“No Backpacks” versus “Drugs and Murder”: The Promise and Complexity of Youth Civic Action Research

BETH C. RUBIN
BRIAN F. HAYES
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Although young people have diverse experiences with civic life, most civic education practices in classrooms fail to recognize this complexity. In this article, Beth C. Rubin and Brian F. Hayes describe the results of a year-long research project that incorporated a new approach to civic learning into public high school social studies classrooms. They explore how students’ disparate experiences with civic life shape civic identity development in complex and challenging ways across two distinct contexts. They offer a fully elaborated conceptualization of civic learning in settings of “congruence” and “disjuncture” and describe how the practice of connecting students’ lives and experiences to the curriculum through civic action research, while promising, can also create dilemmas for both students and educators.

Allwood High School, June 2008

Samara: Last year there was a lot of threats and stuff, and the principal didn’t want us to carry around backpacks. So that was our problem—trying to, like, get the principal to let us use our backpacks . . . It felt good because we got to make change. Like, now we can carry backpacks.

Surrey High School, June 2008

Omar: We chose drugs [as our problem] . . . Because some people do drugs in the neighborhood, and you got young kids around here—they see you, they see them doing drugs and then they carry that. [They] say, “Oh I see somebody else doing drugs” . . . that’s why it becomes a problem in the community.
Interviewer: Do you think the problem of drugs in Surrey is something that is going to go away?

Omar: No.

Students’ senses of themselves as citizens—their civic identities—develop in the nested contexts of classroom, school, and society. Young people have diverse daily experiences that can complicate, but may potentially enrich, their identification with civic life. Despite this, many civic education practices are structured as though all students draw on an identical well of experience to make sense of the curriculum. This article describes how civic action research—a practice that engages youth in critical exploration of issues that affect their lives—can facilitate civic learning that resonates for students, connecting them to larger civic themes and practices. And, as the contrasting reflections of Samara and Omar hint, it dramatizes how complicated such a connection can be.

In this study, students’ pressing civic problems emerged from and were embedded within the local realities of their schools and communities. Students’ relationships with school and law enforcement, the civic institutions that most directly touched their lives, were implicated not only in the civic problems they chose to explore but also in the process of studying those problems, the outcome of their projects, and students’ senses of accomplishment and efficacy. Focusing on the civic learning experiences of high school students in two different communities—Surrey and Allwood—we explore here two interrelated ideas:

1. The power of congruence—the sense that one’s immediate civic institutions are working for one’s benefit—to encourage feelings of civic efficacy in youth.
2. The deep complexities of disjuncture—the sense that one’s immediate civic institutions are not looking after one’s best interests—for the civic learning experiences of youth.

This study draws on students’ lived experiences with civic action research in settings of congruence and disjuncture to consider both the potential and limitations of classrooms as contexts for civic learning and to envisage how educators might most fruitfully structure meaningful, action-oriented, civic learning experiences for students.

Background

Changing Frames: Moving from Deficit to Sociocultural Understandings of Youth Civic Learning

“Ignorance of American history and civics weakens our sense of citizenship,” George W. Bush (Office of the Press Secretary, 2002) proclaimed in 2002, noting U.S. students’ low scores on the 1998 National Assessment of Educa-
Bush’s remarks, made while announcing new initiatives for teaching U.S. history and civics, reflect a persistent concern among educators, political scientists, and policy makers with the NAEP-measured civic knowledge of U.S. students. The policies built on such concerns, focusing on the transmission of patriotic content, reveal a commonly held belief in a direct link between certain types of civic knowledge and civic commitment.

Youth civic knowledge and engagement are frequently investigated through statistical analyses of large, national data sets in which civic knowledge is defined as mastery of facts about national, state, and local government, and civic engagement is assessed through indicators such as newspaper readership and intent to vote (e.g., Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001; Bennett, 2000; Lutkus & Weiss, 2007; Niemi & Junn, 1998). Previous research about American youth suggest that differences in civic knowledge and engagement appear to be linked to race and class, with low-income students of color scoring significantly lower on such measures than their white, higher-income peers (Baldi et al., 2001). While such data provide a necessary sense of students’ mastery of predefined content, they have some important limitations.

Levinson (2005) notes that civics and civic education research has been dominated by researchers in political science, comparative education, and social studies education who “tend to use survey methods and to take for granted the limited hegemonic meanings of liberal (representative) democracy” (p. 336). Such analyses cannot capture the nature and impact of civic experiences, both within schools and beyond, that shape students’ understandings of what it means to be U.S. citizens and participants in the civic life of a democracy. These experiences may differ sharply depending on how students are situated socially, historically, and culturally amid the institutional and economic structures of the United States (Abu El-Haj, 2009a, 2009b; Ladson-Billings, 2004, 2006; Levinson, 2007).

Researchers working from sociocultural frameworks that draw on anthropological understandings of practice, culture, and identity find that larger social forces and daily experiences in schools and communities affect each young person’s sense of self as a civic being in ways that large-scale, quantitative measures are unable to capture (Bhavnani, 1991; Ginwright & James, 2002; Nasir & Kirshner, 2003). Such approaches reframe discussions of civic learning to include the notion that “civic identity” (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997) is constructed amid particular structures and practices (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). They help us to understand “the interplay between . . . local identities and broader social, culture, and political-economic structures and processes” that shape citizenship trajectories in a society marked by racial and socioeconomic inequalities (Levinson, 2005, p. 336).

Rubin’s (2007) earlier study, in which she found that students’ daily experiences and social positions informed their understanding of civics in powerful ways, provides an example of how civic identity development is situated amid
the United States’ uneven terrain of privilege and opportunity. This interpretive study of civic identity conducted at four different public middle and high schools revealed how students’ daily experiences and social positions informed their understanding of civics in powerful ways. Many urban youth of color in the study pointed to *disjunctures* between the civic ideals expressed in civic texts (such as the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights) and the reality of their lives. White, higher-income youth and some immigrant youth expressed *congruence* between key civic ideals of liberty and justice and their personal experiences. Students experiencing congruence tended to be more complacent (feeling that nothing needed to change) about civic life, while those experiencing disjuncture were more *discouraged* (feeling that nothing could be changed), while certain practices seemed to move students toward more *active* and *empowered* civic identities. Figure 1, adapted from Rubin (2007), depicts this typology of civic identity.

Our study builds on this framework, investigating the implementation of a curricular and instructional approach designed to transform civic learning into a meaningful endeavor that leverages, rather than denies, students’ daily experiences as citizens.

**Youth Inquiry for Civic Learning in Social Studies Classrooms**

This reframing of civic identity development has implications for classroom practice. In the United States, social studies classrooms are seen as pivotal sites for citizenship education, yet their pedagogies and curricula often do little to stimulate interest in civic life or commitment to civic action (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith, & Thiede, 2000). The textbooks that are the basis for historical study—the standard proxy for civic education in most public schools—tend to present a one-dimensional, triumphalist view of U.S. history that does little to engage students or develop understanding of the complexities of freedom, inequality, and the ongoing struggle for rights and justice in this society (Justice, 2007; Levinson, 2009; Loewen, 1996; Seixas, 2000). The lived civic experiences of many students, and of the communities and racial and ethnic groups to which they belong, make a simple patriotic approach unconvincing and inauthentic. Indeed, such an approach can promote cynicism and isolation among students who experience this gap between textbook and personal history (Epstein, 2009).

Research indicates that engaging students in discussion, investigation, and analysis of the civic problems they encounter in their daily lives holds potential for fostering more aware and empowered civic identities (Fine, Torre, Burns, & Payne, 2007; Hess, 2009; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Rubin, 2007). Youth action research, with its emphasis on involving students in meaningful inquiry on self-generated topics linked to their own lives and experiences, is a potential antidote to the rote approaches that dominate civic education in many settings and in schools serving low income students in particular (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). There are many examples of how educational experiences
that foster sociopolitical development and critical inquiry can contribute to the civic empowerment of youth from marginalized communities (e.g., Abu El-Haj, 2009b; Morrell, 2004; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999).

Youth action research was central to a curricular reform effort we developed together with collaborating teachers that emphasized drawing connections between themes in U.S. history (e.g., conflict and resolution, social change) and students’ daily lives.4

Method

Methodological Orientation

This article presents an analysis of a subset of the data from a design-based research (DBR) project in which a team of teachers and researchers employed the understandings of civic learning and identity outlined above to redesign the traditional U.S. History II course. DBR involves “engineering” new forms of learning based on specific ideas about teaching practices and then studying them in real contexts (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003). Such projects allow researchers to study, analyze, and refine educational innovations amid the complexities of actual educational settings (Kelly, 2003). Although not frequently used in research on civic learning, DBR’s attentiveness to examining learning in context is well suited to a study like ours that is grounded in a situated perspective. Perhaps distinct from most DBR studies, however, ours is also embedded in a sociocultural approach to understanding civic identity that considers how larger social forces and inequalities, as instantiated in daily life, can shape civic identity.

Note: A version of this table first appeared in Rubin (2007).
Four design principles, initially proposed in Rubin (2006), guided the reconstruction of the U.S. History II course:

1. Civic education should build on students’ own experiences with civic life, including daily experiences with civic institutions (e.g., schools, police);
2. Civic education should provide opportunities for students to consider and discuss key issues and controversies in civic life;
3. Civic education should build students’ discussion, analysis, critique, and research skills;
4. Civic education should build students’ knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a way that connects directly to their own concerns.

The attempt was to shift the emphasis of the curriculum from content coverage to a more open and exploratory framework facilitating connections between historical content, enduring civic issues, and students’ daily lives (see appendix 1, table A1). Four civic learning strands—discussion, writing, civic action research, and current events—were incorporated throughout the year, key practices to help students develop civic skills and engage more actively with the curriculum (see appendix 2, table A2). This analysis juxtaposes the enactment of the civic action research strand of the curriculum in two distinct settings to illustrate the complexities and the promise of a practice that attempts to leverage, rather than deny or ignore, students’ daily civic experiences.

**Contexts and Participants**

Located just sixty-five miles apart in the same northeastern state, the participating schools featured in this analysis provide distinct vantage points from which to consider issues of civic learning. Allwood High is one of two high schools in Allwood, a community of roughly 100,000. Allwood’s student body is quite racially and ethnically mixed, with students from many different national, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds and from predominantly middle-class families. Surrey High is one of two high schools in Surrey, a small and densely populated, declining postindustrial city of 80,000. The student body is about half African American and half Latino/a, the majority of students coming from low-income families. Table 1 provides key data for the participating schools described in this analysis.

The research and design team included three high school social studies teachers, a university professor (Rubin), and a doctoral student (Hayes), with three undergraduates and a master’s degree student in supporting roles. The professor and doctoral student are former public high school social studies teachers. Teachers were selected for their pedagogical and subject matter competence (based on observation and colleague recommendation), interest in the topic, and willingness to participate in the study. Jill Tenney, the participating teacher from Allwood, is a white woman in her fifth year of teaching at Allwood High School at the time of the study, and Kevin Brooks, the par-
TABLE 1  Demographic information for participating schools and classrooms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic feature</th>
<th>Allwood High School</th>
<th>Surrey High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficient</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak a language other than English at home</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Individualized Education Plans</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility rate</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced lunch</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of participating students</th>
<th>Allwood High School</th>
<th>Surrey High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab American</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...participating teacher from Surrey, is an African American man in his fourth year of teaching at Surrey High School during the 2007–2008 school year. Both chose to live in their school communities. Both were students in a graduate program in education and had completed advanced study in social studies education, including in civic education. Both reported a deep concern about civic learning.

This analysis includes data from two schools. In these two schools, eighty-seven students in five different classes participated in the project. At Allwood High School, three “middle track” U.S. History II classes, a total of sixty-eight students, participated. At Surrey High School, two sections of “special needs” U.S. History II classes, a total of twenty-two students, participated. Table 1 pro-
vides detailed demographic information about the students at the two schools and in the five participating classrooms.

Project Design and Data Collection
During an intensive summer workshop, we developed with the three participating teachers curricular and pedagogical approaches to integrate the four design principles into the required curriculum. The teachers implemented the approach in their eleventh-grade U.S. History II classes in the fall. The research team observed and videotaped twenty sessions of each class, taking notes and collecting classroom materials. The entire team met monthly to continue discussion and curriculum development. Rubin interviewed the teachers at the beginning and end of the school year. To collect data on students’ experiences with the curriculum, students completed a questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the school year to ascertain their stance toward civic activity, their civic experiences, and their civic knowledge, and we conducted interviews with more than thirty students.  

We collected school and district data as well. This analysis draws on these multiple data sources.

Data Analysis
Together with our undergraduate assistants, we read through classroom observation notes and interview transcripts to find themes, trends, and patterns. Data was coded both broadly (e.g., by school, instructional method) and narrowly (e.g., by various discussion topics, different feelings about the community). We first did coding individually and then compared results as a team, fine-tuned codes, and recoded. Each researcher wrote memos on large code categories (e.g., discussion, civic action projects, themes, and questions) and wrote up school sites as cases. Teachers read and commented on our emerging findings. We used Atlas.ti software to manage the data, codes, and memos. In general, this was a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which understandings of the emic meaning of events in the setting were built through an iterative analysis of the data.

As with all interpretive research, it is important to note that this analysis is not intended to represent the experiences of all urban or suburban students but, instead, to provide a deep consideration of the experiences of students living in two distinct contexts in order to illuminate the complex social and educational processes related to civic learning.

Youth Civic Action Research in Distinct Settings: Building Civic Selves amid Congruence and Disjuncture
Consistent with research supporting sociopolitical development and critical inquiry as contributing to youth civic empowerment, civic action research invites youth to explore issues that impact their lives (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Watts et al., 1999). In the next section, we
examine and interpret the civic action research experience of students at Surrey and Allwood high schools, placing it amid the intertwining contexts of curriculum, classroom, and community. This multilayered analysis reveals the complex and ambiguous nature of civic learning in a project that encourages students to draw on their own experiences.

Choosing Civic Problems

Allwood and Surrey students began the civic action research strand of the curriculum early in the year. In both schools, the participating teachers encouraged students to freely brainstorm problems that they experienced or could identify in their schools and communities. Students at each school discussed a variety of possible problems before settling on their choice for the project.

— Allwood: No Backpacks in the Hallways

At the beginning of the year, Ms. Tenney’s class discussed potential civic problems they could investigate. Groups of students took turns presenting their ideas for civic problems and the results of their initial research.

“We should have the same stuff as Underwood [the district’s other high school].”

“Battle of the Bands!”

“Pep rallies!”

“If we have more activities, when we get compared to Underwood we’ll look better.”

“Hasn’t anyone noticed it has gotten progressively worse every year; they are taking more and more away from us?”

“Yeah!”

Boisterous with overlapping voices, the room was filled with students’ ideas and questions. The tone was giddy and impassioned, students interjecting, questioning, and voicing agreement. Hands waved around the room as students asked each other questions, raised issues, made comments, added examples, and focused intently on the identification and discussion of problems they had selected for consideration—the dress code, crowded conditions at lunch, the difficulty getting through halls between periods, and the rule against carrying backpacks through the halls.

A student named Raman described to us some of the problems they discussed during the selection process:

We said lunches, how they should be longer. And how they should have better food for us . . . we also talked about during passing [from class to class], how we should have more time . . . because it’s hard to, like, get around because it’s so crowded . . . to get to the other class on time.
Students were frustrated with the stance the school administration took toward them (“They’re so strict!” a girl exclaimed about the dress code). Robbie explained, “The way they, the way the teachers treat kids, and the administration, it’s like the rules are so ridiculous that they encourage people to break them.”

Ms. Tenney confirmed that in recent years the school administration had developed additional rules, increasingly restricting and regulating students’ school lives. Students were growing frustrated. The administration’s response to student infractions over the past few years had been to take away privileges in the name of curbing disorderly conduct: pep rallies, the ability to wear backpacks, field trips, and more. The extremely crowded state of the school, which currently handled many more students than it had been designed to accommodate, exacerbated these problems and spurred multiple difficulties (e.g., the length of lunch, packed hallways). Students thought that wearing backpacks, so they would not have to go to their lockers between classes, might alleviate some of these issues. For this reason, Ms. Tenney’s classes decided to investigate and act on the rule against wearing backpacks in the hallways.

Ms. Tenney noted the restricted scope of this problem, limited as it was to the particularities of Allwood High School. Indeed, all of the problems put forward by her students were located at the school site and focused on issues related to students’ school-based freedoms and opportunities (e.g., the dress code, the limited number of pep rallies and activities, the poor quality of the food in the cafeteria). While she encouraged her students to think broadly when selecting a problem for inquiry, she also believed that the heart of the project was to select a problem that was meaningful to the students.

It’s so hard in a town of our size, and because we are a middle-class suburb, to really find a [community] problem that’s meaningful to all students. I’m not sure how they would choose a [community] problem and be passionate enough about it. I mean, what’s their hardest thing that they have to deal with? Traffic?

With that in mind, she gave students the green light to pursue their deeply held conviction that they should be allowed to wear backpacks in the hallway.

— Surrey: Drugs and Murder
At our first research team meeting, Mr. Brooks reported back on what his class had been doing. “Well, we’ve voted on the community issue we want to tackle,” he told the research and design team. “My first-period class, we voted together on drugs and voted in second period on murders.” The team sat in silence, speechless for a moment, taken aback by the contrast with the Allwood students’ plan. Mr. Brooks described how his class arrived at these problems.

What I did was I had them set up a chart where they pretty much, they’re thinking about their block, their neighborhood, their city, and the school—places where you spend most of your time . . . So [I asked] “what do you like about
them, what do you hate about them?” . . . I said “draw from the things that you
hate and pick what you’d like to change.”

“Uniforms and lunches were things that they hated,” Mr. Brooks told us,
problems shared by Allwood students. But, in the end, his students decided to
tackle a community problem very different from Allwood’s. Manuel described
how the students in his class made their choice, selecting “drugs” after honing
it down to “drugs” and “murder,” because the former was tightly linked to the
latter: “because, it’s basically like, if we would’ve chose murder, most of the
murders here in Surrey are dealt with drugs, so basically if you stop drugs . . .
you’re stopping most of the murders.”

Mr. Brooks recognized the seriousness of the problems selected. The topics
were “rough,” he said, acknowledging the difficulty of doing projects on such
choices. “But,” he explained, “I was trying not to put any barriers on what they
wanted to do, you know? I mean, it’s a civic-driven, civic-participation driven
program . . . and I really didn’t want them to feel like this is a typical school
thing.” He drew out how ridiculous it would have been to limit his students to
smaller, less intractable problems, saying with ironic laughter, “like we’re talk-
ing about, I don’t know, ‘putting the stop sign here.’ I mean these kids have
real concerns.”

Neither Allwood nor Surrey students selected the traffic-related problems
of which their teachers gently made fun. Both groups of students, after impas-
sioned debate, chose problems that they found meaningful and that affected
them daily. But, perhaps obviously, the nature of these concerns was very dif-
ferent. The civic problems selected by Allwood and Surrey students reflect par-
ticular relationships with civic institutions.

Congruence and Disjuncture as Frames for Civic Identity Development

— Congruence: “There’s a lot of a very nice feeling of community here”
Ms. Tenney’s students at Allwood High described their town as quiet, attrac-
tive, and a bit boring. “There’s nothing great, like, nothing like, spectacular.
You know, it’s nice and mellow,” said Daniel. Janet concurred, saying, “it’s nice
. . . I know that Allwood used to be a very highly looked-at community, like,
back when. Now, I think it’s just kind of one of those, like, whatever towns.”
Rebecca elaborated: “It’s boring. No, it’s not that boring. It’s just, it’s quiet. It’s
not too, it’s not, I mean, it’s just very suburban. It’s very . . . full of trees.” She
expanded further, describing how she experienced life in Allwood: “There’s
just, there’s, I think there’s a lot of a very nice feeling of community here. I
think if you’re in trouble, someone knows about it.”

Ms. Tenney’s students reflected a general sense of trust in the adults
charged with protecting them. “I love the Allwood Police,” said Tariq. “I’m
actually going to become an Allwood cop hopefully.” “The police are doing
well,” Samara told us. “They like, they get at the place where there’s something
going on, like, pretty fast . . . they listen to everybody and then they make a
decision, not just based on what they see.” Robbie also felt safe in the community: “There’s a lot of cops. They swarm the streets and, like, it’s good . . . And you know, I feel like if something were to happen I’d have help . . . It’s a safe place, I think.” Students reported encounters, witnessed or experienced, in which people were pulled over for minor infractions; these indications of police vigilance made them feel safer. All of the students felt the police were doing a good job protecting the community, but, as Daniel made sure to point out, this was not such a difficult task in peaceful Allwood, where “it’s not like there are criminals walking around here and they’re working night and day to keep them out.”

These students’ comments reflected the relative prosperity and safety of Allwood. The median household income of Allwood families in 2007 was $80,581. Unemployment in Allwood, as of 2007, was 4.2 percent, with a 2.7 percent poverty rate for families. Allwood’s violent crime rate of 1.67 percent fell well below the state and national averages; the property crime rate was low, and a person’s chance of being a victim of a violent crime in Allwood was less than half the state average.

Ms. Tenney’s students also felt positively about the school, teachers, and other adults who surrounded them. Rebecca described teachers as “very supportive, [they] say ‘call me if you ever need anything.’ And they follow through.” “The teachers here are great,” Tariq enthused. “We have a good staff here, I got to say.” Kim, describing the best thing about Allwood, said, “I like having the closeness with the teachers.” “I like the teachers. They always help you out,” offered Samara.

Students spoke of teachers they could trust and count on. Janet explained, “There are a lot of people in this school that you can actually really trust. It’s really cool, because you can open up to a lot of people here.” They described teachers who went beyond classroom teaching, teachers “you can talk to about everything,” who “stop what they’re doing and make sure you’re okay,” who advised students about “the SATs, acceptance, college life.” They also spoke highly of the security guards and guidance office. Robbie described how you just write a little slip saying “I want to come talk to you,” they’ll call you down the next day . . . I remember one day my counselor was in the middle of lunch and I had to talk to him really bad about something, and he just stopped what he was doing, kept me as long as he had to. Like, during his one lunch period of the day, and I think if, like, a teacher or guidance counselor is willing to do that, then it just shows like how dedicated they are to their students. It’s good.

In this context of general satisfaction and comfort, students had one main complaint about the school. As a student, Samara, said, “The worst thing? It’s really crowded. It’s really crowded.”

Overall, Ms. Tenney’s students put forward a sense of a school that was orderly and safe. Despite its crowded conditions, participating students reflected a sense that their school had the teachers and counselors necessary
to provide a good quality of education for them, that the school was, for the most part, succeeding in its mission to prepare them for life beyond high school. This was borne out in Allwoods’s low dropout rate (1.4 percent), high graduation rate (97.4 percent), and high attendance rate (96 percent) during the year of the study. Allwood students scored well on the SAT (average scores of 533 math/500 verbal), and scored better than the state average on state proficiency tests.

This was an environment in which students experienced congruence. From these students’ perspectives, the civic institutions most directly charged with protecting and guiding them—law enforcement and school—were holding up their end of the bargain. Although irritated by some rules they felt were unreasonable, students expressed a general and justifiable sense of trust in these institutions. This congruence proved a powerful force in students’ developing sense of civic efficacy, even as it shielded them from larger social problems that might have led to a more critical perspective.

— Disjuncture: “It’s the worst place to live”

In stark contrast to Ms. Tenney’s students in Allwood, students in Mr. Brooks’s classes in Surrey described a town fraught with danger. As Narciso put it, “It’s dirty. People always fighting. People always dying. If you just walk down the street you see drugs being handed out. It’s the worst place to live.” Surrey students reported that they had seen a great degree of violence, drug use, and other forms of law breaking in their community, and they expressed little faith that the police were willing or able to improve the situation. Of students surveyed, 86 percent had experienced violence in the neighborhood, and 68 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that their neighborhood was safe.

These perceptions were grounded in reality: Surrey was a challenging place in which to live. Frequently cited on lists of the most dangerous cities in the United States, Surrey’s violent crime rate was six times higher than the state average, property crime was high, and the rate of crimes per square mile in Surrey was fourteen times the state average, with 699 crimes per square mile (Morgan, Morgan, & Boba, 2008, 2009). The median household income for Surrey families was $23,154, well below the state’s average; almost 50 percent of Surrey families with children under eighteen had incomes that put them below the poverty line, and the unemployment rate was 17 percent, more than twice the state’s average.

Tamika reflected the sense of insecurity she felt living in this context:

Worst thing is the murders. Because you don’t know like . . . like you don’t know whether if you want to go to this place, go that place, because you don’t know what’s going to happen. You don’t know what to look forward to when you go places.

Each student interviewed at Surrey High expressed concern about danger in the city, describing personal encounters with illegal drug use and murder.
Students spoke of frequently witnessing the open sale of illegal drugs. Stacey told us, “The problem we have is that they’ll sit on the corner, and they’ll do their drugs right there and a child will walk by and be like ‘Oh mom, look.’”

Students’ experiences with violence were immediate and dramatic. Narciso explained, “Look, my brother got shot in the stomach seven times . . . All over his body, seven times. His friend got shot four times in the heart because he was in front of him . . . He’s ok. He’s still living; it’s just that his arm is paralyzed right now.” Violence was so endemic that one student, Manuel, told Mr. Brooks that he didn’t think that serving in Iraq would be worse than living in Surrey. Asked if he would go to Iraq, Manuel replied, “Hell yeah—I’d see crazy people but it’s not like I don’t see crazy stuff here. There’s a war going on here, dog. [If you go to Iraq] sometimes you get a nice paycheck when you come back.”

In this context, students’ feelings toward law enforcement, the key civic institution charged with protecting them from crime and violence, ranged from mild disgust with the perceived inaction of police to fury inspired by incidents (observed personally or observed by others) of police harming community members. Of students surveyed, 86 percent said they had experienced unfair treatment by a police officer, and 83 percent said police in their community did not treat people fairly.

Narciso, when asked how well the police were doing keeping the community safe, responded, “No, negative, like, twenty points . . . Look, my brother got shot . . . They’ll say they’re working on it, but next thing you know, two years went by and they don’t know nothing about it.” He felt the police were corrupt: “All you got to do is give them a thousand dollars to turn their heads and they do it.” Benny agreed, telling us that things might change “if the cops stop killing people and start doing what they’re supposed to do. The cops, if they’re right down on your block, they might not even look for drugs, they might come out there just to mess with you.” We asked whether Benny would go to the police if he had a problem. “No.”

Esteban echoed this general sense among Mr. Brooks’s students that police ignored crime in Surrey, explaining, “You see, like, the drug dealers on the corner and, like, you also see that the police cars drive by them and don’t do nothing.” Sandy concurred:

Where I live at, it could be a whole group of guys at the corner and the cops would just pass by, and like they’ll see them dealing drugs and the cops will just pass by. Or if it’s state boys, they’ll just drive by and see who they can find, but it’s not helping anyone.

Benny reiterated the common view that the police in Surrey operated outside of the law:

They’re not protecting nothing. I ain’t seen them protect nobody yet. They over there slamming people, shooting people, beating people up . . . They’re cops, they can do whatever they want. Cops can come up to you, beat you up and you
can take it to court. You’re not going to win. They’ll just make up a lie right out on paper. Whatever they say goes. They’re going to believe them over you.

Other students recounted racist insults and incidents of police abuse they had experienced, witnessed or been told of, expressing a profound mistrust of the police and belief in their immorality and lawlessness.

Students’ sense of danger, insecurity, and lawlessness beyond school walls mirrored their depiction of life inside the school building, which they described consistently as unsafe, uncaring, and chaotic. Eighty-six percent of Mr. Brooks’s students said they had experienced violence at school. They had seen drugs sold and used in the building. Manuel said, “You got kids coming to school high as hell . . . And I’ve seen kids coming here with drugs, too.” He continued, “I don’t like this school at all. Sometimes I feel like I’m coming into a jail, you’ve got to come in through metal detectors. They search you no matter what.” Despite the metal detectors, the school administration’s attempt to address school safety issues, students did not feel safe because of the failures on the part of the adults entrusted with protecting them. As Narciso explained, “The side door . . . if you pull the security guard over, he’ll open the side door. Like anybody could just walk in here with a gun. All you got to do is know the security guard, say ‘what’s up’ to him, he’ll open the door, just give him $20.”

Students at Surrey felt their best interests were not being served, and this lack of trust extended to the students’ perceptions of teachers and school counselors. Seventy-one percent reported unfair treatment by a school official. Narciso described hostility from a guidance counselor who responded to his request for information about his graduation status saying, “I can’t tell you nothing, get out of here.” Students felt that many, perhaps most, of their teachers did not care about them. As Manuel said, “Like some teachers in this school don’t even care, they don’t care if you go to class or not. They just pass you just to pass you.” Esteban sounded disgusted as he described how the many students roaming the hallways during class time were rarely confronted by the adults in charge.

Mr. Brooks’s students also felt that most teachers did not put much effort into their work. When during a class discussion Mr. Brooks asked the students if anyone in the class had learned about the day’s topic (abuses of power during wartime) before, Narciso replied, “No one, because people at this school don’t give a f*ck about us. Because teachers aren’t like you. They sit on their asses and get paid.” In his view, “there’s more messed up teachers than good teachers.” In his eyes, Mr. Brooks exemplified a good teacher: “even if you don’t really want to learn, he’ll still teach you.” When asked what advice he would give to a new student coming to Surrey, Manuel replied, “choose another school.”

These feelings were corroborated by state and district data from 2007–2008. While disappointing, the school’s relatively high dropout rate (8%) and rela-
tively low graduation (75%) and attendance rates (80%) were not shocking. These school-generated statistics were dwarfed by indicators measuring students’ preparation for life after high school. Students scored extremely low on the SAT scores (average scores of 330 math/335 verbal) and terribly on statewide proficiency tests (37.7 percent proficient in language arts, 12.7 percent proficient in mathematics), with only 10.6 percent of Surrey seniors graduating by passing the state test. In the year following the study, the school was ranked at the very bottom of the state high school rankings. While standardized test scores and state rankings do not provide a full measure of students’ capacities, such statistics indicate that Surrey was failing to prepare the great majority of its students for life after high school and, thus, was largely failing in its educational mission.

This was a setting, then, in which students experienced disjuncture. From these students’ perspective, the civic institutions charged with supporting and protecting them—law enforcement and school—had failed miserably in their mission. These civic failures put large, complex, and seemingly intractable social problems front and center in the daily lives of students. Disjuncture made the Surrey students’ project topic deeply meaningful and connected to larger social issues. It also made notions of civic action infinitely more complex than they were for their Allwood peers.

Pursuing Civic Action Research amid Congruence and Disjuncture

— “We won the battle”

For Allwood students, gathering evidence about their problem could be done within the safety of school and home. Lalit described the initial investigation of student-generated problems, explaining:

In one assignment, we had to go around the school and . . . just note down what you see and observe about the situation, like I had to write down notes during lunch about the foods and how kids reacted. Like, I asked them, like—did you like the food? And what could you do to make it better?

Tariq remembered that Ms. Tenney

told us to go home, look up our topics, look at evidence and see if we can back up our arguments. So what we had to do is we had a couple of days in class, we had to talk to our group members. And then we had to go up in front of the class.

As described earlier, students investigated their various problems before voting to select the backpack issue. This was a straightforward process that, while generating much class discussion, certainly did not touch on sensitive issues related to safety, survival, and allegiance.

Acting on the problem seemed similarly straightforward to the students. Cindy described what they had planned to do: “we were going to plan to maybe talk to the principal, talk to the student council. Get more support.” Rebecca
used the language of political negotiation to explain how they intended to act, describing how they were going to “lobby” for the right to carry backpacks.

As the year continued, the new approach to U.S. History II flourished in Ms. Tenney’s classroom. Students engaged in lively discussions on the essential questions of the course, considering issues such as America’s role in the world, whether the economy was fair, and the nature of social change. A fourth-quarter project in which each student researched and presented on a social change movement captivated the attention of the class, and students created posters and well-informed presentations on various movements: gay rights, pro-choice, pro-life, and Native American rights, to name just a few.

The civic action project, however, had fallen by the wayside by the second quarter. A new principal had taken charge of the school, and he was systematically reforming the strict rules that had characterized the previous administration. Ms. Tenney held off having her students work on the project because everything was in flux, and it looked like the very rules to which they had objected were about to change. Plus, the students were more excited about other aspects of the curriculum. The civic action projects, while they had captured students’ attention for a few weeks at the beginning of the year, were not at the forefront of their concerns.

By the end of the year, the Allwood students’ chosen problem had been resolved by the new principal, who determined that students could again wear their backpacks in the hallway. The students were left without a problem to act on and with the experience of having one of their key issues, in Cindy’s words, “kind of resolved on its own.” Some students even felt that some of their other concerns had been addressed as well. Jennifer noted, “Well, we haven’t really done anything, but the lunch, actually the food in lunch does seem better . . . and backpacks were actually brought back. We’re allowed to use nylon backpacks.”

Their problem, therefore, was solved when the school “changed the rules,” Rebecca said, indicating her sense that this was an orderly, almost legalistic process. Students experienced the simplicity of change in a system that ultimately made sense and, in the end, could be trusted to act in the best interest of its constituents.

The effortless resolution of the Allwood problem was, on the one hand, empowering. Students felt they had made an impact. Tariq described proudly how their problem was resolved:

We picked the backpack situation, [which] actually got done. We didn’t even have to do anything. It just got done because of the new principal. Because I think he realized how nonsense that was. Not to have backpacks. So what he did was he let us have string bags. Little sport bags. So we really, we won the battle.

As Samara put it, “It was something we all wanted to do. It was a problem we all wanted to do so everyone got involved . . . It felt good because we got to make change.” Lalit was able to feel like he made a difference without actu-
ally doing anything. “I don’t know if our class really affected it much,” he conceded, “but we do have more passing time next year. Yeah, so I don’t think it was our class specifically, but I think we did make a difference.” The easy resolution to their problem reinforced the congruence experienced by Allwood students who were left with the impression that just discussing school problems could result in change.

— Dilemmas of Action
What in Allwood was an uncomplicated process simplified still further by the unilateral action taken by the new principal was at Surrey almost unbearably complex. One complexity was that some of Mr. Brooks’s students were involved in the very problem they had selected. He explained:

I mean, I understand the makeup of my students. I mean, I have some people that just left jail. I got quite a few students that . . . are drug dealers themselves . . . I mean, this one kid I have he’s . . . he’s on probation for gun charges, and you have some people that have real, real issues.

Students themselves, or those close to them, were involved in drug use and sale and in the very violence they decried, presenting Mr. Brooks with a complicated teaching dilemma: navigating the contradictions inherent in engaging students with a problem in which they played a part.

Though students spoke disparagingly of illegal activities in their community, many expressed that reporting such activities to law enforcement was not an option, and some described their direct involvement in such activities as necessary for survival. As Manuel explained, “I used to fight a lot, I used to, you know what I’m saying? I sold drugs, I sold guns, you know what I’m saying? . . . sometimes in Surrey you got to fight to get some respect. You know what I’m saying?”

Aware that his participation or assent contributed to the lack of security of the community, but feeling such actions were essential, Manuel showed his mixed emotions in the repeated qualification of his responses (“you know what I’m saying?”). Calling the police to report drug dealing—seemingly an obvious action for those living in affluent communities—involved great personal risk for Surrey students. As Evan put it vividly, “Find out you snitch and they pop. I’ve known a lot of snitches got killed.”

This catch-22 of experiencing severe problems while feeling powerless to act against them sometimes resulted in a sense of hopelessness and resignation, although students never lost their desire to work on the project. Manuel proclaimed, “One person can’t make a difference. If it’s one, don’t get involved.” “I can’t do anything where I live,” echoed Evan. Narciso wavered a bit, telling the interviewer that “if a lot of people get together, they could like stop it [drug dealing] a little bit,” before concluding, “but it ain’t never going to stop.” In Surrey, unlike Allwood, students experienced a fundamental conflict between their motivation to act and difficulties implicit in such action.
The disjuncture of the context set nihilism alongside a critical analysis and a desire to act. As one student put it, “Cops don’t worry. Why should we?” Such dilemmas of action were not faced by Allwood students, whose quest to carry backpacks was easily and painlessly fulfilled.

Despite these strong expressions of disjuncture, Mr. Brooks’s students also spoke with pride about their community, expressed a sense of responsibility toward those younger than them, and had a strong desire to improve the community’s situation for themselves and for others. Sandy, reflecting on whether she intended to act on the class’s civic problems, said,

Yes, because, say we was to have children—they would have to grow up seeing the same thing we saw, and that’s not cool. You don’t want your children—your child—to grow up in a place like that, seeing people selling drugs on the corner or killing people.

How might she act on these feelings? “Go on strike . . . get a couple people go to city hall to whoever is responsible for this, and just talk to them, tell them what’s going on and how it’s affecting your life.”

Indeed, when compared with their Allwood peers, Surrey students appeared more committed to social action. In Surrey, 94 percent of the students said they would volunteer time to help poor or elderly in the community, compared with 70 percent in Allwood. In Surrey, 92 percent of the students said they would work with a group to solve a problem in the community in which they lived, while only 51 percent of Allwood students expressed this commitment. Fifty-seven percent of Surrey students said they would participate in a peaceful protest march or rally, compared with 44 percent of Allwood students. Despite this enthusiasm, Surrey students were less likely to believe that change actually could occur than their less socially committed Allwood peers. While only 60 percent of Surrey students felt that by working with others they could make things better, 83 percent of Allwood students agreed with that same statement.

By the second quarter Mr. Brooks had hit on the strategy he was going to employ so that his Surrey students would be able to create a product from their civic action research project that might give them a sense of purpose, pride, and closure. They would all contribute to a “scrapbook,” a compilation of writing, research, and photographs on the problems of drugs and murder in their community. The students voted on the title *Listen: An Anthology of Student Voices*. Students worked hard on the project. During the final quarter of the year, in inverse relation to the Allwood experience, the rest of the curriculum slipped away as students focused on writing and revising their pieces for the scrapbook. Surrey students cataloged their daily experiences. They used stories and photographs to effectively dramatize their chosen problems, creating an emotionally powerful document that—particularly for students in a special-needs social studies class in a school in which very little writing was expected—was an impressive accomplishment.
Tamika spoke proudly of the project, saying, “We’re talking about murders and stuff because we’re writing a book . . . We’re writing a book about the murders in the city of Surrey.” In interviews, the students raved about the opportunity to work on a product like *Listen*. “We’ve never done anything like this before in school. We’ve never written this much. I’ve gone through two whole notebooks this year!” For all of the dilemmas described earlier, Surrey students indicated that their work on the scrapbook and participation in the discussions and research gave them a sense that they were participating in meaningful action. Omar said he “loved” the project for that reason. This year’s class was so different from previous years where “all we did was watch movies, hand out dittos, hand out ditto sheets.”

This year he let us express our feelings . . . Or he’ll say, “what would you do if you was in a situation where you had to stop drugs?” And we’ll say, some of us would say, “we’ll try to get all the students inside the school and have a debate,” or “we’ll go out on the corners and try to or put up signs” . . . He had us going like to—he had gave every each one of us a chance to go to the Board of Education meetings like Monday through Friday and stuff like that.

Expressing feelings, considering what one might do to take a stand against a community problem, getting out of the school building to attend civic events—these were some of the features distinguishing social studies with Mr. Brooks from students’ past experiences.

As Mr. Brooks wrote in the foreword to the scrapbook,

What my students have presented here in *Listen*, are their own perspectives, opinions, and experiences concerning the drug trade and murders here in the city we call home. To their credit, my students in *Listen* explore and share deeply personal stories and experiences; some still feel very uncomfortable sharing verbally. Communication through ink, however, as most people could agree, is intimate and safe; a place emotionally and/or physically, many of my students (and others like them) may have not seen since childhood, if ever.

He continued:

What *Listen* hopes to communicate with all of its slang, profanity, and disturbing content, is that my poorer, minority students too have voices, thoughts, and dreams. They are not all the same. They are not stereotypes. They do desire to see positive changes in their city, their country, their world.

Youth civic action in Surrey was fraught with complexity yet was singularly meaningful in both effort and relevance when compared to students’ previous school experiences.

In Allwood, congruence—the sense that one’s immediate civic institutions are working for one’s benefit—had the power to convince students that they had caused change despite their actual lack of action. Disjuncture—the sense that one’s immediate civic institutions are not looking after one’s best interests—created a complex context for the civic learning experiences of Surrey.
youth, but this did not mean that civic learning did not take place. Indeed, the students’ experience of studying and expressing themselves on topics generally avoided by the adults surrounding them was a powerful one, indicating the tremendous potential of settings of disjuncture for meaningful civic learning.

Conclusion

Although conveyance of civic knowledge might seem on the surface to be a straightforward proposition, civic education is not a socially, historically, or politically neutral endeavor. In our democratic society, as Junn (2004) notes, “inequality and barriers to action structure rather than pepper” the daily lives of some young people, and “concepts such as freedom, fairness, equality, justice, and even democracy are far from unambiguous” (p. 252).

This project revealed both how civic action research can facilitate the connection between the curriculum and students’ lives and how there are complexities in making such connections. Samara’s and Omar’s comments that open this article perfectly reflect the ambivalence inherent in such a project; Samara “felt good” about a change she did nothing to bring about, while Omar was deeply concerned about the problem he described and just as deeply convinced that it would never be resolved. Congruence and disjuncture profoundly shaped these students’ civic learning experiences, dramatizing how fundamentally civic identity development is embedded within particular social, historical, political, and economic contexts that both enable and complicate meaningful civic learning.

Such findings raise serious questions for the practice of civic education. Youth action research and, more broadly, civic education practices that draw on students’ own experiences have great potential to counter the alienation from civic life often produced by traditional civic education based on triumphalist narratives of United States history and unsophisticated theories of learning. Yet, as we demonstrate, such approaches play out very differently in contexts of congruence or disjuncture. The practical question our analysis raises is, How to best teach for meaningful civic learning amid these varied contexts and circumstances?

Teachers working in congruent settings have tremendous advantages. They are more likely to have better access to material resources—books, photocopiers, helpful technology—than their colleagues in settings of disjuncture. Students in these settings are more likely to attend school regularly, to have fewer outside responsibilities, and to have the higher level of academic competence that results from being educated in more consistently effective schools. These students have experienced functioning civic institutions and feel more buy-in to the idea that these institutions could be responsive to citizens. Such advantages enabled Ms. Tenney to successfully implement the wholly redesigned curricular approach to U.S. History II that so captivated her students.
The challenge for teachers in such settings will be to help students engage in analysis beyond the narrow confines of school and community. Ms. Tenney’s students were taking part in a version of U.S. History II that foregrounded critical civic issues and mitigated the impact of the setting’s congruence. Students in congruent settings—learning through a more traditional, textbook-driven approach—were frequently complacent in their stance on civic issues, seeing civic problems as irrelevant to them and viewing the role of citizen as restricted to voting and paying taxes (Rubin, 2007). Educators in these settings face the complex challenge of leveraging their schools’ superior resources, support, and security in order to unsettle the complacency resulting from these same assets. Students in such settings could benefit from teaching practices and curricula that emphasize critical engagement with larger civic issues, the opportunity to communicate with students living in less congruent contexts, and a critical framework for making sense of the inequalities that they study and observe.

Teachers working in classrooms in settings of disjuncture have a more difficult, but critical and worthwhile, challenge ahead of them. They face the constraints of poorly functioning schools—limited access to resources, bureaucratic encumbrances, chaotic atmosphere—that create less stable and consistent environments for both students and teachers. Their students attend school less regularly; face the many challenges presented by living in resource- and opportunity-poor, crime-ridden communities; and have not had the opportunity to develop academic skills in consistently effective schools.

The failure of civic institutions leads to an understandable skepticism about the responsiveness of these institutions to calls for change, and, as described throughout this article, problems that are meaningful to students in such settings also present them and their teachers with serious dilemmas. In team meetings and interviews, Mr. Brooks frequently reflected on the challenges of teaching in such a setting. He was enthusiastic about the project and excited about how his students were engaging, through discussion and writing, with complex and meaningful topics. But he also struggled to keep his spirits up in the face of his students’ intermittent attendance, poor academic skills, limited prospects for further education and meaningful employment, and cynical perspectives on civic life.

The challenge for teachers in such settings is to guide students through projects that are more demanding and complex than what they usually encounter in school. It takes skill and tact to support students as they engage with personally difficult topics, to walk the fine line between providing students with a hopeful vision for civic improvement without insisting on a rosy picture of civic life that students know not to be true. Students in such settings need academic and emotional support. They also need the opportunity to make a structural analysis of inequality and injustice, to understand the larger forces behind their community’s problems. And, perhaps most importantly, they need opportunities to be heard, to present their findings—particularly through expressive
and creative means (Abu El-Haj, 2009b; Fine, Roberts, Torre, Bloom, Burns, Chajet et al., 2004). Mr. Brooks’s students, for all of their discouragement, were deeply proud of the scrapbook they created. The title they selected, Listen: An Anthology of Student Voices, speaks volumes about their unsatisfied need to be heard on the difficult issues that affected them so directly. While the complex problems they chose to investigate remain unsolved, the students (and their teacher) found meaning and voice in the creation of a scrapbook that reflected their difficult experiences.

This article demonstrates the need for civic education practices that are attentive to the qualities of varied communities. Civic learning is a situated endeavor embedded within settings with particular political, historical, economic, and social dimensions. All settings are not created equal, but neither are they one-dimensional in terms of their impact on civic learning. Settings of congruence have the benefit of resources, order, and trust but may seem to lack passion and significance. Settings of disjuncture are troubled by institutional failure, chaos, and mistrust, but civic learning in such contexts has the urgency and meaning that comes from standing directly in the crucible of society’s most pressing civic problems. Educators and others concerned with the civic identity development of all American youth will find that creating practices and curricula for civic learning that are attentive to these differences will result in more meaningful civic learning for youth across varied communities.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for the names of all students, teachers, schools, and communities in this article.
2. In 1998, 77 percent of fourth graders, 84 percent of eighth graders, and 68 percent of twelfth graders scored “below proficient” on the NAEP test of civic knowledge (Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazer, 1999). Results from the 2006 administration of the test showed some improvement, with “below proficient” scores for 75 percent of fourth graders, 76 percent of eighth graders, and 68 percent of twelfth graders, but still a weak performance, with only 25–32 percent of U.S. students reaching proficiency on this standard measure of civic knowledge (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007).
3. Programs announced emphasized direct transmission of patriotically oriented content, including the Idea of America Essay Contest, an annual Heroes of History lecture, and Pledge Across America, “a nationwide patriotic observance that invites every school child in America to participate in a simultaneous pledge of allegiance” (Bush Education Initiatives, 2002).
4. The entire curricular and instructional redesign project and its results are described in Rubin (in press).
5. Students and a teacher at a third school, Oak Knoll, participated in the study as well. Due to space constraints, this article focuses only on Surrey and Allwood high schools.
6. When selecting students for interviews, the research team sought to solicit the views of students from a variety of racial/ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, both boys and girls, with varying levels of participation in class and with various levels of achievement in the class (based on observation and discussion with the teacher).
References


Rubin, B. C. (in press). “We have the power to change”: Transforming civic learning in diverse social studies classrooms. New York: Routledge.

Appendix 1

TABLE A1  Themes and essential questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Economics</th>
<th>Conflict and resolution</th>
<th>Movement of people</th>
<th>Social change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over-arching question</td>
<td></td>
<td>WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential questions</td>
<td>• What purpose does government serve?</td>
<td>• What do Americans owe each other?</td>
<td>• What is America’s role in the world?</td>
<td>• Who is an American?</td>
<td>• Are all Americans equal?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What is a good American citizen?</td>
<td>• Why are some rich and some poor?</td>
<td>• Why does the U.S go to war?</td>
<td>• Why do people come to America?</td>
<td>• How do Americans make social change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Am I a good American citizen?</td>
<td>• Is the American economy fair?</td>
<td>• When should it?</td>
<td>• How do different groups define their American identities?</td>
<td>• Who has the power to make change? Do you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Can nations cooperate?</td>
<td></td>
<td>• What forces shape society?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content (not inclusive)</td>
<td>• Branches of government</td>
<td>• Basic Terms</td>
<td>• WWI</td>
<td>• Immigration</td>
<td>• Race/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Federal system</td>
<td>• Capitalism: stock market, Great Depression</td>
<td>• WWII</td>
<td>• Migration: Native Americans, African Americans</td>
<td>Civil rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Political ideology</td>
<td>• Industrialization</td>
<td>• Cold War</td>
<td>• Internment</td>
<td>movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Electoral politics</td>
<td>• Role of government</td>
<td>• Vietnam and Korean wars</td>
<td>• Contemporar</td>
<td>• Latino rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Civic participation</td>
<td>• Economic reforms</td>
<td>• Gulf and Iraq wars</td>
<td>y challenges</td>
<td>movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• World economy</td>
<td>• War on Terror</td>
<td>• Race/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Personal economics</td>
<td>• Genocide</td>
<td>Civil rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Gender/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Women’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Social protest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table A2  Civic learning strands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Writing and expression</th>
<th>Civic action research</th>
<th>Current events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Seminar</td>
<td>• Social studies</td>
<td>• Problem identification</td>
<td>• As related to themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Take a stand</td>
<td>journals</td>
<td>• Research</td>
<td>• Connected to questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Structured</td>
<td>• Persuasive letter</td>
<td>• Solutions</td>
<td>• Connected to the election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conversation</td>
<td>• Persuasive speech</td>
<td>• Presentation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Newscast</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Five-paragraph essay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Purpose | Develop discussion and listening skills; enhance ability to analyze and present a well-supported opinion on a controversial issue | Develop skills of written and oral expression; enhance ability to work alone or in a group to prepare/present | Develop ability to investigate public issues and concerns using primary and secondary sources; develop a plan for action | Develop consideration of current events as woven throughout themes, events, and questions under study |

This research was supported by research grants from the Spencer Foundation and the Rutgers University Research Council. The authors wish to thank the students and teachers of Surrey and Allwood high schools who participated so gamely in this project. We would also like to thank Carla Shalaby, Thea Abu El-Haj, Michelle Fine, Meira Levinson, and Kysa Nygreen for their feedback on various versions of this work. Finally, we are grateful for the insightful comments and suggestions from the *Harvard Educational Review* editorial board.