“It's the Worst Place to Live”: Urban Youth and the Challenge of School-Based Civic Learning

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One of the primary aims of education in the United States is to prepare youth to contribute to civic life in a democracy. Urban youth have daily school and community experiences with poverty, violence, and injustice that complicate their relationship with civic life. In this article the authors explore the ramifications of these experiences for youth civic identity development and consider how new understandings of the civic learning and identity development of urban adolescents might be used to rejuvenate civic education practices and, by extension, the civic mission of schooling.

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. (Narciso, 12th-grade student, Surrey High School)

One of the primary aims of education in the United States is to prepare youth to contribute to civic life in a democracy. Narciso’s description of his community is bluntly evocative and deeply felt. Yet most civic education (and schooling in general) does not take into account this particular vantage point on civic life. Urban youth have daily school and community experiences with poverty, violence, and injustice that complicate their relationship with civic life. In
this article, we explore the ramifications of these experiences for youth civic identity development and consider how new understandings of the civic learning and identity development of urban adolescents might be used to rejuvenate civic education practices and, by extension, the civic mission of schooling.

**Civic Learning and Identity Development of Urban Youth**

There is growing concern about the disenfranchisement of youth, particularly urban youth, from civic life. The topic is frequently investigated through statistical analyses of large national data sets, studies in which civic knowledge is generally defined in terms of students’ mastery of facts about national, state, and local government, and civic engagement is assessed through indicators such as newspaper readership and intent to vote. Multiple studies suggest that differences in the civic achievement of U.S. students appear to be linked to the racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students being tested (e.g., Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001; Niemi & Junn, 1998). Yet these statistics do not capture what a number of researchers working in other research traditions have noted: Many urban youth of color in the study pointed to disjunctures between the civic ideals expressed in civics textbooks and the reality of their lives. The results of this study and others indicate that young people make sense of their identities as civic beings through the particularities of their experiences as members of specific communities. It also suggests that teaching practices that engage students in discussion, investigation, and analysis of the civic problems they encounter in their daily lives hold potential for fostering more aware and empowered civic identities in youth (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Parker & Hess, 2001).

This article focuses, in particular, on the thoughts and experiences of students at one of three schools participating in a follow-up study to the one described above, the implementation of an approach to civic learning in the U.S. history classroom designed to engage students’ perspectives and experiences (the curriculum, a problem-posing approach to civics education, is described in detail in Rubin, 2008). This was a low performing comprehensive public high school in one of the state’s most impoverished and violence-ridden urban areas. At Surrey High School, civic learning was a complex endeavor, taking place in a context rife with disjuncture. Students experienced the failure of civic institutions on a daily basis. Their desire to work for change and to participate in civic and community life was intertwined with a sense of despair and lack of hope in being able to fight the overwhelming problems faced by the community. Through
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the problem-posing approach, students participated in discussions, investigated pressing civic problems, and expressed themselves through writing.

Civic Identity in the Crossfire: Disjuncture and Possibility

Surrey High School serves 1,314 students, with a student body that is 50% Latino, 46% Black, 2% Asian, and 1% White. Reflective of a city in which 50% of youth under 18 live below the poverty line and the mean family income is $36,197, 65% of Surrey’s students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The high poverty rate and a depressed local economy contribute to a 26.6% mobility rate at the school, far above the state average of 10.1%, and 22.5% of the school’s students are designated as special education students. In the 2006–2007 school year, 41% of students tested at the proficient or advanced proficient level on the state’s language arts/literacy assessment, compared to 83% students statewide. In mathematics, only 12% of students had scores that were proficient or advanced proficient, compared to 73% of students statewide.

Kevin Brooks, the participating teacher, is an African American man in his late 20s who lives in the community and is in his fourth year of teaching at Surrey High School. His two U.S. history II classes, both designated as special needs classes, had a shifting population that hovered at around 15 students per class, all of whom were African American and Latino, with the exception of one Arab American student. Mr. Brooks was excited to teach his students what he hoped would be a more relevant history curriculum, and even more so, he wanted his students to actually see that they could do things to make a difference. He also hoped that, through the civic action project (described below), “he would be able to give them a moment where a lot of attention is brought to them for doing something good.”

The next section describes the disjuncture Mr. Brooks’ students experienced on a daily basis, their hopes for change, their discouragement, and their experiences with the problem-posing approach.

Disjuncture

Disjuncture is a contrast between the civic ideals of the United States and students’ daily lives. Surrey High students participating in this study had daily experiences with violence, drugs, injustice, and inadequate schooling, and expressed low levels of trust both in the civic institutions in their lives and in their fellow community members that demonstrated such disjuncture.

Drugs and Violence

Surrey students participating in our study 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% had experienced violence in the neighborhood. Eighty-four percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that their neighborhood was one of the safest in the state, and 68% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their neighborhood was safe at all.

Each student interviewed at Surrey High expressed concern about the danger in their city. Esteban described his surroundings in grim detail in one of his scrapbook entries:

My first entry is about the needles that you see in the streets all over Surrey. I don’t see why the state won’t clean it up. Children could be walking to and from school and see it. They might pick it up and hurt themselves or catch a virus or disease. If I were mayor of Surrey, I would get people who are determined to clean up the city and make a difference.

Every day after school I walk home. On the streets that I live on, there is a house where I think they do and sell drugs. People have parties there. And I also think there is prostitution going on. There are fights inside and outside of the house all night long. There should be a police rundown on the house and arrest all the criminals.
Illegal drug sales and use were also prevalent, according to the students. 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 had experiences with violence that were immediate and dramatic. Narciso explained, “Look, my brother got shot in the stomach 7 times . . . all over his body, 7 times. His friend got shot 4 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.

Hope wrote in one of her scrapbook entries, “I attend Surrey High School. People call it the R.I.P. school because so many people are dying. Dying because people hanging with the wrong crowd. People are being pressured by their peers to join gangs. Parents having to bury their children before their time. I think that this violence stuff makes no sense at all.

These teens, many of them parents themselves, had a keen sense of the impact on the community’s children of the pervasive violence. As Hope explained in writing, “Another reason I want to move out of Surrey is if I choose to have kids in the future, they won’t be exposed to this violence.” 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’d 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, dawg. Sometimes you get a nice paycheck when you come back.”

Low Levels of Trust

Students expressed a very low level of trust in both the institutions in their lives and the people around them. In the participating class, 0% of the students surveyed said they always trusted the national government, the local government, Congress, the schools, and people in this country, and 64% said they never trusted people in this country. Only 15% said they always trusted the police, and 83% disagreed or strongly disagreed that police in the community treated people fairly.

This lack of trust was evident in our interviews with the students. Benny told us, “Half the people don’t even follow the laws.” Narciso, when asked how good a job the police were doing keeping the community safe, responded, “No, negative, like, 20 points. They don’t do nothing about it. Look, my brother got shot in the stomach 7 times . . . . 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.

Perceptions of School

Most of the participating students did not experience Surrey High School as a completely safe, caring, or educationally compelling environment. Seventy-one percent of the students surveyed said they had received unfair treatment by a teacher or school official at Surrey High School and 86% of students said they had experienced violence at school. Ninety-two percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school was “one of the best in the state.”

When asked if he felt safe at school, Narciso told us, “Unsafe. Because last year we had a riot; my cousin got beat up.” Manuel did not feel welcome, saying, “I don’t like this school at all. Sometimes I feel like I’m coming into a jail, you’ve go to come in through metal detectors. They search you no matter what.”

In interviews, students suggested that many teachers did not care about them. Manuel told us, “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.”
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, “If the cops stop killing people and start doing what they’re supposed to do [things might change]. 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.

Would he go to the police if he had a problem? “No.”

Daily survival was on the conscience of many of the participating students, and their writing often provided an opportunity for them to express these concerns. In a scrapbook entry, Benny reflected on the increased violence in the Eastside of Surrey, his neighborhood, concluding, “People don’t care if you live or die, so you can’t trust anybody.”

Injustice

Students were keenly aware of unjust treatment and differences between their community and others. Of students surveyed, 86% said they had experienced unfair treatment by a police officer, and 71% reported unfair treatment by a school official. In response to the statement “It makes me angry when I think about the conditions some people have to live in,” 84% agreed or strongly agreed. Eighty-five percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “When I think about the hard times some people are going through, I wonder what’s wrong with this country;” and 77% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I get mad when I hear about people being treated unjustly.”

Students described the relative lack of opportunity to be found in Surrey, compared to other communities. Manuel told us,

I got a lot of friends who are drug dealers…. They’re smart, you know, they’re good at sports, but there’s no sports for them to go after. Yeah, they played for the school, but here there’s nothing else in the summer for them to do, you know, except do nothing and selling drugs, and then they forget all about their talent. You know, there’s not enough jobs for them to work, you know?

Poignantly, Manuel told the interviewer, “We’re all human beings. You know, why should somebody be treated better just because they live in another place?” Benny, comparing Surrey to a neighboring affluent, White community, said, “The air … it’s just better there. It just smells better in Pine Bluff. You can tell when you’re there. It’s just different. Better.”

Desire to Participate in Civic and Community Life

Despite the strong expressions of disjuncture described above, students also expressed pride in their community and had strong desires to participate in civic and community life, to improve the community’s situation for themselves and for others.

Of the students surveyed, 94% said they would probably or certainly volunteer time to help poor or elderly in the community, and 92% said they would probably or certainly work with a group to solve a problem in the community in which they lived. Seventy-one percent said they would probably or certainly try to talk to people and explain why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates during an election, and 66% agreed or strongly agreed “I think it’s important to protest when something in society needs changing.” Sixty-five percent said they would probably or certainly collect money for a social cause, and 60% agreed or strongly agreed that “by working with others in the community, I can help make things better.” Fifty-seven percent said they would probably or certainly participate in a peaceful protest march or rally, and 50% said they would probably or certainly get involved in issues like health or safety that affect their community.

Students felt deep connection to, and some degree of pride in, their community, complex emotions, given the violence and lack of opportunities they faced. The best thing about living in Surrey, according to Benny, was “being around
my friends and family. The people I like.” The worst? “It’s dangerous and dirty.” Manuel, who confided in an interview that he had once dealt both drugs and guns, credited Surrey for “making him the man he is today.” When asked to describe Surrey, he replied, “I mean, yeah, Surrey has a big murder rate and drug rate, but you can’t bring that amongst everybody in Surrey, you know what I’m saying? I’m proud of Surrey, I’m glad I come from Surrey.”

Students had ideas about how to solve the problems, many of which involved improvements in policing. Estaban wrote,

In Surrey, I wonder why the police never arrest the drug dealers on the corner. The police always just drive by and never do anything. If the police stop by them and check them, I bet they would have something illegal on them. If I were the police, I would stop at every corner in Surrey, and arrest the drug dealers in Surrey. Then I would make sure they never get out of jail.

Despite his frustrations with law enforcement in his city, he wrote that “After high school, I want to go to the United States Marine Corps. And after that, I would like to become a Surrey police officer.”

The problems in the community fueled students’ desires to remedy them. Manuel wrote in his journal, “My plan after high school is to go to the Air Force for about 4 years. After I finish the Air Force I want to go to the police academy so I can help stop the drugs in Surrey. So the kids in the future won’t have to go through what I went through.” He wanted to change things for younger children,

I don’t really talk for myself, because I can handle my, I can work, you know? I really talk for the younger people. My brother, I want things better for my brother. I don’t want to see my younger brother go on a bad path. So I don’t really talk for me, I’m already 18; I’m ready to hit the real world. You know. I’m talking for the younger kids that got talent, that actually want to be somebody.

Discouragement and Hopelessness

Despite their desire to help, however, many students expressed discouragement and hopelessness based on the situations they faced. In interviews and class discussions, students described solutions as elusive, beyond their control, and personally dangerous.

The quandary of civic action in this setting was on full display during a class discussion in the midst of the Conflict and Resolution theme. What follows is an excerpt from a discussion, led by Mr. Brooks, on the Edmund Burke quote “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

Mr. Brooks: Was there ever a time when you didn’t do anything about a problem in your community?

Evan: I was picking up my nephew and some dudes were fighting and people called the cops and no one said anything. No one gave cops info about the fight.

Mr. Brooks: If I asked you that, what do you think it [the quote] means? For evil to happen, good people must sit back and do nothing.

Manuel: It’s true. Yes, there’s a lot in this community that you see that you can’t do something about—drugs.

Mr. Brooks: Suppose you thought something was right—is it always right to get involved?

Evan: You know drugs are bad but you can’t fix it.

Mr. Brooks: What about drug dealers: : : you see them in the same spot, same day, all the time : : : What if you were to report them?

Manuel: You can’t snitch in the hood. You get popped.

What for those living in more affluent communities might seem to be an obvious action, calling the police to report drug dealing, for Surrey students, would involve great personal risk. Students frequently encountered what they knew to be dangerous and illegal activity, without feeling as if they could do anything about it. Manuel
reflected this sense of hopelessness, saying, “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.”

Implications for Teaching: Lessons From Mr. Brooks

Many of Mr. Brooks’ students had difficult lives outside of schools, including heavy home responsibilities (many with children of their own), arduous work schedules, and family conflicts. Mr. Brooks reflected, “That’s the hardest thing to overcome, is their outside issues. Outside things that they have to deal with day to day.” Yet the problem-posing approach Mr. Brooks employed in his social studies classes engaged students in a way that they reported was completely new to them, allowing them to express their ideas and experiences, through discussion and writing and considering issues that were timely and relevant.

New Approach, Different Experiences

In a survey conducted at the beginning of the year, 75% of Mr. Brooks’ students reported that in their social studies class last year, teachers mainly lectured and students took notes, 56% said they worked mostly from a textbook, and 53% said they did not talk about racism and discrimination. When asked if they had discussions in social studies last year, Benny replied, “No, all book work.” Such practices appeared to be dominant in other classes as well. Manuel told us that, “We basically never do that [have discussions] in none of my classes except Mr. Brooks’. Mr. Brooks’ class is like one of the best classes I have because he actually sits there and listens to me.”

This year, according to the students, was different. Benny told us, In our class we’re doing things that are happening, or about to happen, or already happened, like recently though. And in the other classes, we talk about things that happened like 13,000 years ago, that don’t got nothing to do with today. So it don’t make no sense.

Narciso had a similar analysis, saying, “We learn more in Brooks’ class. Other classes like, teachers just give you the book, read out of it, do the work, that’s it.” They connected history to the present, discussing questions like “Where’s the guns made at? What’s causing this? Why is everybody dying nowadays? Who’s in charge of all of the drugs?”

Narciso enjoyed class discussions, saying

Like, if we have a discussion, people actually got to learn about it more, like we’ll know a little bit about it, and that’s not right. So like, the next day, we’ll focus on that one topic that we was talking about, so we’ll know a lot about it. And we won’t say the wrong stuff and we’ll know what we’re talking about.

The Scrapbook

No project during the year did more to stimulate students’ desire to engage with issues of grave and personal importance than the scrapbook project. Originally conceived to be a civic action project where students would research a local problem in their communities and formulate an action plan to address the issue, Mr. Brooks modified the project when a strong consensus emerged around two community problems—murder and drugs. The scrapbook became a way for each student to document the ways in which their lives have been impacted by murder and drugs. He motivated his students to write for an audience of school, community, and state officials. Benny, one of Mr. Brooks’ students, created the title: Listen: An Anthology of Student Voices.

Students explored the chosen community problems through journal entries based on personal experience and original research. The scrapbook is a heartbreaking compendium of the daily injustices faced by these young people. In
interviews, Mr. Brooks’ 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!” More impressive than the quantity of writing that went into developing the scrapbook was the quality and authenticity of the writing. As Brooks wrote in the scrapbook’s foreword,

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 they 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 been since childhood, if ever.

Their writings reflect the grammar of a school system that has failed them, the dialect of cultures that have provided them security, and the urgency with which they wish to see these problems eradicated. As Brooks wrote,

But 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.

Conclusion

Studies of young people’s development of civic identity frequently overlook the meaning that youth, and urban youth in particular, make of their daily experiences with civic institutions and their agents amid the cultural practices and structural inequalities that surround them. New research suggests that civic identity is embedded in young peoples’ everyday experiences with civic life, and that school contexts and classroom practices are deeply implicated in shaping these identities in particular ways. For students in Surrey, who knew the system had clearly failed them, civic learning was fraught with complexity and contradiction. This makes civic education in such a setting at once complicated, difficult, and essential.

Note

1. All names of people and places in this article are pseudonyms.

References


