

# “There’s Still Not Justice”: Youth Civic Identity Development Amid Distinct School and Community Contexts

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*Qualitative research describing and theorizing about the emerging civic identities of diverse youth is scarce. This study provides a textured view of how civic identity is constructed and negotiated by racially and socioeconomically diverse adolescents, based on interviews and in-class discussions conducted with students in four public secondary schools. Youth living in distinct contexts come to school-based civic education with varied understandings—shaped by disparate daily experiences—of what it means to be an American citizen and a participant in the civic life of a democracy. This investigator’s examination of diverse adolescents’ discussions of their in-school and out-of-school civic experiences suggests a “typology” of civic identity that runs counter to prevalent views of the civic engagement of urban, minority youth. The study illustrates sharp disparities in daily civic experiences of youth from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, and suggests that schools can either hinder or encourage development of engaged, action-oriented civic identities among students from various contexts.*

## INTRODUCTION

“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.” — Zaria,<sup>1</sup> African American eighth grade student in an urban middle school

“I think I don’t agree with what the government is doing at all, and I don’t necessarily agree with the Pledge of Allegiance, but I do think it’s important to realize how lucky we are. We are very lucky just to be here.” — John, white eleventh-grade student in a suburban high school

As youth develop, they create meaning, identity, and a sense of themselves in the world by using a variety of sources, including existing constructions of ethnicity, race, gender, and social class. Yet studies of young people’s development of *civic* identity frequently overlook the meaning youth, and urban youth in particular, make of their daily experiences with civic institutions and their agents (e.g., teachers, police, social workers) amid the cultural practices and structural inequalities that surround them.

This study examines the development of youth civic identity—a young person’s sense of connection to and participation in a civic community (Nasir and Kirshner, 2003)—among diverse adolescents across a variety of socioeconomic contexts. It employs an expanded understanding of civics that hinges on the civic *experiences* of youth, particularly those from traditionally marginalized groups. Using a critical and interpretive theoretical perspective, the study draws upon group discussions and individual interviews with diverse youth in four distinct school settings to argue for a new understanding of youth civic identity and, as a consequence, to propose a new direction for school-based civic education.

Civic education research has generally focused on students’ “civic knowledge” and “civic engagement.” Civic knowledge in this literature refers to facts about U.S. history and government that can be readily measured with close-ended surveys and tests. Civic engagement is typically defined as participation in civic institutions through formal means, such as voting, and informal means, such as following current events and discussing politics with friends and family. Measurements of civic knowledge commonly seek to ascertain to what extent students have mastered material that has been presented to them, and measurements of civic engagement attempt to quantify through survey responses the degree to which students intend to participate in civic life, with participation narrowly defined. Urban students and students of color tend to lag behind their suburban and white peers in such measures (Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazer, 1999).

While valuable, such data are based on investigators’ rather than students’ definitions of civic knowledge and engagement; thus, they fail to capture students’ understandings or modes of engagement beyond those pre-defined by researchers. Yet students have civic experiences on a daily

basis, both within schools and beyond, that shape their understanding of what it means to be American citizens and participants in the civic life of a democracy. These experiences may differ sharply depending upon how students are situated socially, historically, and culturally. Most studies in this field, however, are designed to examine the civic knowledge and engagement of students from traditionally marginalized groups only from a deficit perspective.

How might consideration of students' out-of-classroom civic experiences impact formal, classroom-based civic education, which generally proceeds as though all students draw upon an identical well of experiences to make meaning from the curriculum? Might Zaria, cited above, a student in an urban middle school, who has faced extreme economic hardships in her life, have a different perspective on what it means to be an American than John, a student from one of the most affluent communities in the country? How might the practice of civic education be informed by a deeper and more nuanced understanding of racially and socioeconomically diverse students' daily (and differing) experiences with civic life?

This study attempts to unearth and explicate the meaning that diverse students make of their daily experiences as citizens and civic beings, as distinct from their knowledge about workings of the democratic system and their intentions to participate in more "conventional" markers of civic engagement, such as voting or reading the newspaper. Drawing on data generated through interviews and classroom seminars involving over 80 middle- and high-school students in four distinct schools, I argue that students' daily experiences and social positions inform their understanding of civics in powerful ways, and that particular school settings further shape this understanding, creating complex and varied contexts for students' developing civic identities. I then consider the implications for school-based civic education of this expanded understanding of youth civic identity development.

#### CURRENT RESEARCH ON YOUTH CIVIC KNOWLEDGE AND ENGAGEMENT

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 documenting students' civic achievement over time.

Many studies and polls, including the ongoing National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Vanishing Voter Project, conclude that students in the United States lack civic knowledge, defined as mastery of civics- and history-related content (Lutkus, et al, 1999; Patterson, 2002). The 1999 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study, on the other hand, sounded a reassuring note, concluding that U.S. students compare well internationally in civic knowledge, as assessed through a survey of students' knowledge of civics-related content, skills, and "conceptions of democracy," according to various researchers (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, and Hahn, 2001; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, and Schulz, 2001; Hahn, 2001; Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999).

Multiple studies suggest that differences in civic achievement of U.S. students appear to be linked to racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of students being tested (IEA, 1999; Lutkus, et al, 1999). For example, students in "high poverty" schools score lower on these measures than students in "low poverty" schools, African American and Latino students score lower than their white and multiracial peers (Baldi et al., 2001; Niemi and Junn, 1998), and parents' educational attainment is noticeably correlated with student performance (Baldi et al., 2001; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Hahn, 2001). Student educational attainment appears significant as well. Many researchers conclude that the longer students stay in school, the more likely they are to show a high degree of political knowledge (Galston, 2001; Hyman, Wright, & Reed, 1975; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Nie et al., 1996).

There is disagreement in the literature over the extent to which civics and social studies instruction affects students' civic achievement and participation, and how such an effect might be measured. Some researchers argue that social studies instruction has a positive effect on students' civic learning (Niemi and Junn, 1998; Hahn, 2001). Others argue that civics classes have little or no effect on most students and question the ability of classroom instruction to motivate participation (e.g., Gutmann, 1987; Erikson & Tedin, 1995; Corbett, 1991).

Most researchers concur that civic knowledge and engagement are in decline. Multiple studies report poor voting rates among young people (i.e., National Information Consortium, 2000; Patterson, 2002), and their lack of engagement with civic issues at both school and national levels (National Election Studies, 2000; Jennings & Stoker, 2001). Political scientists bemoan this apparent decline in the level of civic engagement among today's youth (Bennett, 2000; Putnam, 1995).

With few exceptions, this body of literature is rooted in a conception of civic knowledge as discrete content and skills that can be transmitted by

teachers to students in a classroom setting. The extent of students' civic knowledge, it follows, is best assessed through close-ended questions designed to take stock of an individual's command of this content. The notion of civic engagement found in this literature is limited by researchers' conceptions as well, instantiated in quantifiable activities such as intent to vote or how often the student reads the newspaper, without attention to students' own definitions of what it means to be an active citizen.

Much has been and continues to be learned from these approaches to understanding civic knowledge and engagement. This continually expanding body of research tracks changes over time and allows for numerous analytical possibilities. The studies reviewed above also raise important questions about civic learning and engagement, questions which previous approaches may not be able to fully address. Although it is clear from established measures of civic attainment that race, socioeconomic class, and educational attainment are somehow related to students' civic learning, it is unclear how or why. The actual impact of classroom instruction and out-of-school involvement is also unclear. As Galston (2001, p.219) writes, "Although citizens are made rather than born, it does not follow that civic education is the key formative mechanism."

Thus despite the wealth of existing data describing how well students measure up to researchers' predefined conceptions of civic knowledge and engagement, little is known about how students *themselves* define and understand civic life, apart from adult-devised definitions. Understandings of the relevance of race, class, and educational attainment to civic learning are limited by the static and de-contextualized quality such factors take on within traditional measures of civic achievement.

#### CONSTRUCTION OF CIVIC IDENTITIES: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Other researchers conceptualize civic learning, knowledge, and engagement in ways that take into account sources of civic knowledge beyond those considered by the prevailing research. Studies by Beane, Turner, Jones & Lipka (1981), Ladewig and Thomas (1987), and Verba, Schlozman, & Brady (1995) examine youth participation in organized groups and find a connection between such activities and adult civic participation of the same individuals. Zaff & Michelsen (2002) note that programs that actively involve youth in civic projects boost their civic knowledge and involvement. The IEA itself finds that students who participate

in extracurricular activities score higher on the IEA's civic knowledge section than those who do not (Baldi et al., 2001).

Other researchers find a connection between youth activism and adult political engagement (Fendrich, 1993; McAdam, 1988; DeMartini, 1983). Youniss & Yates (1999), in their examination of a program in which youth work in soup kitchens for the homeless, claim that such service work contributed to students' "altered perceptions of themselves from politically impotent teenagers to involved citizens who now and in the future could use their talent and power to correct social problems" (p. 362). More broadly, several researchers argue that larger social forces may affect young peoples' emerging senses of themselves as citizens (Bhavnani, 1991; Ginwright & James, 2002; Hart & Atkins, 2002; Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003; Rippberger & Sautd, 2003).

The present study builds upon such work, utilizing a more fully articulated sociocultural approach to explore the development of *civic identity* in diverse youth. Identity, as described by Nasir and Saxe (2003), is defined "not as purely essentialist properties of a static self, but rather as multifaceted and dynamic as people position themselves and are positioned in relation to varied social practices" (p. 17). The present study considers how students' daily experiences in a society marked by racial and socioeconomic inequalities become part of their evolving understandings of themselves as citizens. It reframes the idea that civic knowledge and learning is something that is (or is not) attained, making a shift to the notion that "civic identity" (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997) is constructed or developed amid particular structures and practices (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). This study is designed to investigate diverse students' senses of their relative value and importance within U.S. civic institutions and their belief in their ability to affect the system. By examining what young people *do* know about civic life from their daily experiences as citizens, rather than what they do *not* know, I hope to help inform our understanding of the development of civic identity among diverse students.

To create such an understanding, it is essential to examine views and experiences of students from traditionally marginalized communities. Rosaldo (1999) writes of the importance of research that investigates "vernacular notions of citizenship," calling for studies centering on "the aspirations and perceptions of people who occupy subordinate social positions" (p. 260). Ong (1999) notes that, "seldom is attention focused on the everyday processes whereby people, especially immigrants, are made into subjects of a particular nation-state" (p. 263). To develop a notion of civic identity that encompasses such dimensions, it is necessary to solicit views of a cross-section of U.S. youth. The sociocultural frame

and interpretive research approach employed in this study (described more fully below) will help shape an understanding of the meaning of civic life from the perspective of its diverse young participants, shedding light on troubling patterns and providing a base from which to develop appropriate instructional practice.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With the limitations of the current literature in mind, this study investigated four questions: 1) How do young people, from a range of socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and academic backgrounds interpret the central tenets and key texts of American democracy? 2) How do young people, from a range of socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and academic backgrounds describe their experiences with public civic institutions (i.e., schools, police, social services, health care) in the United States? 3) What congruities and/or disjunctures exist between formal civics and citizenship instruction and daily civic experiences for students from a variety of backgrounds? and, 4) How do students interpret the notion of civic participation?

## METHODOLOGY

### METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

The study was grounded in both the interpretive and critical research paradigms. The interpretive perspective highlights the socially constructed and locally negotiated nature of experience, while the critical research paradigm is rooted in a concern with how larger structures of inequality frame the possibilities of individuals and groups with the least power (Mehan, 1992; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Merging these two perspectives provided a theoretical framework in which to analyze varied meanings of civic life for diverse participants, situated within broader school and societal patterns of racial and socioeconomic inequality.

The study method was also designed to elicit perspectives of a varied group of students. Recent literature has pointed to the need for greater attention by educational researchers to school experiences of diverse students (Rubin & Silva, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2002; Ericson & Ellet, 2002). Soliciting this underrepresented perspective is acutely important for understanding the nature of diverse students' civic identities and the part that formal civic education plays and could play in the development of these identities.

### *Participating Schools and Students*

One social studies classroom in each of four New Jersey public middle and high schools was selected for participation in this study.

- Green Middle School is a small school in a low-income urban area. A magnet school for the performing arts, it serves predominantly African American (80%) and Latino (15%) students from poor and lower-income backgrounds.
- Burnside High School is a large school in an upper middle- to high-income suburban area. It serves predominantly White (82%) and Asian American students (14%) from upper middle- to high-income backgrounds.
- Willow High School is a large school in a racially and socioeconomically integrated suburban area. It serves a diverse group of students (47% African American, 43% White, 5% Latino, 5% Asian American). Students participating in the study were enrolled in a small learning community within the school that had a civics and government focus.
- Somerset Middle School is a large school located in a lower- to middle-income suburb. It serves a racially diverse population of students, many of whom come from families that have recently immigrated to the United States.

In each school, one classroom was chosen in which students reflected the range of ability levels and the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the school. Five students from each of these classrooms were selected for individual interviews based on the diversity of their opinions, their academic, racial, gender, and socioeconomic diversity, and their willingness to participate in reflective conversations. These students were not selected to “represent” particular groups, but in a study designed to explore civic identity from multiple perspectives, it was important to elicit viewpoints of diverse students.<sup>2</sup>

### *Data Collection*

Data collection occurred in two stages. The first stage focused on student discourse in the “natural” setting of the classroom and prepared the way for the second stage of the study, the direct elicitation of students’ beliefs

and experiences through one-on-one interviews.

In the first stage, the research team engaged students in two in-class activities designed to elicit ideas, recall incidents, and express feelings about their civic experiences in and out of school. The two activities were a *Pledge Seminar*, in which students participated in a “Socratic Seminar”<sup>23</sup> on the Pledge of Allegiance, and a *Bill of Rights Seminar*, in which students discussed current cases involving the Bill of Rights. Both activities were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes within and between schools. The purpose of this stage was to: (1) create, for observational purposes, a classroom event similar to what would occur in a social studies classroom; (2) provide a common classroom experience for students in a variety of school settings in order to compare student discourse across settings; (3) utilize the social setting of the classroom as a quasi-focus group; and (4) facilitate subsequent interviews by providing context and familiarity with topics and researchers.

In the second stage, researchers interviewed five students from each participating class, recording and transcribing each interview for analysis. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol focusing on student ideas about patriotism, allegiance, and civic responsibility. Interview questions emerged from the Pledge Seminar; students’ ideas about their rights as citizens, emerging from the Bill of Rights activity; and students’ experiences, in and out of school, that resonated or conflicted with their experiences of formal classroom civic education.

### *Role of Researchers*

The research team consisted of the principal investigator, a research assistant who was both a practicing teacher and a graduate student in social studies education, and, to a limited extent, the classroom teachers participating in the study. The principal investigator played the primary role in both data collection and analysis.

### *Data Analysis and Interpretation Techniques*

As in any interpretive study, data analysis was ongoing and iterative. The research team examined themes in the data both within and between schools. A coding scheme was developed through the constant comparative method—comparing and grouping data chunks to generate “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To bolster coding reliability, the two researchers generated codes collaboratively and coded a sample of the data independently. The codes were then refined for further use, and the entire data set was re-coded. A draft of major themes from the

data led to a typology of the range of student civic identities, and the data set was then re-coded using this typology.

## FINDINGS

The study found two distinct axes of identity in discussions and interviews with students: the range from congruity to disjuncture in the relationship between students' personal experiences and what they had learned were the ideals of the United States, and the range from active to passive in students' attitudes about civic participation. These two axes intersected to form a typology of student civic identities: aware, empowered, complacent, and discouraged.

### PART I, FIRST AXIS OF CIVIL IDENTITY: CONGRUITY OR DISJUNCTURE BETWEEN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND THE LEARNED IDEALS OF THE UNITED STATES

In seminars and interviews, students discussed both what they had learned about the ideals of the United States from key civic texts and their personal experiences as citizens. For some students, the ideals and realities of citizenship corresponded closely—they were in *congruence*. Others identified a gap—a *disjuncture*—between the ideals of the United States and what they had experienced or heard about from their families.

#### *Congruity*

In interviews and classroom discussions about the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights, some students expressed a high degree of correspondence between the ideals of the United States and their own experience, in areas such as safety and prosperity. Others found this confirmation in comparisons between the United States and other countries. Most students expressing “congruent” views were from more affluent schools where students were white or from immigrant backgrounds.

*Civic ideals confirmed through personal safety and prosperity.* Some students, particularly those at affluent and predominantly white Burnside High School, felt that the personal safety and prosperity they had experienced in their lives fulfilled the ideals expressed in the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights. For example, Frank, a white eleventh grader, saw his comfortable lifestyle as a fulfillment of the ideals of America:

[The Pledge is] a way to show your appreciation and dedication to the country who's provided so much for us, because I mean,

if I look at my house, if I look at this school. This school, I'm going here because I live in America, driving a car. It's not an American car, but still I have a car. You know, we're well off. I live a very comfortable, safe lifestyle, and I'm grateful for the opportunities I have. . . .

Frank's comment also reflected a connection some students saw between personal safety and the ideals of the United States. Stephanie, a white eleventh grader at Burnside, echoed this sentiment: "I think the reason the country is so great is because people are individuals and can be individuals. . . . I always feel safe." Jennifer, a white eleventh grader at Willow, stated, "I don't feel like I am going to be arrested because I look a certain way or because I said a certain thing."

*Civic ideals confirmed through comparison with other countries.* Many students noted ways in which the United States lived up to its ideals by comparing its freedom of expression, safety, and economic prosperity with conditions in other countries. Jack, an eleventh-grade white student at Willow, said that despite his reservations, he stood up for the Pledge of Allegiance because of "respect and just recognition that I am in the tiny minority of incredibly lucky people in the world." Claudia, an African American eleventh grader at Willow, noted, "It seems like when you think of America you think of the American Dream. No matter how bad you are off here it's always somehow better than it is in some other country . . . just for the fact that we have a say and you don't really get penalized as badly as you would somewhere else."

Because data collection took place between March and June 2003, Afghanistan and Iraq were frequent points of comparison for students. Amelia, a white seventh grader at Somerset Middle School, compared the United States to Iraq:

If you look at Iraq, like they're being controlled by Saddam Hussein. Like and they're all scared of him. . . . They're looking to the Americans to help them out and get them free. . . . [In] America, people aren't ruled by anybody like they are. . . . You're not demanded, no one comes into your house and invades your house and takes all your, your jewelry and your money and important things.

Shante, an African American eighth grader at urban Green Middle School also felt strongly about rights and security in the United States in comparison with Iraq, saying,

You live in America under the First Amendment, which is freedom of religion, freedom of speech. What I want to say is that the Pledge of Allegiance, to me it means that you're honoring the freedom of America. You're honoring that you live in such a country, that you're not in, you know, war in Iraq. . . . You don't have to walk down the street and think that you're going to be bombed, or that you're going to be hijacked, or whatever.

Burnside student Frank noted economic advantages of life in the United States and commented:

We have people who come to clean the house on Fridays, and I was talking to one of the women . . . she makes about three hundred dollars a week here, but she says . . . and you know that doesn't seem like that much but . . . compared to what she made back there [her home country] she said it would have taken her months to make that amount of money. [People who live] here at the lowest level in our country [do better] than their other country could provide for them.

*Civic ideals confirmed in comparison with the "home country."* For many immigrant students, comparison between the United States and other countries was more immediate. Many of these students spoke forcefully about opportunities and rights available in the United States that did not exist in their home countries. John contrasted the words "one nation" in the Pledge of Allegiance, with "where I was from, like North Korea and South Korea, they're not like one nation." He also felt that in the U.S. "you have the right to like go anywhere you want and like wear anything you want . . . and you could be . . . like any religion you want." In Korea, on the other hand, "If you don't like pay your bills or something then cops just come in and start putting yellow tags on every item."

Lizzie, an eleventh grader at Burnside whose family had emigrated from Moldova, spoke about the Pledge, saying,

Every day it has meaning to me especially since I'm not, I wasn't born in America. . . . And also my parents came here with no money and then, like a few months, my parents were able to afford their own place. We were out on our own living, me and my sister and both my parents, and then after that we got another house, and we were renting that, and then after that now my father owns his own home. . . . It's just incredible what this

country has to offer, and it's upsetting that there are Americans who don't value it.

For these students, the rights, opportunities, and security that they and their families experienced in this country overshadowed any discrepancies between the ideals and realities of life in the United States.

*Congruence with key civic texts.* Students at Burnside High were most outspoken in their beliefs in the veracity of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights: Frank said, "There's no part of it [the Pledge] that bothers me personally"; Raman, an Indian-American eleventh grader said, "There's nothing wrong with it"; and Lizzie, a Moldovan immigrant, said vehemently, "I agree with it completely. Every part of it."

In the Bill of Rights seminar, Burnside students could not come up with any examples of violations of rights guaranteed by the First and Fourth Amendments, those related to the case studies that students read and discussed. Raman said, in relation to Bill of Rights violations, "I don't think that there's anything that's encroached upon my daily life . . . I don't think there's anything major that I'm concerned about." Lizzie added, "Not in America. At home back in the original place, Moldova, it would happen whenever."

Thus, while "congruent" sentiments were heard from students in all four schools, white and immigrant students expressed such ideas more frequently than their black and Latino peers, particularly those from urban Green Middle School. Burnside students stood out for their consistency in seeing congruence between ideals and realities.

### *Disjuncture*

On the other hand, many students, particularly students of color from low-income communities, had daily experiences that conflicted with what they had learned about American ideals. Such experiences included racism, discrimination, economic injustice, unaddressed violence in their communities, and Fourth Amendment violations. A final theme, the disjuncture between the ideals of the United States and adults' treatment of minors, cut across all of the school settings.

*Civic ideals in conflict with experiences of racism, discrimination, and economic injustice.* Many students at urban Green Middle School spoke of racism and segregation as being contrary to what they had learned to be ideals of the United States. For some, these were personal experiences, while others reported experiences of family members, or cited historical events (e.g., slavery) that they related to strongly.

Zaria, an African American eighth grader at Green Middle School,

explained her objections to the Pledge of Allegiance, saying, “I think, personally, that we shouldn’t pledge to the flag because, [for] me as African American, we saying ‘one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all,’ and that’s like a lie because there’s not liberty and justice.” Jalisa, an African American classmate of Zaria’s, drew upon history to express her opposition to the Pledge, stating passionately in the Pledge seminar: “I think we shouldn’t pledge to the flag because, like, we was in Africa! And they brung us over here. So there is no reason why I should pledge for a flag.”

Fari, a Pakistani American student at Somerset Middle School, related instances of religious/ethnic discrimination that she saw as contrary to the Pledge’s promise of liberty and justice for all. “They [other students] make fun of you if you’re from a different country,” she told the interviewer. “Last year kids were like ‘Uh, ew, you guys bombed the World Trade Center. I don’t want to talk to you.’” Such occurrences went beyond the school doors. Fari related that her uncle “goes to mosque in New York . . . and he sees like lots of people spitting in front of the mosque or saying bad things about Muslims.”

Some students who had not personally experienced or seen discrimination or economic injustice still pointed to these issues as a source of disjuncture between American ideals and realities. Many of these students attended Willow High School, a racially and socioeconomically integrated school in a diverse community. Jenny, a white eleventh grader, told the interviewer:

There is NOT liberty and justice for all. I mean . . . there are so many examples. Like more African American people are on death row than white people and like half of those people won’t even be proven guilty. That kind of thing. There are so many people who live in poverty and who don’t get equal benefits as like someone who works as a lawyer as opposed to someone who makes shoes.

Jack, a white eleventh grader at the same school, echoed Jenny’s convictions that there were conflicts between U.S. ideals and realities. He told us:

Slavery is the most obvious [example]. . . . You know, obviously we have gotten a lot farther since then, but I read somewhere that . . . the average income of an African American person compared to the average income [of a] white person is the same that it was like a hundred years ago. . . . I’m not saying that we haven’t

come a long way since then, but there is definitely still a long way to go.

These students cited past and present history classes and their parents as their sources of their information about injustices. As Sam, a white eleventh grader at Willow put it, “Well, Willow is a really liberal town and every year at one point in the history curriculum or another, a teacher will tell us or remind us about some horrible atrocity or injustice or hypocrisy that took place in this country’s history and then sarcastically say ‘with liberty and justice for all.’”

*Civic ideals in conflict with experiences of violence in students’ communities.* Many Green Middle School students spoke of violence in their communities, and some expressed disappointment that government would allow it to continue unchecked. Zaria described how this violence affected her daily actions, resulting in her sense of injustice:

The way it is around here, if you wear the wrong color, you get hurt because it’s like certain gangs wear that color. . . . It’s really hard for me, I have to change my wardrobe just because there’s a gang member. . . . I don’t think it’s right that we have to watch what we wear or watch what we do for our protection.

Students at other schools also cited personal knowledge of violence, experiences that had implications for their sense of whether the government was providing for their basic security. This was in striking contrast with the sense of safety and security as a basic facet of the American experience expressed by many Burnside and some Willow students.

*Civic ideals in conflict with experiences of Fourth Amendment violations.* Still more striking were personal experiences with violations of Fourth Amendment rights, recounted by urban students during the Bill of Rights seminar. In the words of Elizabeth, an African American eighth grade student at Green Middle School:

You know how you are supposed to have the right to privacy? Well one time, me and my brother were at home and the cops bust in through the window and through the front door and all these cops started coming in and they were looking for my cousin. They went in the bedroom, in the basement, everywhere. I don’t think they had a search warrant. I had to call my father and they looked through my purse. And that went against the Fourth Amendment rights, search and seizure at your house.

Another student had an even more disturbing story to tell, about the uncle of a friend:

It happened to my friend. A cop was following her uncle, so they pulled up in front of my house and he was like, "What's the problem," and he didn't even do nothing, so he had the window half down and they broke the window and they pulled him out of the car and they started beating him up and they killed him. The cops did it, and he didn't even do nothing. And they stuffed cocaine down his throat and tried to say he was trying to take drugs.

While some of these stories may seem too extreme to be true, students' use of such narratives indicates their deeply seated sense that they have been mistreated by those who were supposed to protect them. It is notable that even the most shocking of these stories did not cause any visible surprise among the students taking part in the Pledge seminar at Green Middle who, in a class of 18, shared 15 stories of Fourth Amendment violations. Students at the other three schools did not reveal stories of similar violations, even after direct questioning. Indeed, when students from other schools discussed a scenario that involved a violation of Fourth Amendment rights, many suggested that the victims might be at fault.

*Civic ideals in conflict with treatment of minors.* Across all schools, students cited instances where they felt minors were not treated in accordance with ideals of the United States. Sierra, an African American eighth grader at Green, complained about the school dress code, saying, "That's one of the amendments, but we can't dress as we want to, we have to follow what you all want us to dress by, and that's not following the First Amendment." Later, in a lively discussion about the Fourth Amendment, Sierra also complained about laws that prohibited carrying firearms.

Students were also concerned about privacy rights and freedom of speech. Jenny, a white eleventh grader at Willow, complained about her parents entering her room and described a friend whose mother ". . . took her diary and read it when she was cleaning her room, and that was a problem." Stefan, an African American seventh grader at Somerset, felt that students were denied full freedom of speech. "[In] some ways we do have freedom of speech, but other ways we don't," he said. "Like school, you're not allowed to say what you want to say or else you'll get into trouble."

In summary, patterns of congruence or disjuncture emerged among

students participating in this study, among African American and Latino students at urban Green Middle School and, to a lesser extent, at working-class Somerset Middle School describing experiences of disjuncture with greater frequency than more affluent, often white students, particularly those at Burnside. Immigrant students at Burnside and Somerset cited examples of congruence between ideals and the reality of life in the United States based on comparisons with their home countries. In highly diverse Willow High, students who had no personal experience of disjuncture cited examples of experiences they learned about in school and from their families, a markedly different approach to discussing injustices not personally experienced than that of Burnside students. In all, students did not draw upon an identical well of experiences as they approached their formal civic learning, but instead brought complex and varied experiences and interpretations of these experiences to the process of civic-identity construction.

## PART II, SECOND AXIS OF CIVIC IDENTITY: ACTIVE OR PASSIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD CIVIC PARTICIPATION

During seminars and interviews, students explained what civic participation meant to them, with some viewing it as an *active* undertaking and others viewing it more *passively*.

### *Active Attitude toward Civic Participation*

Students in all four schools expressed active attitudes toward civic participation. Some cited progress made over the length of American history by various disenfranchised groups, while others spoke of the value they placed on Americans' right to protest and speak freely, or expressed personal determination to fight for change.

*Change for the better has resulted from civic participation.* Some students, both white and students of color, spoke of progress in America's commitment to "liberty and justice for all." They cited examples from American history, ranging from Martin Luther King's civil rights work to recent anti-war demonstrations, as proof that America's ideals were worth fighting for and were attainable through civic action. For these students, both family and historical figures provided inspiration. For example, Amber, an African American eighth grader at Green Middle School, spoke about her mother's achievements to show how far African Americans have come:

This country's getting better, this country's getting closer together, a lot has changed since old times, a lot. Minorities have more privilege than we did before. We get to go to school with other colored, with other race kids. That has changed, like slavery and all that. Because black people, they own their own businesses. I look at my mother to see how things have changed. She's a single black mother and she has two kids and she has her own business. When I feel down and stuff [about racial issues], looking at my mother, I feel happier and stronger and proud.

Tom, a white eleventh grader at Burnside, also expressed hope for the future, based on the past. He acknowledged America's past injustices, while describing how civic actions have brought American society closer to its ideals:

There was the movement of the Japanese-Americans . . . the slaughter of Native Americans . . . um . . . slavery and there's tons of stuff that happened in America, but with these ideals put in the Constitution, and people didn't really think or didn't want to think that this was actually going against liberty or justice, but we've tried to solve these problems and with increasing times we've been closer to get it.

*"Speaking out" is key to civic participation.* Many students expressed appreciation for their right to make their voices heard. Whether speaking out against war, discrimination, or a principal censoring a school newspaper, these students cherished their right to have their opinions count. They often cited diversity of thought and speech as the source of America's greatness. Brandy, a Latina eighth grader from Green Middle School, was articulate about making her voice heard:

As an adult, I see myself not trying to be a violent person, but trying to protest against the war situation; I see myself protesting against something like that, or if something's happening on the Supreme Court that I don't like, or in any case that I don't like, I see myself trying to protest and standing up for what I believe in.

Jessica, a white seventh grader at Somerset Middle School, also saw the right to speak out as critical to her identity as an American: "The fact that we have this freedom of speech or assembly, able to let our voices be heard, it's very important or we wouldn't have a society like this today, you know?"

*Personal determination to fight for change.* Another facet of active citizenship was the desire to overcome injustices, ranging from racial and eco-

conomic inequalities to the war in Iraq. Student conceptions of “working for change” varied. Some anticipated careers (i.e., lawyer, teacher) in which they could effect change, while others talked about reaching out to minority groups in their schools or making other students aware of oppression through rallies and posters.

Many students at economically and racially diverse Willow High School expressed awareness of inequalities taking place outside their immediate environment. Many Willow students spoke of how lucky they were to be free of worries about money or discrimination and to be in academic and familial settings that encouraged political awareness. Jack, a white eleventh grade student, made the connection between awareness of injustice and his role as a citizen in working for change, implying a definition of citizenship including social action:

I am not like, “down with the government or anything.” But, now that I am more aware of some social injustices, you know they are not always blatant, they are sometimes subtle and they are not always like flagrantly illegal, but . . . now that I am aware of it . . . I know that since I am a citizen I can do something about it. It’s better.

Students of color at both Green and Somerset Middle Schools discussed taking action as citizens to right injustices for themselves or their communities. Rajay, an Indian American seventh grader from Somerset, wanted to work for change on the local level, hoping to influence fellow students not to stereotype or discriminate against people of Indian or Middle Eastern descent. She told the interviewer, “I’m not sure what I really want to do, but I do want to help the future people [to] not be discriminated against.”

Brandy, a Latina eighth grader from Green spoke passionately about how she hoped to ensure her rights as well as those of others in her community:

It makes me want to fight more, because I want to be able to have my rights and be respected as a person. I don’t want anybody to try and treat me as if I’m not better than they are, like we’re different. Now the child[ren], I feel as we don’t get as many rights as an 18-year old or a 20-year old, so it makes me want to fight more. If I find an opportunity for me to get my rights, I’m going to try and take it!

*Passive Attitude toward Civic Participation*

Other students displayed a more passive stance toward their role as citizens, some because they saw citizenship as merely living the “American Dream,” and others because they were hopeless about American society ever living up to its ideals.

*Achievement of personal economic success is civic participation.* For some students, especially those at Burnside, but also some at Somerset, being a good citizen had a lot to do with economic issues. Frank, a Burnside student, didn’t think “. . . a lot of this matters when you get older, when you’re being a good citizen, when you’re actually living a real life where you have to support yourself.” Raman, another Burnside student, equated civic participation with financial contribution, saying:

I think I’ll vote, obviously. But I can’t, if I’m in a position to donate money, I will. But you shouldn’t try and donate money if you don’t have anything to donate. If it’s going to make you be like in the bottom of the barrel, then you shouldn’t donate. If you are in a position, I would say so. Like if you, you’re living comfortably, then yeah, I don’t think there’s any harm. It is tax deductible.

*Being grateful and refraining from critique is civic participation.* Some students felt that those who spoke out on civic issues were making “a big deal out of nothing.” Burnside High’s Lizzie felt disturbed by Americans who chose to protest the Iraq war. She told the interviewer, “It’s just incredible what this country has to offer and it’s upsetting that there are Americans who don’t value it.” Similarly, Frank, a white twelfth grade student at Burnside, said, “I feel like a lot of people, or some people, instead of asking themselves, you know, what’s right with the country . . . they automatically ask what’s wrong.” For these students, it was more important to be grateful and supportive as an American citizen than to question the country’s political actions.

*There is no point to civic participation.* Some students, particularly at Green Middle School, felt resigned to inequalities and injustices they had experienced in life. As Zaria said:

I feel I could do things [be an active citizen], but I don’t feel it would make a difference because people are down on children, like we can’t really do anything. Like I would like to march or whatever, but looking at what Martin Luther King did, it just caused a riot. He did a right thing, but other people who were

against it did wrong and I think it's going to happen all over again.

Similarly, Zaria's classmate Jalisa passionately defended ideals of the United States, but expressed skepticism about justice for all, "I understand that no matter how far involved this country gets, there's not going to be justice for all. If you separate this world into two groups, straight people, gay, black, white, there's always going to be one group who is [without] justice."

Many students who had experienced disjuncture found themselves on the border between hopefulness and despair, attempting to craft a perspective that encompassed both their daily experiences and their social and political ideals.

In summary, students expressed a range of attitudes toward civic participation, from highly active to resignedly passive, sometimes both at once. More students at Willow and Green displayed active attitudes than students at other schools, although some Green students expressed hopelessness about the possibility of change. Many Burnside students defined civic participation as perpetuating the status quo of stability and economic prosperity enjoyed by their families and community.

### PART III: A TYPOLOGY OF CIVIC IDENTITIES

Figure 1 arranges the four themes described in the preceding sections into a matrix of civic identities representing the range of approaches students took to understanding and presenting their identities as citizens. The quadrants of this matrix are: 1) students experiencing *congruence* between ideals and realities of life and taking an *active* attitude toward civic participation; 2) students experiencing *disjuncture* between ideals and realities of life and taking an *active* attitude; 3) students experiencing *congruence* between ideals and realities of life and taking a *passive* attitude; and 4) students experiencing *disjuncture* between ideals and realities of life and taking a *passive* attitude. There were definite patterns by race, socioeconomic status, and community of origin among these four identities, although many students had attributes of more than one quadrant.

Students' experiences in relation to the learned ideals of the United States		CONGRUENCE	DISJUNCTURE
Students' attitudes toward civic participation	ACTIVE	Quadrant I: Aware <i>Change is needed for equity and fairness</i>  These students — have experienced congruence recognize their privilege and are aware that disjunctures exist for others — have learned about injustice in school or from family, but not through personal experiences	Quadrant II: Empowered <i>Change is a personal and community necessity</i>  These students — have experienced disjuncture — believe in their ability to use the system to bring about justice — know about civic rights and processes — have been encouraged to critique
	PASSIVE	Quadrant III: Complacent <i>No change is necessary, all is well in the U.S.</i>  These students — have experienced congruence — support preservation of the status quo — do not know about or recognize disjunctures experienced by others	Quadrant IV: Discouraged <i>No change is possible, life in the U.S. is unfair</i>  These students — have experienced disjuncture — express deep cynicism about the possibility of using the system to make changes

### *Quadrant One Civic Identity: "Aware"*

Students in quadrant one had not experienced disjunctures between ideals and realities that some participating students described. Yet they expressed awareness of inequalities and a desire to work for change. Comments from Jenny, a white eleventh grader at Willow, exemplify this civic orientation:

I feel secure living in this country. I don't really think anything is going to happen to me, I don't feel like I am going to be arrested because I look a certain way or because I said a certain thing, like I am really lucky and privileged to live like that. But, that's personal for me. The greater picture, like it's kind of embarrassing to live in a country where we walk around parading our flag and saying we are the best and everything, and we are like going to conquer Iraq and all that kind of stuff and really like, we need to fix ourselves first. . . . You should try to do something to make your country better, even if it is just like . . . community service, like a little thing like that, you know, helping people who aren't as fortunate as you in your country like it is a good thing. I think that everyone should do it. I think it is a really good requirement to have it . . . . [When you are older you can] teach people, become a teacher or, you know, or a lawyer like my dad, I look up

to him a lot because he helps people who are being discriminated against.

This identity was most common among students from Willow High, an unusually diverse school where many students spoke positively about racial integration. For example, John, a white eleventh grader, expressed dismay that so few colleges offered the kind of racial balance—“like 50% African American”—he was used to in high school. Willow students also seem to have benefited from frequent class discussions of civic and social action. In explaining where he had learned about social injustice and ways to combat it, John said that his teachers “have been pounding it into my head since elementary school.” Other students 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 more active civic identities of Willow students, despite congruence between some students’ experiences of civic life and learned civic ideals, was in sharp contrast to those at Burnside, where wealth, a lack of diversity, and paucity of discussion about inequality and civic action appeared to foster a sense of complacency, the quadrant-three identity.

*Quadrant Two Civic Identity: “Empowered”*

Many students, even in the face of civic disjuncture, took an active stance towards civic participation. These students, while aware of societal injustice, expressed a hope that they could and would work for change and justice for themselves and their communities. As Brandy of Green Middle School put it, “If I find an opportunity for me to get my rights I’m going to try and take it!”

This change-oriented identity, somewhat different than that of quadrant one, was found most commonly among Green Middle School students, but in some Somerset and Willow students as well. Green students often cited what they had learned in their social studies class as pivotal in their understanding of their rights and avenues for protest. Their social studies teacher, Ms. T, employed a number of strategies for teaching her students about their civic rights and engaging them in learning about civic processes, including simulations, discussions, and writing activities. Zaria recounted learning about “freedom of speech, freedom of petition, freedom of the press, and search and seizures” from Ms. T. Before that, she said, “I had no idea about the amendments, like how many there were and about our rights that we do have and don’t have.”

Ms. T had also demonstrated the students’ ability to make their own

decisions about civic issues by allowing them to opt out of class recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

Drea, an African American eighth grader, decided to participate:

When Ms. T said we didn't have to stand to say the Pledge of Allegiance, I was like, "I'm not going to stand because I'm tired." But when I realized what the Pledge meant and everything, I stood up! Because when you pledge yourself to a flag it's like you are swearing an oath, saying that you stand for that country, that you respect the country, and you'll abide by the laws and obligations to the country.

Other students disagreed and decided to not recite the Pledge. When a shocked substitute teacher complained to the principal about the practice, the principal confirmed that students could decide whether or not to participate.

Ms. T's encouragement of critical thought and mastery of key civic knowledge seemed to enable some students to develop more active civic identities despite personal experiences of disjuncture between their own lives and civic ideals. These students had tools for understanding and critiquing this disjuncture, knowledge of their rights, and encouragement to reach their own conclusions about their civic participation. These aspects of the school and classroom context were critical in helping some Green students develop the empowered identity of quadrant two rather than the discouraged quadrant-four identity.

#### *Quadrant Three Civic Identity: "Complacent"*

Some students experienced congruence between ideals and realities of life in the United States. When combined with a more passive attitude toward civic participation, this led to a rather complacent civic identity. In the words of Lizzie, of Burnside High, a good citizen lives his or her life "to the fullest in the nation, abiding by laws . . . just enjoying being in the place, not worrying completely about politics or what's concerning the world outside."

This is a civic identity, in contrast to quadrant two, in which students generalized from their own experiences of congruence between national ideals and realities of life to the conclusion that life in the United States was fair for everyone. These students felt satisfied with the status quo and did not see any need to work for change. Most of the students expressing this identity were from Burnside High, although they were joined by some Somerset students.

Aspects of the racially and socioeconomically homogeneous Burnside context appeared to foster development of this identity. Most Burnside students rarely came into contact with peers whose life circumstances differed dramatically from their own. Unlike students in quadrants one and two, Burnside students, even when questioned directly, made no reference to having learned about civic issues or action from their classes or teachers. The Burnside milieu appeared to foster a complacent civic identity in students who had experienced congruence between their personal lives and learned civic ideals.

*Quadrant Four Civic Identity: “Discouraged”*

Some students experienced disjunctures between ideals and realities of life and were negative in their attitudes toward the utility of civic participation. These students expressed a sense of discouragement about working to rectify inequalities they personally experienced and a sense of hopelessness about using established channels of civic participation to bring about change. They seemed resigned to the ineffectiveness of working for social change, and expressed cynicism about the possibility of civic participation. Most students with this identity attended Green Middle School. Green students’ experiences of personal and community disjuncture, instantiated in acts of racism and discrimination and in the unrelenting poverty of their community, were powerful daily reminders of the persistent inequalities of U.S. society that could not be assuaged through classroom-based civics instruction.

This identity frequently appeared in conjunction with the more active identity described in quadrant two. Students who had experienced disjunctures between their personal lives and/or community circumstances and key civic ideals and texts often had mixed feelings about whether or not change was possible. However, certain classroom practices, as well as family role models, seemed to nudge students into a more hopeful and engaged orientation, as will be discussed below.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL-BASED CIVICS INSTRUCTION:  
CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF PROBLEMS AS A CATALYST  
TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

This examination of the experiences of youth, particularly youth from traditionally marginalized groups, reveals that civic identity is both locally constructed and situated amid larger structural inequalities. In this light, what has previously been described as “disengagement” in the civic education literature may actually, for marginalized students, be a rational

response to the disjunctures they experience in a society that purports equality but delivers injustice. Congruity is no guarantor of active civic engagement, however. For some students, it may be this very congruence between daily experiences and societal ideals, combined with a lack of exposure to the existing disjunctures, which produces a complacency that appears to fuel a limited view of civic engagement. Across settings, the recognition and exploration of problems or disjunctures appeared to stimulate a more active understanding of civic engagement.

This is a new approach to understanding both civic identity and the problem of youth civic disengagement, an approach with implications for school-based civics instruction. A conception of civic education that revolves around moving students from the complacency of quadrant three to the awareness of quadrant one, or from the discouragement of quadrant four to the empowerment of quadrant two, is distinct from traditional approaches focusing on content coverage and one-size-fits-all activities.

In this study, the shift from privileged complacency to concerned engagement was exemplified by the contrast between students from Burnside and Willow High Schools. Willow students' more active and aware civic identities, in contrast to the complacency of most Burnside students, were spurred by their experiences in a diverse setting, amid classroom practices that fostered relationships among them, encouraged frank discussion of issues of power and privilege, and presented social action as desirable. That such experiences appear far easier to achieve in racially and socioeconomically diverse school settings is testimony to the great power and possibility of integrated school spaces. However, teachers must be willing and able to engage students around issues of difference and power to create meaningful democratic learning experiences for all students in such settings (Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997).

The shift from discouraged resignation to empowered engagement was exemplified by students at Green Middle School, who moved between these two responses to disjuncture. In poor, urban communities, educators will need to engage students with honesty about the disjunctures students may experience, and try to provide both a forum for analyzing these disjunctures and the key skills and knowledge they will need to navigate them. As Kirshner, et al (2003) note, "For youth growing up in neighborhoods and schools with insufficient resources, meaningful democratic participation often involves a critical analysis of structural forces and power (p.2)." An analysis of power in social relationships may be key to fostering optimism about social change in urban youth of color (Ginwright & James, 2002).

Instructional practices that engage youth in considering problematic

aspects of U.S. civic society can benefit *all* students, according to these findings. Frank discussion of civic rights, processes, and social disparities facilitated development of a more active civic identity at Green Middle School and Willow High School, empowering youth in the urban setting and challenging students in the more privileged setting to look beyond their immediate concerns. Lack of such practices contributed to the complacency and passivity of students at affluent, homogenous Burnside High and, to some extent, at working class, diverse Somerset Middle School.

Although many educators choose to avoid controversial social and civic issues in their classrooms, these were the very practices that students cited when describing a shift to a more active civic identity. Kahne and Westheimer (2003) note, “The sense that something is wrong is *compelling*, especially to adolescents who are already developing their own critiques of the world” (p. 58). Students can be engaged in a range of activities to draw upon their own experiences and develop their understanding and critiques of the world, activities that can take many forms and cover a range of content and skill-related material. Identification and explorations of problems—disjunctures—are at the heart of such practices. I will describe two such practices and explain how they might be employed to further the aims of youth civic engagement and empowerment.

Critical engagement with key civic texts and concepts through carefully planned discussion is one such practice. Parker (2003) argues that discussion enables students to “. . . see through [their] taken-for-granted responses and stances . . . see the world differently and shift [their] place in it a little” (p. 128). Such discussion is “. . . more than an instructional tool that encourages learners to talk (Ngeow & Kong, 2003).” It is, ideally, an activity in which students can bring their prior knowledge and experiences into play both with larger themes and ideas and with the experiences and knowledge of others, uncovering and probing the disjunctures which appear to spur critical inquiry. Teachers are the designers and managers of these events, with varying questions, formats, types of preparation, and degrees of involvement depending upon the nature of the class.

The text-based seminars on the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights that were used for data collection in this study are an example how this strategy can be applied to a civic education context. These seminars resulted in lively discussions of civic issues and processes in all four settings, but had greater impact in two of the four schools. At Green Middle School, the seminar discussions provided an opportunity for students to consider their own experiences alongside an analysis of the key ideals of

the United States embedded in the texts. The discussion format allowed students the space to probe these ideals, to measure them against personal and community experience, and to debate critical notions such as patriotism, rights, and social action. At Willow, students drew more on school-based knowledge and on the experiences of some classmates to engage with the same texts. In contrast to these vibrant and sometimes contentious discussions, the seminars at Somerset Middle School and Burnside High School were, to a certain extent, more sedate forums of agreement in which students affirmed each others feelings of patriotism and “allegiance” without much mention of the more problematic aspects of U.S. society discussed in the other seminars. More preliminary work would need to be done in such settings to ensure that students would be able to view texts from multiple viewpoints. Films, readings, and speakers could be used to that end, and questions from the teacher could be used to stimulate deeper thinking on issues of disjuncture and congruity. In this way, text-based discussions could be employed as a bridge between experience and key civic notions that would be enlightening and empowering for youth from varying backgrounds and communities.

A second possibility is engaging youth in critical research, a practice which builds students’ analytical, conceptual, and concrete skills while allowing them to pursue areas of investigation that grow out of their own experiences (Rubin, 2002). Morrell (2004) describes such an approach in an urban studies course for high school students, in which students were given the theoretical and methodological tools necessary to act as “street sociologists,” pursuing answers to questions regarding the inequalities they witnessed daily in their schools and communities. During their participation in a partnership effort between a university and the local high school that focused on apprenticing youth as critical researchers in their own schools, these students engaged with topics such as unequal treatment of student groups in the school and lack of access to guidance counselors.

While not directly embedded in a civic education context, such an approach could be easily adapted to that setting and purpose. Kiernan (1990) suggests the efficacy of “civic writing activities,” in which students are taught to conduct “question driven research” on questions about civic life that they generate individually or collaboratively. Pushing further on this idea, Kirshner, et al. (2003) describe student participation in a community youth research project in Redwood City, California. In this project, diverse young people first described and interpreted the needs of their communities in general, and youth in particular, using collages made of photographs they themselves had taken. These presentations targeted the lack of places to go, threats to safety, gang presence, and

inequalities among neighborhoods as problems. The students then, with adult guidance, used surveys, interviews, and video documentation to gather and analyze data on these topics. Finally, the students prepared and presented their findings and recommendations to city leaders. Kirshner argues that through these activities, “youth were able to direct their critical perspectives towards practical ends” (p. 14).

Such endeavors have transformative potential, both for the students who take part in them and for the civic education enterprise in general. In an online journal displaying the results of a summer institute for high school students at UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education and Access, high-school student researchers Jackson, Gilmore, Bedolla, Jimenez, Flores, Espinoza, and Pérez (2004-2005) write the following, based on their study of civic engagement in Los Angeles:

Theorists and activists focus on taking action in order to address the failure of schools to civically engage youth. However, in order to take action, youth need adequate training in productive civic engagement. In order to encourage students to engage civically in their communities, the curriculum of their social studies classes, especially government, must be updated and improved. When students are engaged in class, they will feel motivated to participate in their communities. Political participation in the classroom leads to political participation in the community.

The words of these student researchers are impressive in their insight and eloquence, proof of what students can accomplish given the tools, support, and meaningful topics rooted in youths’ own experiences. As educational researchers, teacher educators, and educators, we must take such findings to heart, “updating and improving” our practices in ways that will engage students in the classroom and, to use the words of the students cited above, train and motivate them to engage civically in their communities and beyond.

## CONCLUSION

Youth craft civic identities from the materials at hand, and these materials are distinct for youth from different communities. When interpreting key civic texts, such as the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights, the import of these distinctions emerged. In this study, more privileged youth from more homogenous settings, and some immigrant youth emphasized the congruity they experienced between their daily experiences and the ideals expressed in key civic texts. Many urban youth of color in the

study pointed to a disjuncture between these civic ideals and the reality of their lives.

Notions of civic participation developed amid this backdrop of congruity or disjuncture. White students in a homogenous, wealthy setting tended to be complacent in their stance toward civic participation, positing that voting and paying taxes would be enough for them to fulfill their civic duties as adults. Youth in a racially and socioeconomically integrated setting which emphasized analyses of social inequality had a strikingly different approach, expressing the desire to become actively involved in social change. Urban youth of color in a poor community showed both a sense of empowerment that hinged on their intentions to work for social change, and, at times, discouraged resignation when faced with the daily discrepancies between what was and what should be. These youth credited teaching practices with revealing the possibilities of action, but these were not always enough to bridge the disjunctures.

The participants in this study demonstrate that students in American schools develop civic identities amid an array of sources that reach far beyond civics lessons and textbooks. Students' civic orientations are shaped through their daily experiences within particular social, economic, institutional, political, and historical contexts. However, most civics and government classes are not structured to take into account or build upon these varying experiences, instead emphasizing content coverage and traditional pedagogies. Social studies educators and others must begin to develop practices that encourage students to wrestle with both the congruities and disjunctures they experience as a means of shaping more meaningful civic education that helps students to construct critical yet engaged civic identities.

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### *Notes*

1 The names of all people, schools and locations in this study are pseudonyms.

2 Achievement and skill level were operationalized through math placement, grades, student self-reports, and teacher input. Diversity of opinion and willingness to participate in reflective conversations were judged through the nature of students' participation in the first stage of the project, described below.

3 A "Socratic Seminar" is a text-based discussion in which students are given a text to read and an extended period of time to engage in discussion on both the meaning of the text itself and the issues it raises.

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