructed. As Choctaw/Cherokee scholar Frances Rains (2003) wrote, “[t]he dilemma is how to teach about ‘core values’ such as ‘freedom,’ ‘liberty’ and ‘justice for all’ in a country that has a continuing legacy of oppression and intimidation within its own boundaries” (p. 200). This is the challenge of oppression and content. That is, once content is reframed using the voices of those who have previously been marginalized, the teaching of social studies must be reframed as well.

This brings me into more familiar territory, the focus of my research, youth civic identity – how young people come to see themselves in relation to the nation. Woodson noted that “history textbooks deeply inform students’ understandings of citizenship and democracy” (2015, p. 57). She writes about black students’ contentious relationships with texts about slavery. Certainly, the examples I shared earlier highlight the ways that school-based and educative framings of history set up versions of the nation’s past that center whiteness and otherize Native Peoples, African Americans and other groups that are marginalized within the national story. Chandler and Branscombe (2015) call this a “White Social Studies” that protects white dominant narratives and sidesteps discussion of institutionalized racism. This is a social studies that, as King and Chandler (2016) put it “fails to prepare students for a racially based citizenship existence in the US” (p. 10).

In my own research and that of many others, we have explored the ways that students’ day-to-day experiences as citizens, their lived, citizenship experiences, shape their understandings of what it means to be part of the United States. Fifteen years ago, at an urban middle school, students engaged in a lively discussion of the Pledge of Allegiance:

- Amber: We are the one nation, under God. One nation.
- Jessica: When the Pledge of Allegiance says, “under God,” it can’t actually say that and expect people to pledge allegiance to the flag. Because there’s other races that really don’t believe in God. So, if you don’t believe in God why would you pledge allegiance to the flag that states “under God?” You won’t...it’s...
- Angelica: Well, me and her [points] were discussing. She said that it’s not one nation because of segre..., like we had segregation, all this stuff, all this hate. But you’re not pledging to the people in America, you’re pledging to America itself.

Although quantitative measures of civic attainment consistently rank low-income students of color behind their White and more affluent peers, Amber, Jessica, Angelica, and their classmates, African American and Latino eighth grade students at a middle school in a low-income urban area, energetically pursued such questions for over two hours, leaving the room reluctantly and still talking. This brief snippet of classroom conversation shows these students’ interest in and engagement with complex civic questions. Who is the “one nation” invoked in the Pledge? Does our nation’s history of segregation and “all this hate” provide a challenge to this notion? Can all Americans be expected to agree to a pledge that invokes belief in a deity? What about those “other races” who don’t believe in God? Can they be expected to make the same pledge?

Students’ civic knowledge and engagement are frequent subjects of inquiry for researchers from

political science, education, developmental psychology, and other disciplines. Measures of civic learning have been administered to large cohorts of students, some repeatedly over the course of several decades. The result is a wealth of data and analysis, an impressive body of research that documents students' civic achievement – or, more aptly, their lack of civic achievement - over time.

With few exceptions, this body of literature is rooted in the idea that civic knowledge is a set of content and skills that can be given by teachers to students in a classroom setting and that civic engagement is measured by if students say they intend to vote once they are 18, read the newspaper, or watch the news on TV. Using these measures, young people come up lacking, especially students of color. But, as the discussion between Amber, Jessica, and Angelica, shows such measures do not capture the depth and complexity of young people's feelings about and analyses of civic life.

Over 15 years ago, I began a line of research to investigate young peoples' relationship to the concept of citizenship, across a variety of contexts. Over and over, I found that larger social forces and students' day-to-day experiences in school framed and shaped young peoples' civic identities – their sense of connection to and participation in a civic community (Nasir & Kirshner, 2003). Zaria, an African American 8<sup>th</sup> grader, exemplifies this connection in explaining why she didn't think she should have to say the Pledge of Allegiance, saying,

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. One nation under God. Well, we are under God, but I don't feel like we are all one nation because some people still do segregate, and there's still not justice—liberty and justice—for all people.

Young peoples' daily experiences powerfully shape their civic identities; this is a valuable and greatly underutilized resource for meaningful civic learning.

## **II. STRUCTURING CONTENT: CREATING A SOCIAL STUDIES THAT MATTERS**

- How can and should content be structured?
- What are official approaches to structuring content?
- What are approaches that build on students' experiences, equip them to analyze the world around them in relation to questions of inequality, and create critical consciousness?

How then, do we structure content to engage with young peoples' pressing, situated concerns, concerns rooted in the lives both as individuals and as members of groups that are deeply connected to national history in ways which, as I discussed earlier, are not adequately engaged in social studies classrooms? In this section I will lay out traditional approaches and then provide examples and approaches for how social studies content might be structured to more transformational effect. But first, I'd like to start with an example of how social studies classrooms can be places within which students can discuss, analyze and make critical connections between past and present.

### **A Time for Social Studies<sup>3</sup>**

It was the day after the Ferguson grand jury declined to indict police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of Michael Brown. "My students came into the classroom asking me about it, before I even got a chance to say anything," said Nicole Cooper, social studies teacher at an urban high school in New Jersey. That same day, Cienai Wright-Wilkins's students at her urban Virginia high school contacted her through social media before school began, asking if they could talk about the verdict in her social studies class. Coming to their teachers with the desire to discuss and begin to make sense of events that had touched them deeply, these African American and Latino students expected their social studies classrooms to provide this space.

In response to her students' requests, Ms. Cooper reshaped her day's lesson. In the middle of a unit on the U.S. constitution, she decided to dedicate the class period to student consideration of whether

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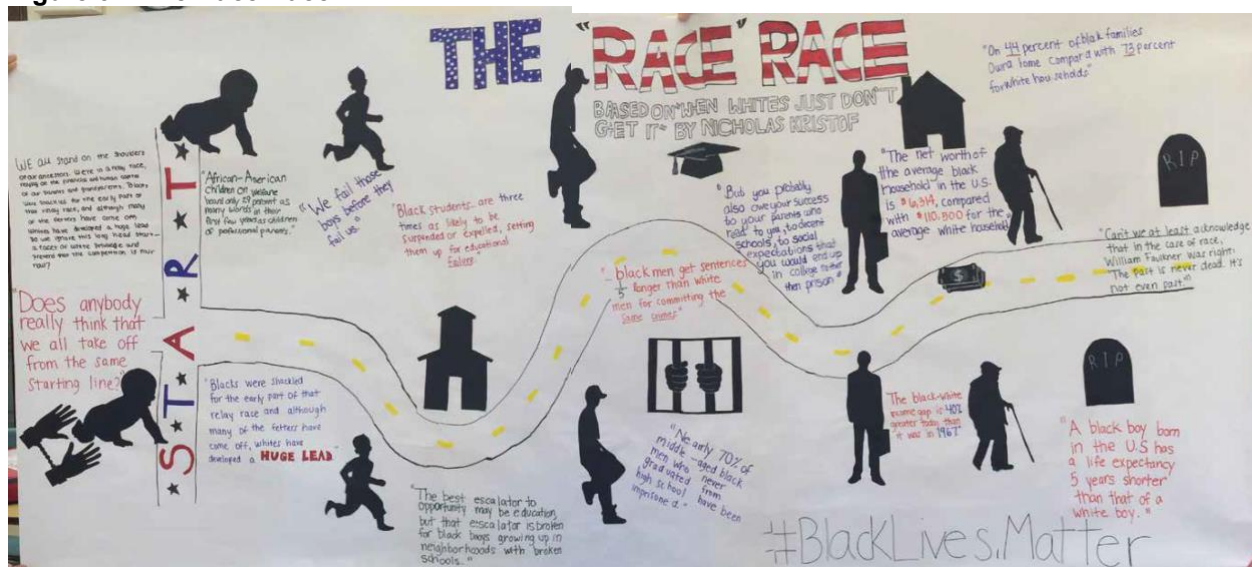
<sup>3</sup> This section draws on Rubin, B.C. (2015). A time for social studies: Talking with young people about Ferguson and Staten Island. *Social Education*, 79(1), pp 22–29.



Michael Brown and the protesters' constitutional rights had been violated. Ms. Wright-Wilkins asked her students to write in their journals and share their feelings about law enforcement. "They are supposed to be there for protection," a student shared, "but I have never felt protected by the police." When asked by her students to express her own feelings on the subject, Ms. Wright-Wilkins demurred, later explaining, "I want them to find their own opinions."

Figure 3 shows a mural made by another teacher's class, Shana Stein from Montclair High School, who, after the Ferguson verdict, had her class read Nicolas Kristoff's "When whites just don't get it" series and then asked them to create a visual response – this 9 X 6 foot mural was hung in the hallway to share with the school.

**Figure 3: "The Race Race"**



These students came to their social studies teachers anticipating that they would be able to use their classrooms to share feelings and discuss events of direct and personal importance. Their teachers, two African American, one white, built on these desires, creating discussion, writing, and analytical activities that allowed the students to contextualize their own feelings and experiences and connect them to larger historical, social and political themes. Perhaps these seem like obvious maneuvers. However, we could also imagine teachers responding that there was not time to discuss these events, that the day's lesson on the Bill of Rights needed to be completed, or perhaps expressing fear that opening a discussion of students' feelings about law enforcement was too risky or too controversial. They could have surrendered to "getting through the curriculum;" after all, there are standards to meet and student growth objectives that must be attained.

Over the years, I have learned from students how learning is typically structured within social studies classrooms. "All we did was watch movies, handouts, dittos," remarked Juan, student at an urban high school, describing his social studies class. "Teachers just give you the book, read out of it, do the work, that's it," reflected Sarah, student at a middle-class suburban school. "The teachers don't teach...they'll give us a worksheet and we'll have to read it and then just answer the questions," concurred Sean, a student at a different suburban school. These comments, a few of many similar sentiments expressed by public high school students that I have interviewed over the years, hint at how classroom social studies is frequently experienced in the United States.

These data are consistent with other research. Multiple studies describe a field dominated by lecture, memorization, textbook driven instruction and worksheets (Ellis, Fouts, and Glenn, 1992; Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; Russell & Waters, 2010). Despite a wealth of evidence about the necessity of discussion and relevance for effective civic learning, studies report that little discussion occurs in social studies classrooms. Even teachers who claim to use discussion are often confusing it with question and answer and recitation (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2001; Hahn, 1996; Nystrand, Gamoran & Carbonaro, 1998; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Wilen, 2003). In a recent poll, 35% of students surveyed said that teachers

lectured most in their social studies classes, the highest percentage for all subjects (Wiggins, 2015). Wolk writes, “Not allowing students to engage in open discussion on important issues and topics is the most detrimental intellectual void in schools” (2003, p.103). Or, as one student, Peter, told me, it’s “just lectures, lectures, lectures, and it gets boring after a while so you don’t really remember.”

The norms and conventions of classrooms are not neutral - they shape learning in particular ways, reflecting the structures and perspectives of particular people and places (Nasir & Hand, 2006). When lectures, textbooks and worksheets dominate students’ experiences with social studies content, this content is then framed as a set of certainties to be memorized, rather than questions to be explored. This further distances students from a social studies that might help them to better understand themselves and the world around them.

## **Officially Structuring Social Studies State Standards**

Although educators, researchers, policy-makers and the general public have argued about the purpose of social studies for generations, most people would probably say that social studies is the same as history. Looking at the standard sequence of courses found in most middle and high schools makes this clear: U.S. high schools usually require one to two years of world history and one to two years of U.S. history, with some requiring shorter courses in government and economics. Middle school curricula commonly include ancient history and U.S. history. Some require state history.

Although the U.S. has a decentralized educational system in which state standards vary widely in terms of detail, organization, framing, and quantity in their requirements for social studies, the emphasis on history is consistent nationally. Despite the frequent use of the term “social studies” in the titles of various states’ standards, the 2011 National History Education Clearinghouse report asserts, “history remains at the center of the social studies curriculum” (Martin, 2011, 13).

In New Jersey, where I train social studies teachers and send my children to public school, for example, the suggested sequence for high school social studies is framed historically, down to suggested time periods. In California, while economics and government do receive one semester each in students’ senior year of high school, United States history (including California history) is the focus of social studies in grades four, five, eight and eleven, and world history is the focus in grades six, seven and ten (California Department of Education, 2000). History eclipses the other social studies topics by a factor of 7 to 1.

This all seems rather straightforward - social studies is history, and history is the study of what has happened in particular times and places, easily divided into time periods and locations, as in the examples from the New Jersey standards. But, of course, as I’ve spent the first part of this paper exploring, there is nothing simple about it. The content of and approach toward the history curricula at the heart of social studies education have long been controversial. Disputes take place over, among other things, the role of facts and chronology in history, the nature of perspective, how the economy is described, how the past is interpreted in relation to issues of justice, whether to emphasize individual rights or the community good, how to present dissent and activism, which historical figures to emphasize, how to discuss the negative aspects of heroic figures and how to present the contributions of particular groups. Battles over content and approach often fall along ideological lines, with school boards, elected officials, and local citizens accusing districts of endorsing curricula that promote particular political perspectives. In the past several years, debates have raged over the content of the U.S. History curriculum.

In 2010, for example, the Texas State Board of Education mandated the use of history and economics textbooks, “stressing the superiority of American capitalism, questioning the Founding Fathers’ commitment to a purely secular government, and presenting Republican political philosophies in a more positive light” (McKinley Jr., 2010). They also discussed whether the word “slavery” ought to be included in the state standards. In Arizona that same year, state legislators spoke against the teaching of ethnic studies in the states’ public schools and Governor Brewer signed a law aimed to end the courses (Huecochea, 2010; Lewin, 2010). In Denver in 2014, the Jefferson County School Board proposed eliminating U.S. History texts that did not promote “respect for authority,” precipitating a walkout of 700 high school students from six area high schools (Barber, 2014).

Curricular tinkering can be very minute. In Texas, for example, the State Board of Education created, parsed, approved, and mandated a list of 204 names of historical figures to be included in the state social studies curriculum, going so far as to stipulate the exact grade level at which they were to be

taught (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, 2010). Social studies is a contested space, with different interests attempting to shape students' national identities and historical understandings by directing teachers' curricular content choices through teaching standards.

## Professional Organizations

What do our professional organizations in social studies tell us about content? The National Council for the Social Studies has described the subject in this very complex manner: It is "the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence." It integrates multiple disciplines ("anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences") into a "coordinated, systematic study" resulting in "knowledge of and involvement in civic affairs." This expansive definition calls for the "coordinated and systematic" integration of up to 14 distinct subject areas (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.).

The new [C3 Framework](#) stacks preparation for college and career on top of the NCSS's traditional commitment to preparing young people for citizenship. The Framework is a masterwork of integration, weaving together all the major social studies disciplines, the 10-part English Language Arts Common Core Standards for Reading and Writing in History/Social Studies, and a four-part action research sequence. There are 31 tables mapping out the connections between subjects and skills. This is an impressive synthesis that presents social studies teachers with an overwhelming task (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).

Yet the new NCSS C3 framework is, despite its commendable focus on civic inquiry, basically raceless – in the 110-page document, I found four references to race, all of which were definitional. "Inequality" is considered in a companion document, found in the appendix, prepared by the American Sociological Association, but is not integrated into the framework itself. As Chandler and McKnight put it, "No overt statement about race or racism is made in the standards that govern and organize the social studies" (2011, p. 9).

## Racial Pedagogical Content Knowledge to Structure Content in Social Studies

One way to prepare new social studies teachers to address this lacuna on race, racism and oppression is through what Chandler (2015) calls *racial pedagogical content knowledge*, "social studies teachers' racial knowledge and how it influences content and pedagogical choices" (King & Chandler, 2016, p. 6). King and Chandler (2016) suggest that racial pedagogical content knowledge in social studies teacher education be based on Pollack's four principles of anti-racist education,

1. Rejecting false notions of human difference
2. acknowledging lived experiences shaped along racial lines
3. learning from diverse forms of knowledge and experience
4. challenging systems of racial inequality (2008, p. 8).

This would, as King & Chandler (2016) put it, "add the layer of race to the teaching of concepts like 'democracy' and 'government,'" which would allow, "teachers and students to see beyond the neutral language of institutions to uncover the lived realities that these macrostructures inflict on people of color" (p. 18).

## Connecting Past to Present with a Critical Analysis: Forests, Trees, and Twigs

Yet social studies educators are still left with the daunting task of structuring content. Doing so in a way that is cognizant of the links between content and oppression, indeed, that has the potential to create critical consciousness and liberate, is a challenging task. James Loewen, author of the 1995 classic *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, writes in his 2009 book *Teaching What Really Happened* about forests, trees, and twigs as a way of thinking about to determine and select what is meaningful from what is peripheral to construct a more engaging and thought-provoking U.S. history curriculum. The traditional curriculum, he argues, in its attempt to cover everything, reveals very little of importance. He dubs this a



“twig curriculum,” made up of hundreds upon hundreds of dates, facts and events, or “twigs.” Loewen writes,

As a professor who specializes in teaching first-year courses, I can guarantee that by the time they enter college, most students who were taught U.S. history the usual way have forgotten everything – except that World War I preceded World War II.” The goal, he writes, is “to help students *uncover* the past rather than cover it. Instead of ‘teaching the book,’ teachers must develop a list of 30-50 topics they want to teach in their U.S. history course. Every topic should excite or at least interest them. What meaning might it have to students lives? These topics will be the trees. They organize the twigs, facts, dates, figures, that students are to recall (2009, p. 19).

Loewen recommends that teacher select these “trees,” the essential topics of US history, by considering why they want students to know it and how it connects to the present. He explains,

No list can be completely idiosyncratic. If it omits the making and use of the Constitution, it’s an incompetent list. If it does not include the Civil War and its impact, it is an incompetent list. But must it include, for instance, the removal of the five so-called civilized tribes from the Southeast - the Trail of Tears of the Choctaws, Cherokees, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles? My list would. But a Minnesota teacher revealed to me that hers wouldn’t – she’d rather teach the Dakota War or Sioux Uprising of 1862-63, which happened right in her part of Minnesota. She had a point. But at some point, every list must include the taking of the land from its first possessors, or it cannot be competent (p. 20).

These essential topics should be selected also for their ability to illuminate the “continuing major themes of U.S. history” (p. 22), what Loewen dubs the “forests.” For Loewen, these forests are enduring areas of concern. He identifies the following 10 “forests”:

1. How cultures change through diffusion and syncretism
2. Taking the land
3. The individual versus the state
4. The quest for equity
5. Sectionalism
6. Immigration and Americanization’
7. Social class; democracy vs. plutocracy
8. Technological developments and the environment
9. Relations with other nations
10. Historiography, how we know things All relate to oppression and justice.

If a tree cannot be connected to one of these forests, if it cannot be used to pursue the key questions “What are the implications of this topic for us today? What does it matter?” Then, as Loewen puts it, “Maybe it should be chopped off the list of topics” (p. 25). Loewen’s themes relate directly to and actively upend the oppressive use of content that was examined earlier. In distinguishing between twigs, trees and forests, Loewen gives us a way of structuring a curriculum that puts emphasis on big, enduring questions that connect past to present in ways that disrupt oppression.

### **Making Citizens Project**

In another approach to structuring content to disrupt oppression in social studies, I worked with teachers to refashion the U.S. history curriculum to engage young people directly with civic questions that are both timely and relevant to their lives outside school. In the Making Citizens project (Rubin, Hayes & Benson, 2009; Rubin, 2010; Rubin & Hayes, 2010; Rubin, 2012), a design-based research project that aimed to integrate meaningful civic learning into the U.S. history curriculum in diverse schools, we built

our approach on four design principles drawn from recent civic education research. These were, that civic education should:

1. build upon students' own experiences with civic life, including their daily experiences with civic institutions
2. provide opportunities for students to consider and discuss key controversies in civic life
3. build students' skills of discussion, analysis, critique, and research
4. build students' knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a way that connects directly to their own concerns

Our redesign began with a reorganization of the year's curriculum so that students and teachers could easily access enduring questions that would allow them to explore historical content, relate the subject to their own lives, and "reach today" right away. Working with a historian and drawing upon the "understanding by design" approach of Wiggins and McTighe (2005), the team rethought how to approach historical content, collaboratively organizing the required content into themes with an overarching question and underlying essential questions, as shown in table 1 (Rubin, 2010, p. 145).

**Table 1: Themes and Essential Questions**

Theme	Overarching Question	
	WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?	
	Essential Questions	Content (not inclusive)
<b>Government</b>	What purpose does government serve? What is a good American citizen? Am I a good American citizen?	branches of government; democracy; federalism; political ideology; electoral politics
<b>Economics</b>	What do Americans owe each other? Why are some rich and some poor? Is the American economy fair?	capitalism; stock market; Great Depression; industrialization; economic reforms; world economy
<b>Conflict and Resolution</b>	What is America's role in the world? Why does the U.S go to war? When should it? Can nations cooperate?	WWI; WWII; Cold War; Vietnam War; Korean War; Gulf War; Iraq War; war on terror; genocide
<b>Movement of People</b>	Who is an American? Why do people come to America? How do different groups define their American identities?	immigration; migration (various groups); Japanese internment; gentrification; globalization
<b>Social Change</b>	Are all Americans equal? How do Americans make social change? Who has the power to make change? Do you? What forces shape society?	race/civil rights movement; Latino rights movement; gender/women's rights movement; social protest

We also worked to build lasting pedagogical change into the model, developing four "strands" drawn from the literature on best practices in civic education and meaningful social studies instruction, weaving discussion, writing and expression, action research, and current events throughout the year, teachers incorporated student-centered, active learning practices in an ongoing, developmental manner. This is demonstrated in table 2 (Rubin, 2010, p. 146).

Table 2: **Civic Skill Building Strands**

<i>Strand</i>	Discussion	Writing and Expression	Civic Action Research	Current Events
<i>Activities</i>	Seminar Take-a-Stand Structured conversation	Social studies journals Persuasive Letter Persuasive Speech Newscast Five Paragraph Essay	Problem identification Research Solutions Presentation	Related to themes Related to questions Related to election
<i>Purpose</i>	Develop discussion and listening skills, ability to analyze and present a well-supported opinion on a controversial issue.	Develop skills of written and oral expression, ability to work alone or in a group to prepare/present.	Develop ability to investigate public issues and concerns using primary and secondary sources; to develop a plan for action.	To weave students' consideration of current events into themes, events, and questions under study.

A focus on questions of equality and social justice were central, particularly in the social change theme, displayed here. You can also see the forest – big questions about social change, the trees – several key movements, and the twigs – events, people, terms, in this content map.

At the school in which the design principles were most fully instantiated throughout the academic year, 100% of the students reported that they had talked about racism, sexism and discrimination in class, that they had class discussions in which they could freely offer their opinions, that they had learned about people who work to make society better, that they had learned about things in society that needed to be changed, that they had learned about problems in society and what causes them, and that they had talked about current events. This was a 20% increase from what they said they had experienced the previous year in their social studies class.

In the diverse town of Allwood, with students whose families had recently come to the United States from dozens of different countries, immigration was a vivid part of the community context; questions related to immigration had the potential to be a bridge between the civic and the personal. In an end-of-year interview, a student, Vinnie, when asked if he could recall a particularly interesting discussion they had had in class, answered, “We had a class discussion on immigration. I have two parents that are immigrants, you know. It’s something that...it’s personal, it’s personal. And you know, just hearing out the arguments, just understanding what my parents went through.”

Allwood teacher Ms. Tenney described how her student-teacher, Kristi, approached the Movement of People theme, embedding current events within the study of U.S. history,

...she did start out with Trail of Tears, and understanding that relocation. Japanese internment. And then Kristi posed the question that after 9/11, some people were calling for some kind of internment or some kind of questioning for Muslim Americans, and has the United States changed in 150 years? ... [T]hey talked about immigration by choice, people moving to this country. And they talked about immigration that was happening with Ellis Island in the late 1800s into the early 1900s, and they talked about the Chinese Exclusion Act. And how immigration kind of slowed down a bit in a certain period of time in our country and then picked up again after the 1950s. Different groups of people that came to the United States and why they came and then today, the largest group that comes to the United States, and she talked about our own community...our town and how it has changed and why do people come here.

Rather than chronologically separating significant episodes of movement into and within the United States, the design team had grouped these separate events together under the theme of Movement of People, framed by the questions “Who is an American? Why do people come to America? Why do people move within the United States? How do different groups define their American identities?” This organization

allowed students to make connections across those events and to connect them to current and personally relevant concerns.

With this framing, Allwood students easily connected the historical study of immigration to current and personally significant issues. Ms. Tenney, a teacher at Allwood, described how her students probed their own feelings about immigration during class activities and discussions, directly engaging with each other on this topic, with legal immigrant students saying, “I’m an immigrant, and I came here legally, and I don’t think that illegal immigrants should get amnesty or certain benefits and they should go through the process like everyone else,” and undocumented immigrant students explaining “in my home country, this is the way things are, and we had to get here any way we could and we contribute to the economy, we contribute to the society.” Students engaged with each other on issues directly related both to their own lives and to ongoing civic concerns.

Wayne Journell points out that it is typical to teach about immigration without teaching about “historical and current acts of xenophobia and discrimination” (2009, p. 166). In state standards for US history, immigration is set as a past event, something that “occurred indistinct periods of American history rather than as a fluid process that continues today” (p. 164). Immigration in state standards is stranded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and doesn’t touch contemporary events. The curricular reform, in this case, provided space for students to make connections between the historical content, contemporary concerns, and their own lives throughout the entire year.

This approach to structuring content allows for immigration, and other issues, to be living issues that connect past to present in the ways that we’ve been discussing, illuminating connections, interrogating structures, and providing opportunities for students to connect contemporary events to their own lives and to understand them more deeply.

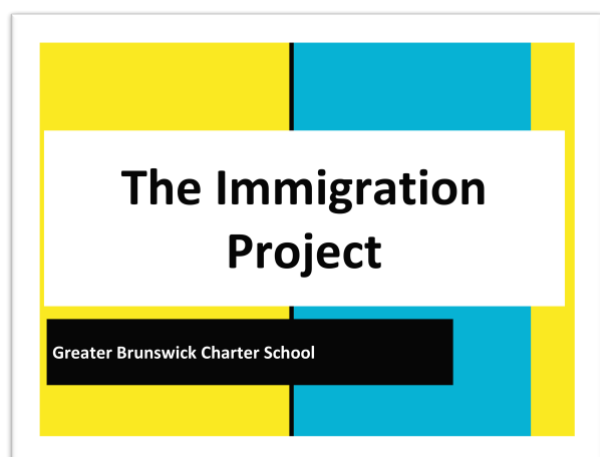
### III. RE-CREATING CONTENT: SHIFTING WHO CREATES SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENT

- Who gets to create content?
- How can we open up what knowledge is and who gets to make it?
- How can student inquiry be used to re-create content?

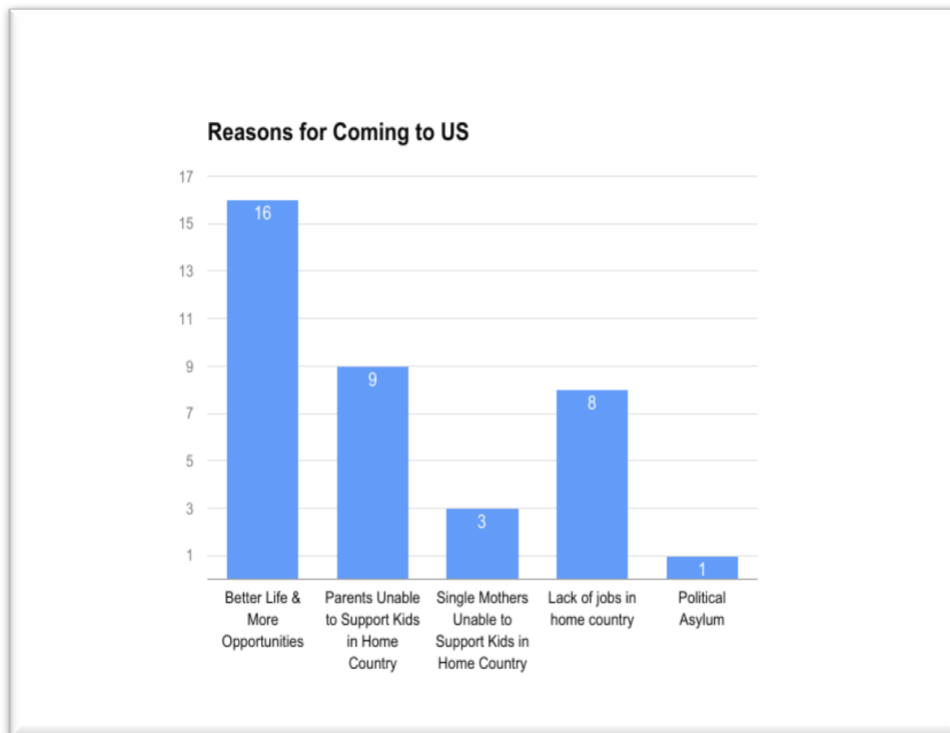
In this section I will use the same topic, immigration, to offer the possibility of students re-creating content through inquiry. In another line of research, I work in various ways with youth participatory action research. Over the past nine years, our student teachers have led these projects as afterschool clubs in the semester following their student teaching experience. As part of the projects, young people select issues of concern to them, conduct original research, and share their work with family, teachers and, the Rutgers community.

In this example, students at an urban, majority Latino elementary school in 2017, upset about the national conversation on immigration, decided to investigate feelings about immigration among their peers and families. Figures 4 through 14 are slides put together by these middle school students to share the results of their original research.

**Figure 4: Title Slide for Immigration Project, Greater Brunswick Charter School**



**Figure 5: Reasons for Coming to US**



They conducted surveys and interviews, and came to Rutgers to report their findings.

**Figure 6: Family Interviews**

Quotes

**“Poverty, family, we had a big family, and not a lot of money and there was barely enough food for all of us and I had to emigrate even if it was to another part of the country to make my life conditions better.”**

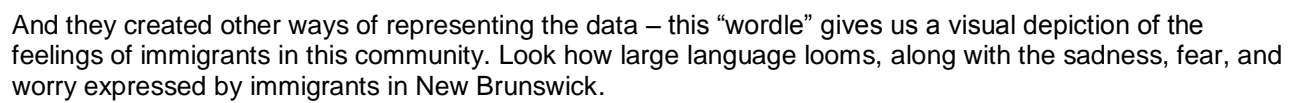
**“I immigrated at the age of 32 when my 2 children were going to start middle school in my country. I didn't have the money necessary to provide them with a better education at a good school. I had little to give them.”**

They interviewed parents as part of the project, writing interview questions, taking notes, and translating.

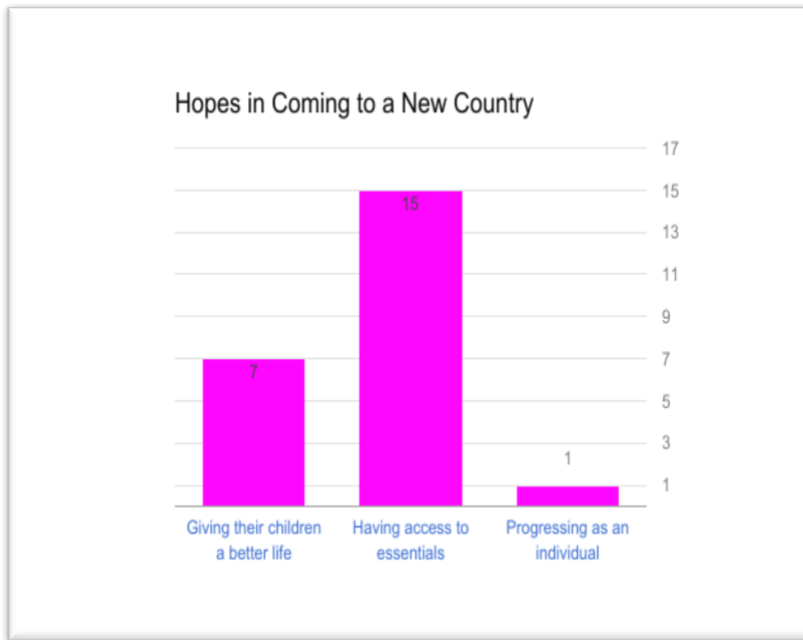
### Feelings and Concerns With Immigrating

Category	Frequency
Negative feelings	16
Sadness due to feeling alone	8
Sadness due to leaving family	6
Concern with language	9
Concern with finding a job	5
Concern with discrimination	2
Concern with access to education	1
Concern with being deported home	1

### Figure 8: Wordle of Feelings and Concerns Felt When Immigrating

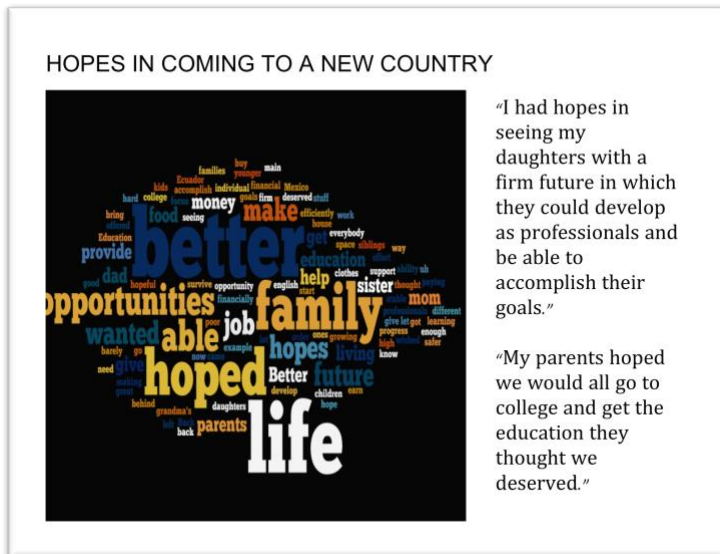


**Figure 9: Hopes in Coming to a New Country**



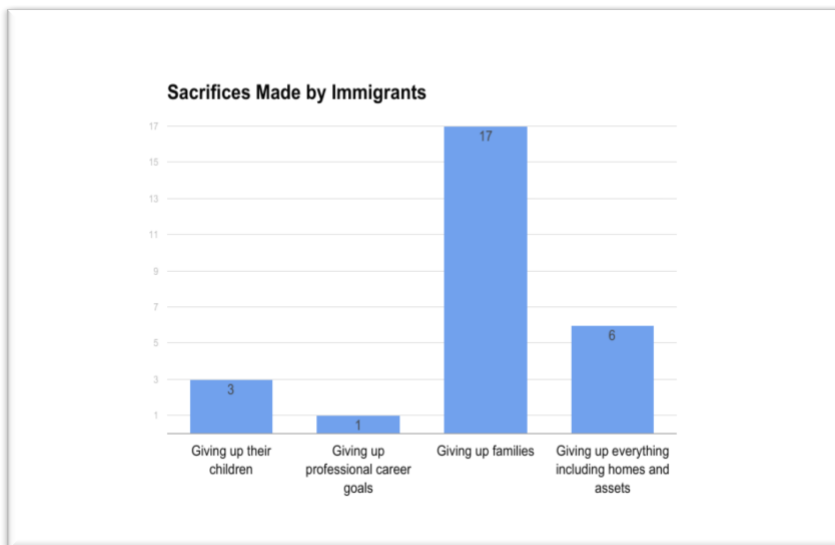
They also asked about what immigrants' hopes were in coming to the U.S..

**Figure 10: Wordle of Hopes in Coming to a New Country**



Again, you get a different feeling from this graphic depiction – the desire to better their lives, seeking new opportunities, commitment to family, the strong belief in education.

**Figure 11: Sacrifices Made by Immigrants**



The students learned first-hand about the sacrifices made by the immigrants in their communities, including family members, learning about the strength and resilience of their community

**Figure 12: Stories from Immigrants in the Community**

Quotes

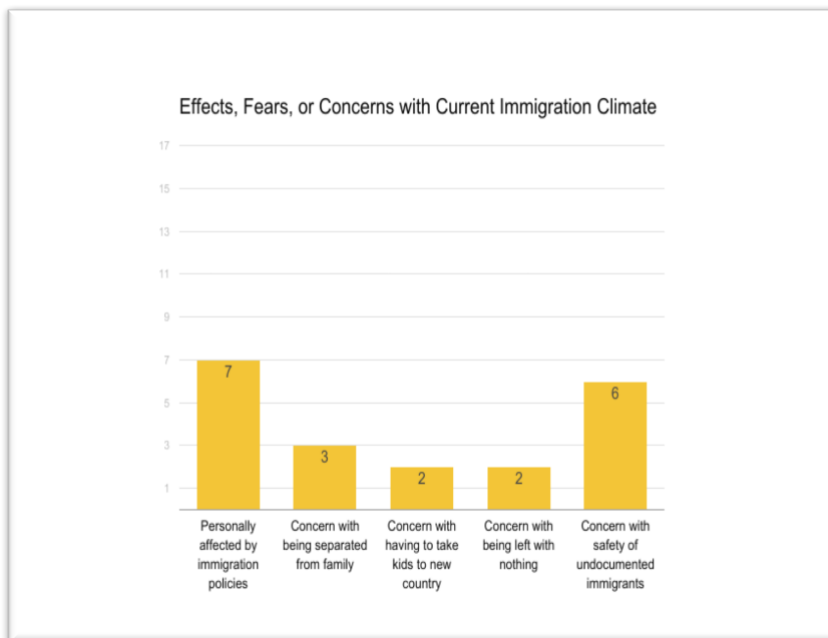
“We had to leave our loved ones, our house, and I had to quit my job.”

“I had to leave behind everything. I had to leave behind my family, I had to leave behind my home. I had nothing but I feel like leaving my family and home is a lot to sacrifice.”

They heard the stories of community members, and then represented them as data that the rest of us should know.



**Figure 13: Reactions to the Current Climate**



Finally, the students work shows us how the current immigration climate is impacting New Brunswick immigrants, who felt personally affected by both the legislation and the changing social, political, and media climate surrounding immigration issues in the run up to and since the 2016 election.

**Figure 14: Interviews with Immigrants about the Current Climate**

Quotes

**"A lot of families are being separated due to the current situation. The family is an important cell in our society and to separate it is very painful...parents and children being separated is very difficult."**

**"It is hard to sometimes go on social media and look at all the news and things that are happening."**

These are living events in New Brunswick students' lives that they themselves created content to address.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: DISRUPTING OPPRESSION THROUGH SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENT

Elizabeth Moje suggests that “social justice pedagogies” that provide “opportunities to question, challenge and **reconstruct** knowledge” are essential for equity in urban school settings” (2007, pp. 3-4), and I would add, in all settings.

So, I will return to our central questions, and a third which describes implications for the preparation of teachers:

- *How does knowing content matter for disrupting oppression?*
- *What is the relationship between advancing justice and the teaching of content?*
- *How can we support beginning teachers to learn content in ways that are intermeshed with the imperative to use teaching to disrupt racism?*

I will address these questions by articulating six conclusions from this working paper.

1. Social studies content is always political – how it is selected, structured, and presented always embodies and communicates a particular message, even if the designers are consciously trying to avoid such a message
2. Social studies content is the result of historical, social and political forces, and must be unpacked and connected to larger structures to understand fully
3. Content in the social studies has been, and continues to be deeply enmeshed with oppression – it surrounds us, beyond school, and shapes how we think about ourselves, others, and our country
4. Social studies teachers must be supported with education, time, resources and coaching to learn how to structure social studies content to reach its potential to create transformative educational experiences that help young people contextualize their own experiences and the pressing civic issues and injustices they see around them
5. This means figuring out which content most productively engages kids in consideration of fundamental and meaningful civic questions that connect past to present, and designing an engaging, student-centered curriculum around those issue and questions.
6. It also means learning how to provide opportunities for kids to re-create content, to ask their own questions and find their own answers about the questions that concern them.

Social studies offers the best opportunity within schools for young people to experience education as revelatory, empowering and liberatory. Challenging traditional approaches to social studies content, restructuring what is taught and how, and providing opportunities for young people to creatively engage and produce knowledge rooted in their own analysis and experience are fundamental to developing a social studies that disrupts oppression and develops a new generation of critically engaged citizens.

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