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“I look deep into this stuff because it’s a part of me”: Toward a critically relevant civics education

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ABSTRACT

In communities historically shaped by processes of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation; police repression; and lack of access to equitable housing, jobs, and labor-rights, young people find very little of this content reflected in their school-based learning. These societal “civics lessons” indicate the need to move beyond the aim of closing the “civic opportunity gap” and toward a more relevant, critical—even transgressive—approach to civic learning in school. In this article, the authors look across their individual studies to consider how young people of color experienced and interpreted current forms of racialized injustice, how their school-based civic instruction intersected with these experiences, and where they turned to explore these dilemmas. Findings reveal that youth engaged with various out-of-school resources, including family members and new media platforms, to investigate and interpret racialized injustice. Through these findings we developed a grounded theory of school-based civics education that we call *critically relevant civics*, an approach that embraces the out-of-school resources that young people tap into to navigate the civic world and grapple with the precarious nature of their citizenship status.

KEYWORDS

Civic education; civic opportunity gap; critically relevant civics; critical pedagogy; critical race theory; culturally relevant education; youth participatory action research

Major news headlines over the past several years tell a story of repeated physical violence toward African American and Latinx youth at the hands of local and federal law enforcement agencies and the subsequent failure of U.S. legal institutions to protect the human rights of both U.S. citizens and undocumented youth of color (e.g., Associated Press, 2018; López & Park, 2018; Ruiz, 2017; Stanglin, 2018). In addition to the threat posed by federal and local police, Black and Brown communities and their young people are mired by joblessness and decades of policy reforms that have served to gentrify neighborhoods and spatially isolate poor residents (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2018; Troutt, 2014). The manifestations of historical and systemic inequality dramatically shape the lived experience of citizenship for many Black and Brown young people.

These experiences are, in themselves, “civics lessons” that implicitly teach young people about the limitations of their citizenship. This sense of (nominal) citizenship is bolstered by recent incursions on the civic rights of communities of color, including the rollback of the Voting Rights Act, targeted voter suppression of African Americans in recent elections, and the growing criminalization of protest in the wake of surging Black and Indigenous direct action (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017; Berman, 2016). These

lessons are a more expansive understanding of civic learning, encompassing the impact of youths' civic experiences beyond the classroom. We argue that the everyday experiences of young people in their homes, communities, and the larger society (including what they experience on their Instagram and Twitter feeds) shape how youth understand what citizenship entails for poor Black and Latinx people.

In this article, we draw on data from interviews, focus groups, observations of social studies classrooms, and participatory action research meetings with young people living in some of the poorest urban areas of the country to explore how learning experiences from both within and outside of schools play varied and consequential roles in helping youth engage with and deepen their understandings of pressing civic issues. Drawing connections across our work, we describe the youths' frequently discouraging experiences with U.S. civic institutions and the ways in which school-based civic education often missed the mark in helping them to critically analyze those experiences. However, despite the dearth of relevant civic learning opportunities in school, many of these youth drew on family, community, and social media to investigate and interpret racialized injustice. Building on these insights, we suggest the need for a *critically relevant civics* (CRC) in K-12 classrooms that would embrace the out-of-school resources that young people tap into to navigate the civic world and grapple with the precarious nature of their citizenship status.

From “deficits” and “gaps” to a critically relevant civics

Traditionally, research on civic learning and identity has focused on the gap in the performance of low-income youth of color and their White, more affluent peers on measures of civic knowledge and engagement (i.e., Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazer, 1999). This disparity is, to some extent, a function of inequities in access to high quality school-based civic education for low income communities (Guilfoile & Delander, 2014; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). For many Black and Latinx youth, however, the absence of optimal learning opportunities in civics classrooms is compounded by the precarity of their status in society, instantiated in daily experiences with racialized systems of injustice, and experiences of civic “disjuncture” (Rubin, 2007). This section describes the varied ways that the civic learning of marginalized youth has been treated in the research literature, establishing the need for a critical, asset-based approach that is attentive to both community and larger structural and historical context.

More than a civic achievement gap

Civic knowledge and engagement have long been examined through standardized tests and broad survey approaches that measure young peoples' knowledge of civic institutions and processes and participation (or intent to participate) in socially acceptable forms of civic engagement, such as voting or reading the newspaper (e.g., Niemi & Junn, 1998; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). These studies typically reveal gaps in civic knowledge and engagement between young people from low income families and communities of color and their more affluent, White peers (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001; Lutkus et al., 1999; Niemi & Junn, 1998). Students' level of education also correlates with certain measures of civic engagement; young people who have not attended

college are less likely to vote, volunteer, or belong to civic groups (Flanagan, Levine, & Settersten, 2009).

Beyond this *achievement* disparity on quantitative civic measures, research conducted in school settings indicates that young people living in high poverty, urban settings do not have the same access to high quality civic education as their more affluent peers, creating a “civic *opportunity* gap” between these youth and their more privileged peers (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levine, 2009; Levinson, 2012). The shift in terminology from “civic achievement gap” to “civic opportunity gap” moves attribution for performance differences on civic measures from inherent deficiencies to lack of access to high quality school-based civics education. Indeed, research shows that schools serving poor youth and youth of color provide the least innovative and most ineffective forms of civic education and that youth in these settings frequently experience classroom-based civic education as alienating and irrelevant (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Young people placed in lower tracks also have less access to approaches we know are effective, such as discussion of critical current issues, learning about topics that are of personal concern, and community engaged learning (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

The civic learning of youth experiencing precarious citizenship

Research focused on gaps, no matter how couched, tells us little about how young people make sense of their own identities as citizens. Students’ daily experiences in a society marked by racial and socioeconomic inequalities become part of their evolving understandings of themselves as citizens—a lived, daily civics that is central to their civic learning and identity (Cohen, Kahne, & Marshall, 2018; Rubin, 2007, 2012; Rubin, Hayes, & Benson, 2009). Interpretive studies of civic learning describe how young people face an unequal landscape in relation to their rights and experiences as citizens (e.g., Abu El-Haj, 2007; Levinson, 2012; Maira, 2009; Nygreen, 2013).

Negative encounters with state agents, with police in particular, are part of many young peoples’ daily civic lives. Nationally representative surveys and comprehensive studies of local neighborhood policing corroborate the widespread nature of such experiences. The Morris Justice Project, a South Bronx-based research team comprised of neighborhood residents and university researchers in New York City, surveyed local residents about their experiences with policing (Morris Justice Project, n.d.). Three-quarters of residents surveyed indicated that they had been stopped; 89% of these respondents were stopped by police before they were 25 years old, and 59% had been stopped for the first time between the ages of 13 and 16. In a neighborhood that was 96% Black and Latinx in 2011, 63% of youth aged 25 and under said they felt targeted by police. A 2015 report from the Black Youth Project reported that 56% of Black youth aged 18–29 did not trust the police. Responding to the same survey, nearly 40% of Latinx youth said that they did not trust the police, while 72% of White youth indicated that they did trust the police.

These experiences of civic disjuncture, what Rubin (2007) defined as “daily experiences that conflicted with what they had learned about American ideals” (p. 461), are not separate from civic learning; they are the very events and practices that comprise civic learning. The disparate landscape that youth of color can face in relation to their rights and experiences with law enforcement, for example, has been referred to as a “hidden curriculum” of policing (Justice & Meares, 2014). This “curriculum” appears to be

pervasive; Cohen and Luttig (2019) argued that carceral violence is an essential part of the political knowledge of Black and Latinx youth.

Social studies classrooms could be places where young people grapple with, analyze, and develop critical understandings of such experiences (e.g., Rubin, 2015). Yet much of school-based social studies education furthers the distance between the curriculum and Black and Brown youth's civic experiences. The history textbook, a central instrument of the formal curriculum, sidesteps the deep fissures in the meaning of citizenship for different communities. As Woodson (2015) noted, "history textbooks deeply inform students' understandings of citizenship and democracy," and school-based framings of history present versions of the nation's past that center Whiteness and otherize Indigenous Peoples, African Americans, and other groups, discarding experiences that do not fit progressive narratives (p. 57). Textbook treatments of slavery, for example, are not only narrow, but also "typically focus on the subjugation of black bodies" while "ignoring black agency" (King & Woodson, 2016/2017, p. 4), a formulation that shields Whites from responsibility and paints a reductive portrait of Black docility in the face of racialized violence.

Leonardo and Porter (2010) describe educational engagements with race that "minimize or ignore the significance of racism" as "educative-psychic violence" perpetuating harm (p. 5). Textbook treatments of racial violence, for example, tend to ignore the ways in which such incidents are part of larger structures of inequality that benefit even those professing to abhor these acts, missing an opportunity to help students connect their own experiences and observations to historical patterns (Brown & Brown, 2015). It is a curricular approach that leaves students unable to grapple with and historicize contemporary racial violence, a "White social studies" (Chandler & Branscombe, 2015) that protects White dominant narratives, sidesteps discussion of institutionalized racism, and fails "to prepare students for a racially based citizenship existence in the U.S." (King & Chandler, 2016, p. 10).

Incorporating the civic experiences and understandings of black and brown youth

The tensions and contradictions marginalized youth of color experience as citizens necessitate an approach to civic education that is both more relevant and more critical than the traditional, school-based civics curriculum. By "critical" we mean explicitly problem posing and questioning the naturalness of societal inequalities. Young peoples' daily civic understandings, developed through experience with civic disjunctures, including their experiences with and/or proximate to the carceral state, are essential to a relevant classroom civics. Social studies classrooms can be spaces within which youth can share, contextualize, analyze, and interrogate disjunctive experiences; their vantage point on citizenship can enhance all students' understandings of the dynamic and challenging process of recreating civic life in a society marked by difference and inequality (Appiah, 2018).

There are a number of examples of this type of civics instruction. In Parkhouse's (2018) study of critical pedagogy in history classrooms, two teachers used approaches of "naming (e.g., racism and other forms of oppression)," "questioning (e.g., common sense views of social paradigms)," and "demystifying (e.g., the connection between historical antecedents and current inequalities)," to raise students' critical consciousness around issues like racism and civic action. Parkhouse described how teachers drew on current examples of institutional racism to more fully engage students' lived realities. Rubin (2015) explored

the varied ways that social justice-oriented social studies teachers responded to police killings of unarmed Black men in Ferguson, Missouri and Staten Island, New York, giving students a space and the tools necessary to process and analyze these disturbing events. Beyond the classroom, Knight Abowitz and Mamlok (2019) described how access to in-school and after-school opportunities peripheral to formal civics education supported activist youths' deep learning in ways that aided their movement building. Similar critical approaches have also flourished in out-of-school contexts (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright & James, 2002).

The field is beginning to grapple with how the lived civics of youth from marginalized communities might be drawn upon to construct more critically relevant approaches to classroom-based civic learning; however, there is still much work to be done to understand these experiences and use them to transform civics curriculum and pedagogy. In this article, we build upon data and findings across our individual studies to consider how young people of color in poor urban settings experienced and interpreted current forms of racialized injustice; how their school-based civic instruction intersected with these experiences; and where, amid the current, quickly changing landscape of resources and connectivity, they turned to explore these dilemmas. It is our intention that this article's analysis of students' experiences and the resulting CRC framework might be helpful in informing the development of critically relevant curriculum and practices for civic education.

Methods

We bring together data from three qualitative studies of the civic learning of Black and Latinx youth living in urban contexts in the mid-Atlantic region to engage with those aforementioned questions. In looking across three studies, two occurring in the mid-2000s (before Barack Obama's first presidential term) and the other between the years of 2015 and 2016 (as Obama's second term was ending and Donald Trump's term beginning), we were able to explore how similarly positioned young people experienced and interpreted racialized injustice with striking consistency at different historical moments.

Clay examined how youth researchers in a college-bound program developed political orientations within the context of a participatory action research group, while both of Rubin's studies investigated how young people came to see themselves in relation to civics and citizenship within socioeconomically and racially varied communities and public schools. While both authors' studies reaffirm much of what has already been found lacking in school-based civic education, particularly in schools serving Black and Latinx youth, Clay's study also reveals promising ways that youth resisted rote and irrelevant instruction to forge their own paths toward a CRC education.

Researcher positionality and study context

Clay is a Black man in his late twenties at the beginning of this study. His research project was situated within an Upward Bound pre-college program located in a poor, primarily Black and Latinx, post-industrial, mid-Atlantic city, where he had been employed between 2014 and 2016, and where, between July 2015 and November 2016, he and a group of 19 Black and Latinx high-school students (14 of whom consented to the study) conducted participatory action research. In this work, Clay, then a doctoral candidate and novice

Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) facilitator with several years of experience teaching in TRIO pre-college programs, investigated if and how young people's ideas about race, class, and social change developed or changed over time in YPAR. Clay facilitated this action research while engaging in ethnographic inquiry. Methods of data collection included participant observation, interviews with youth researchers and members of their social networks, intake and exit surveys, journals, and focus groups. Having spent one or more years with youth researchers in Upward Bound, Clay developed close-relationships with most of them. Clay's racial, cultural, and political identities anchored his attachment to the community in which this study takes place.

Rubin is a White woman, in her forties at the time of this research, whose contribution to this paper draws on data from two separate studies. The first, a study of youth civic identity development across distinct school and community contexts, consisted of classroom discussions of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights and interviews with middle and high school aged youth at four different schools (Rubin, 2007). The second study referenced in this manuscript was a design-based project in which Rubin worked with teachers in three different schools to redesign the U.S. History curriculum to encompass meaningful civic learning (Rubin et al., 2009; Rubin, 2010, 2012). For the current analysis, Rubin drew on data from the urban schools in those studies, a middle school and a high school with predominantly Black and Latinx student populations located in high density, low income areas. As former public high school social studies teacher and current professor specializing in youth civic learning, Rubin had both a relationship with and some distance from the phenomena under consideration. As a White person shielded from civic realities by lifelong privilege, she needed to carefully (and continually) consider how her own assumptions about civic life predisposed her approach to data collection and analysis; she consciously drew on the theories and perspectives of researchers, youth, and teachers of color to unearth and challenge these assumptions.

Grounded theory and cross-study data analysis

Across both of our studies, young people from historically marginalized communities experienced disjuncture between their lived experiences of citizenship and what they were learning about history and citizenship in official educational settings. These same youth drew upon rich resources from beyond the classroom to make sense of those experiences. Struck by these similarities, we decided to more systematically explore these themes. Our goal was to, through consideration of a larger data set, develop a fuller, richer analysis of the civic learning and identity development of Black and Latinx youth from low income communities

To build this theory of civic learning and identity development, we employed a grounded theory approach to the analysis of our data set (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We first identified common themes in each of our studies related to four broad categories: "citizenship"; "personal narratives of race/ism"; "history, civics, and social studies learning"; and "out of school civic resources." We then discussed and reflected on these themes and their data, considering the experiences of students across the three studies in relation to these four areas, deepening our analysis of the ways that these young people experienced and made sense of civic life both within and beyond their classrooms.

Both authors gathered data on the views and experiences of urban youth of color through in-depth interviews, classroom observation, focus groups, and collection of

materials produced by young people and then analyzed and interpreted these data to more deeply understand the perspectives of the participants. From this analysis we arrived at our conception of CRC, reflecting on the ways that youth across our studies articulated what was missing from their school-based learning and what kinds of learning—typically out-of-school—they found important, insightful, racially salient, and relevant to their lives and communities.

Together, these studies indicate consistency in many Black and Brown youths' school-based civic learning experiences over time. All three studies were grounded in interpretive and critical research paradigms, the interpretive perspective highlighting the socially constructed and locally negotiated nature of experience and the critical approach rooted in a concern with how larger structures of inequality frame the possibilities of individuals and groups with the least power (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Mehan, 1992). While this type of research does not result in generalizable assertions about what all youth experience, interpretive studies generate nuanced descriptions of perspectives and experiences of particular youth, in this case on the complex and intertwining topics of citizenship, identity, and racial justice, which allows for the illumination of underexplored standpoints.

Learning citizenship: Lessons from society, school, and inquiry

This section explores three interrelated themes across the researchers' projects that point toward the need for a critically relevant civics education. First, we describe the "lived curricula of citizenship" (Cohen, Kahne, & Marshall, 2018) the study participants experienced in relation to race and (in)justice in their daily lives, analyzing data from interviews and classroom discussions to draw out these societal "civics lessons." Next, we interpret youths' experiences with school-based civics instruction, the classroom "civics lessons" that did little to engage their concerns. Finally, drawing from Clay's study, we explicate the informal civics lessons that these young people sought out through social media and other online resources, conversing with family members, and participation in an afterschool program.

Societal civics lessons

The young people in the three studies all described personal experiences with and insights into the civic institutions shaping their communities, expressing distrust in the legitimacy and fairness of these institutions. There was a sense among study participants that their own citizenship was limited or marginal, as was that of other members of their community.

In Rubin's 2007 study, eighth grade students, all Black and Latinx, in an urban middle school took part in a classroom discussion in which they read a case of a potential violation of a student's Fourth Amendment rights. The case gave rise to an animated exchange of students' own personal experiences with such violations. Elizabeth shared the following story with her classmates,

You know how you are supposed to have the right to privacy? Well one time, me and my brother were at home and the cops bust in through the window and through the front door and all these cops started coming in and they were looking for my cousin. They went in the bedroom, in the basement, everywhere. I don't think they had a search warrant. I had to call

my father and they looked through my purse. And that went against the Fourth Amendment rights, search and seizure at your house.

In describing this experience, Elizabeth drew a clear connection between this occurrence and the Fourth Amendment, pinpointing where she felt her rights had been violated. Another student told an even more disturbing story about a friend's uncle, saying,

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

As the students discussed these events, the ubiquity of such experiences became evident; in a class of 18, 15 shared stories of Fourth Amendment violations by police, revealing a stark disjuncture between the civil rights and freedoms expressed in the U.S. Constitution and their real-life experience of state repression.

In Rubin's 2012 study, she surveyed students about their experiences with law enforcement. Of the 22 student participants from an urban high school serving low income students of color, 19 said that they had experienced unfair treatment by a police officer, 18 "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that police in the community treated people fairly, and only 3 said they "always trusted" the police. This lack of trust was also evident in interviews with students. Narciso, when asked how good of 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.

He also 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.

When asked if he would go to the police if he had a problem, Narciso responded, "No." These students had no expectation that the most familiar civic agents in their community—police—would protect them; rather, they were convinced that the opposite was true.

Youth skepticism of law enforcement and other civic institutions was apparent in Clay's study as well, a skepticism that extended to an analysis of how the news media covered both the original incidents of police violence and the community responses to those events. In a 2015 discussion, Clay invited youth co-researchers to describe the events leading to the death of Freddie Gray on April 12, 2015 in Baltimore, Maryland and the news coverage that followed in order to better understand their perspectives on police violence. "It was a cover-up," offered Shante. She continued,

I believe that the news only shows what everybody in Baltimore was doing instead of what was going on with the cops that caused Freddie Gray's injuries, because they know that the cops was wrong, and they don't like putting that out there.

Expressing a lack of faith in both news media and law enforcement, Shante's comment revealed her sense that Gray's death took place within a system organized against both of their rights.

Many of the youth researchers in Clay's study indicated their belief that racial inequality permeated law enforcement practices. In a group discussion prompted by ongoing debate about the consequences of stereotypes, Clay asked youth action researchers to respond to a scenario that assessed their opinions on whether police would treat a Black and a White person the same if they were both suspected of a potentially fatal crime. "No," many answered, emphatically. "He's getting locked up. He's going to get shot," elaborated one teen, referring to the Black suspect in the hypothetical situation. Selena, a Latinx rising tenth grader, expanded on this sentiment, referencing a social experiment she saw on YouTube.

There's this man, this experiment, right? And there's a Black man and there's a White man. And they were both pulled over by the cops and they were both supposed to answer the cops without answering questions. And a White man said to the cop, "I ain't answering your questions," when he asked what he was doing. And the cop just let him go and said "have a nice day." But when the Black man said it, they kind of beat him up.

Such responses indicated a perception that carceral violence was rooted in racism and a sense that within the U.S. system of policing, Black people's humanity was denied.

Young people were keenly aware of differences between their community and others. They described the relative lack of opportunity to be found in their city compared to other communities. In an interview, Manuel, a Latino student in Rubin's study, told the researchers,

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?

Comparing his divested city to a neighboring affluent, White community, Benny, an African American high school student in Rubin's study, explained to an interviewer, "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."

Selena, along with other youth researchers in Clay's study, echoed Benny's concern about community infrastructure, adding their analysis that a racial value gap (Glaude, 2016) undergirded disparities in government support. In a 2015 interview, Clay asked her if things would be different in her community if it had a majority White population, she expressed her belief that it would be different because " ... the government really cares about them." Selena continued, "Like, they would listen to them. Yeah, I don't think they listen to us." The "us" to which Selena, a Latina tenth grader, was referring, was the nearly 88% population of Latinx and Black residents who, along with Selena, called this city, with over 25% of its residents living below the poverty line, home. Manuel, Benny, Selena, and their peers expressed a keen sense that their communities were systematically disadvantaged and civically disenfranchised.

Such experiences can lead young people to draw conclusions, both about their value as citizens and about the value of citizenship. As a student participating in a discussion of the Pledge of Allegiance in one of Rubin's studies noted,

I don't think I have to pledge to a flag to show honor for my country when the words that we say are not true. One nation under God. Well, we are under God, but I don't feel like we are all one nation ... there's still not justice—liberty and justice—for all people.

This critique of pledging allegiance to the United States challenged the liberal view of an impartial, democratic government concerned with “liberty and justice for all.” Similar sentiments were echoed by Rosada, a Latina rising tenth grade student in Clay's study, who noted in a discussion of the Ferguson, Missouri uprisings,

... the whole riot thing, I think for me it was a waste of time, because I think at the end of the day they know that police are going to do what they want and the government is not going to stop them. It's just—there's no point. You can try and keep trying, but then again, these are policeman, they're not going to do anything.

Rosada and the other youth researchers' comments affirmed that these moments of conflict between government and communities of color could be “civics lessons” from society through which young people learned about their position in relation to state power.

Classroom civics lessons

Across these three studies, many students recounted experiences of classroom-based civic learning that did little to interrupt the alienation they witnessed and experienced through the societal “civics lessons” described above. In each study, young people reflected on social studies classrooms that centered decontextualized historical facts. Some described lessons that they felt were irrelevant to their lives or were disconnected from knowledge that might help them to more fully understand current events.

In Clay's participatory research group, several young people reported that their teachers discouraged them from talking about racially salient current events of most concern to them, implying that those topics were too inflammatory. While 18-year-old Michael Brown's death and the subsequent days of civil unrest on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri dominated the news cycle for weeks in 2015, one young person relayed that a teacher suggested to his class it was against school policy to discuss Brown's death or the resulting protests. This unwillingness to engage (or even allow students to engage themselves) in discussion about a current event of immediate relevance to these young Black and Latinx students shut off the possibility that their social studies classrooms would be arenas within which they could analyze and contextualize this key civic event.

What young people did pick up in school was often dated historical information disconnected from the reality they experienced. In an interview, when Clay asked his youth co-researcher, Jonae, an African American senior who attended her city's last chance high school, what she had learned in her social studies classes about their city, Jonae responded, “Hmm ... that history repeats itself.” Pressed to explain, she paused for a moment and then continued, “Let me think ... Like, back in the day, there was- there's a lot of fighting ... like with the Revolutionary War and stuff like that, they do a lot of fighting ... ” Jonae's response was typical; many young people stopped short at describing something they vaguely remembered being taught about either George Washington, a Revolutionary War battle, or a local monument in remembrance of this battle. Some did not recall anything at all, such as Ebony, a Black youth researcher in Clay's study

attending a traditional public high school who reported that she had learned “nothing” in social studies about the city in which she lived.

Like *Ebony*, many young people across Clay and Rubin’s studies were blunt in their assessment of the lack of relevance of this historical content. Bennie, from Rubin’s second study, told a similar tale. In his U.S. history class, he explained, “we talked about things that happened like 13,000 years ago, that don’t got nothing to do with today.” Kumar, a high school junior in Clay’s study who attended the city’s most lauded charter school, when asked in an interview what he remembered from social studies, replied, “nothing, to be honest.” After reflecting a moment he continued, “I know, um, there was a battle here, with George Washington, umm ... Downtown, I think there was like a building there and they camped in there or something like that. Umm, not much in school, to be honest.” Angling to offer a contextually relevant educational experience, teachers introduced students to this bit of local history; however, students relayed that the information did not serve to connect the past to the present in a way that helped the students to make sense of how historical processes shaped the city in which they currently lived.

Some young people expressed outrage at the perceived narrowness with which topics of racial importance were engaged in school. After Kumar initiated a particularly impassioned dialogue about slavery in an interview, Clay queried, “And school doesn’t talk to you about any of that stuff?” “No, and I’m tired of it! Every time we learn about history, we’re barely talking about Black people unless we’re talking about slavery!” he exclaimed. “You hear the same people: Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, those type of people. We know about them. It’s a lot of things that we don’t know about!” Kumar decried the redundancy of the education related to Black people that he experienced in his school-based education. The frustration with the lack of effort around these topics in school expressed by Kumar and others points to these young people’s desire for an education that engaged them in learning about race and community in critical ways that were relevant to their lives.

Beyond the classroom content, Black and Latinx juniors and seniors at the urban school in Rubin’s second study described in interviews a pedagogy that reflected decades of social studies research on the rote character of instruction. “All we did was watch movies, hand out dittos,” said Omar. Narciso, from the same school, described his past social studies classes as “teachers just give you the book, read out of it, do the work, that’s it.” Hope, put a finer point on it, proclaiming “The teachers don’t teach ... they’ll give us a worksheet and we’ll have to read it and then just answer the questions.” “All we did was watch movies, handouts, dittos,” remarked Juan.

Across these examples, students highlighted their frustrations and disconnection with their school-based learning experiences, describing a longstanding pattern in civics and history classrooms of not engaging socioeconomically marginalized students in learning that would help them to understand the structural underpinnings of their lives (Loewen, 2007). As Loewen wrote, “[p]oor and working-class children usually cannot identify the cause of their alienation, [and] history often turns them off because it justifies rather than explains the present” (p. 218). Learning about the roots of structural inequality can be deeply illuminating. Loewen noted that “[w]hen my students from non-affluent backgrounds learn about the class system, they find the experience liberating” (p. 211).

Consistent with Loewen’s description, when Clay’s co-researchers were exposed to a YPAR curriculum that spoke directly to their own lives and that endeavored to unpack

the layers of policies and social processes that shaped their community, they expressed both intense disappointment and vested interest. After a YPAR session in which Clay facilitated a lesson about the ways that past and present housing policies and practices shaped contemporary economic struggles in youth researchers' community, Kumar elaborated on his frustrations with the limits of his previous school-based education. In school, Kumar explained, students were not learning "about themselves ... [or] [w]hat's going on around them." Pressing for detail, Clay asked "What sorts of things do you feel like school didn't teach you that you were able to learn outside of school?" "[About] [m]yself," Kumar reiterated. "Because Black people, we have so much history. We don't know that though. We don't know that." Clay's lesson on how redlining, Federal Housing Administration mortgage subsidies, White flight, and racialized exclusion from suburban development shaped Kumar's own community had provoked Kumar's outrage over this history and its absence from his formal education. He continued, "This week that you've been teaching this, I'm like, things are really starting to click. It makes sense. They really did set that stuff up. But you won't learn that in school."

Kumar's critique challenged liberal framings of a government "by the people and for the people." By noting that "they really did set that stuff up," he assigned the government a new identity, that of saboteur. His comments indicted his school-based civic education; he felt that school would not teach content that might lead him or his peers to draw this kind of conclusion about government. Kumar expressed the need for a critical, contextually relevant education to help him and his peers see the connections between historical events and policies and the present realities of urban and Black life. Working with youth researchers for over a year revealed the extent to which gaps in their historical knowledge limited their ability to understand the present structural conditions of their community.

Opportunities in civics classrooms to engage in dynamic and rigorous learning are often missing from Black and Latinx students' formal education, which has been described as a "civic opportunity gap"—a lack of access to high quality civic educational practices for young people in underserved settings (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2012). The above comments from young people, however, point to a deficit in civic learning opportunities that go beyond the documented gap between the forms of instruction available to students in low-income communities and those available to their peers in higher-income communities. Not only were students given less engaging and interactive civic learning opportunities, they were also not given the tools with which to make sense of the inequalities surrounding them. In addition to preventing students from understanding their social reality, as Loewen (2007) pointed out, this kind of classroom learning is complicit to the reproduction of structural inequity as it denies marginalized people's access to the kind of knowledge that might help them pursue actions for transformative justice on their own behalf.

Civics lessons from youth inquiry

Despite what they felt was the absence of critical, contextually relevant civics in their school-based education, the youth researchers in Clay's project often took it upon themselves to explore topics related to race/ism, inequality, and their community, drawing on a variety of sources to make sense of their experiences. Young people's commitment to pursuing these topics on their own confounds notions that this group is civically apathetic. Although they felt that their classroom-based learning did not include critical examination

of these areas, several young people demonstrated important observations about societal racism and power, as well as keen insights about community and Black American history. They cited out-of-school resources, including “Tumblr pages,” “Twitter,” and “grandparents” as their sources on these topics rather than school-based history and social studies education.

Jonae in Clay’s research group emphasized the importance of out-of-school experiences in her knowledge of her community’s trajectory. Jonae was the fourth generation in her family to have lived in her city. In an interview, she recalled conversations with her grandfather about how the city had changed, recalling him expressing that,

... [the city] was a family before. Like everybody was for everybody. Like we didn’t really have the problem like [the] East [side] don’t like [the] West [side], we didn’t have those- well they didn’t have those problems before.

Her grandparents also played a pivotal role in her knowledge about the Civil Rights Movement. She explained, “... my grandma taught me too because my grandma was alive then and so was my grandpa. And my grandma, she marched in [this city],” asserting that her grandparents were the real authorities on the local history of the movement. The narratives and oral histories of community elders and family members are a critical part of learning for social change (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008). The historical insights offered by her grandparents were compelling to Jonae and, interestingly, convey somewhat dissonant realities. On one hand, Jonae’s grandfather describes a community of relative harmony compared to current neighborhood fragmentation, and on the other hand, Jonae described her grandmother marching for civil rights in their city. Like other northeastern cities, Milton has a history of racial segregation (e.g., separate YMCAs for Black and White people) and experienced deindustrialization, White flight, and redlining throughout the 20th century, leaving Black families particularly devastated.

Other youth researchers in Clay’s study expressed the importance of critically relevant local history, pointing to the primacy of out-of-school experiences in shaping their understandings. For example, throughout her time in the action research group, Ebony would sporadically share knowledge she had acquired through her own studies. Making note of the absence of a contextually relevant civics education at school during an interview, Ebony underscored the fact that her learning did not stop there: “I learned stuff actually. I learned stuff out of school but they never taught us anything about [this city] in school.” When asked what she learned, Ebony replied,

Well I knew we had riots and stuff in the city. I learned all the history and background behind [this city]—I learned that, but I had to learn it out of school, as in I actually had to go and look for it, instead of them going and teaching it to us.

Although the contentious past of her city was left unexplored in Ebony’s formal schooling, she yearned for this knowledge and filled in the gaps on her own.

Kumar also described how he drew upon out-of-school resources for learning that he found both critical and relevant. In a particularly impassioned moment, he listed a number of the absences from his school-based history education related to the transatlantic slave trade and the African diaspora more broadly. While expressing his grievance in relation to the overly sanitized and redundant account of that past he was taught in

school, he described the process of “slave seasoning” as the kind of critical historical information often omitted in school. He explained,

... Because, they brought us over here, then what they did was they took the strongest man in the tribe, then they totally ripped him apart! When [they] rip the strongest man apart in your tribe, what makes you think he can't do it to you? They're not going to fight!

When Clay asked where he learned this information, Kumar responded, “ ... [S]ome things I do look up myself. When I go home, I don't do nothing but I take a nap and then I research. I'm not lying. I research. I really do.” Explaining why he engaged in research, he continued, “I look deep into that stuff because it's me. It's a part of me.”

Like Kumar, other youth participatory action researchers pursued topics they found both critical and interesting, oftentimes using the Internet as a vehicle for research. Selena, an action researcher who demonstrated significant insight about race/racism and inequality, indicated the centrality of out-of-school experiences, primarily the Internet and social media resources, toward informing her politics. Selena had developed a description of racism that was attentive to power relations in society. As she explained, “Racism” [is] like when you oppress an entire race. Maybe look down on them.” She paused and then continued, “I don't think Black people can be racist or Latina people or any other person other than White because we can't oppress them. They are the ones in power.” When asked where her information about race and racism came from, Selena replied, “The Internet.” She explained, “Yeah, but not just ... just browsing. The news articles on the Internet and the articles from journalists who are there that don't ... that aren't really popular, so they have no reason to lie.” Elaborating further on her Internet source, she shared,

Well, I talk to a lot of people about [these topics]. I have this chat on the Internet. It's just like ... people who want to talk to me about what's going on around them and how they react to the stuff. How they feel about all these kinds of things.

By curating critically relevant discussions online, Selena created her own space for learning and sharing, a space within which she cultivated a structural understanding of racism.

Research demonstrates that this kind of learning and sharing via social media by more civically-engaged youth can draw in other youth who may not be as engaged in ways that can be both personally and socially transformative (e.g., Fullman, 2017; Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd, 2017). Selena also appeared to have her own system by which she ensured the validity of online content about race and racism, explaining that she got her information from “journalists who are there that ... aren't really popular” which she argued gave them “no reason to lie.”

On another occasion during a group discussion in the YPAR group, when asked to elaborate on some feelings she described related to White social power, Selena wove in a description of a Tumblr post that had helped to shape her perspective on White privilege. She shared,

I don't think they really think about themselves. It's just, like, privilege. I read something ... how a White man was in a group, it was like a feminist group. A White woman and a Black woman were talking about feminism. The White woman was like, “Oh, women are all the same. We all feel the same discrimination.” The Black woman was like, “Oh really? What do you see when you look in the mirror?” The White woman was like, “I see a woman.” The Black woman was like, “Oh, I see a *Black* woman when I look in the mirror.” They ask the White man, he was middle class ... like the average person, “What does he see when he looks

in the mirror?” He’s like, “I see a person. I see a human being.” That’s what privilege does to you. You don’t really see yourself like that.

Selena’s description of the video offers an interesting example of the way that social power and social identity (e.g., intersectional identity) shape how individuals understand their position in the world relative to other people and groups. This video, along with other out-of-school resources, shaped Selena’s perspective on White privilege.

When Clay asked Selena if she went “searching for this kind of stuff” online, she responded,

No, I just follow a bunch of people, like my friends, like good people. Yeah. I follow them on Twitter. I don’t really go on Facebook a lot. Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram. I have a few friends I meet, like in person, but other than that it’s just all online. I group chat, and we would talk about it, I would show them videos and stuff.

As with the youth in Clay’s study, researchers have found that young people are increasingly accessing and disseminating political content on social media and other online platforms (e.g., Fullman, 2017; Marchi & Clark, 2019). For example, working-class (mostly) immigrant youth in Marchi and Clark (2019) study used social media as a vehicle of civic engagement, sharing, discussing, and learning about environmental problems affecting their community and translating their online activities into actions that ultimately helped shape local policy by expanding a local bike path.

Thus, the young people who participated in these research projects developed their understandings of the meaning and enactment of citizenship through the interlocking civics lessons delivered by society, school, and their own inquiry efforts. Youth researchers’ experiences of disenfranchisement and injustice in relation to mainstream civic institutions and processes were compounded by classroom presentations of history and current events that did little to illuminate and contextualize these civic experiences. Their own explorations of meaningful content via social media, family, and other forms of research was, in a sense, a third form of a civics lesson, one that offered the possibility for youths’ development of critical, relevant understandings of their civic experiences and that might be built upon and enhanced through the use of thoughtful educational practices. The following section explores the implications of these findings for civic education.

Critically relevant civics

Our conceptualization of critically relevant civics emerged from our data analysis and findings related to students’ views on banal civics approaches and findings related to students’ own searches for richer civic learning opportunities that better reflected their lived experiences. Although CRC embraces many of the tenets of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies, approaches to teaching that reflect a deep commitment on the part of teachers and schools to caring for and supporting marginalized Black and Brown youth’s academic and socio-political development and an investment in sustaining their cultural practices, heritages, and languages (Howard, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), we recognize that “culture,” like “diversity and inclusion,” can both be used and interpreted nebulously (Clay, 2019). At times, leveragings of “culture” have aided in rhetorically deracializing the race-specific concerns of marginalized groups, providing cover for institutions and organizations that seek to placate by engaging in recognition politics devoid of any structural change (Coulthard, 2014). For this

reason, CRC also incorporates critiques of liberalism and colorblindness (i.e., color-evasiveness) drawn from Critical Race Theory (CRT), including CRT's central principle, that racism is normative and structural rather than aberrant or isolated (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Finally, CRC draws on critical pedagogy (e.g., Dunacan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970/2005), positioning education as a liberatory practice that can build critical consciousness and contribute to transformative social change.

Not unlike other scholars who have called for increased attention to young people's social and political realities and a commitment to social action in civics education (e.g., Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007), CRC builds on these rich theories and empirical signposts, offering a set of precepts to guide civics instruction. Traditional civics education reflects liberal-democratic content, approaches, and learning objectives that position a White middle-class lived experience and relationship to the state as normative. CRC, as a response to and critique of this approach, centralizes the civic disjuncture and state antagonism often experienced by youth of color in poor neighborhoods as an essential component of their citizenship.

CRC is based on the assumption that young people from marginalized communities "have political knowledge and expertise that must be acknowledged, respected, and examined in civics classrooms" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 6). This understanding, along with the exploration of how power and oppression operate in society and an emphasis on centering and amplifying youth voice, are key to CRC. Our rendering of a CRC approach is grounded in the following four precepts:

- Unjust encounters with the state are normative for people living in poor, racially segregated (often Black and Latinx) communities.
- Inequality is structural, historically rooted, and adaptable to reform; therefore, it must be closely studied to understand how the past has given shape to the present.
- A truly public education must provide young people with the tools to examine, explain, and change the political, social, cultural, and material forces that shape inequalities in their lives, communities, and the broader world.
- Students have legitimate knowledge, interests, and concerns as citizens (however precarious that citizenship may be) that should play a central role in curriculum design and lesson development.

These four precepts offer a roadmap for developing civic education practices that respect the complexity of today's political environment for youth in community contexts marked by racial segregation and economic disinvestment. As Choctaw/Cherokee scholar Frances Rains (2003) wrote, "The dilemma is how to teach about 'core values' such as 'freedom,' 'liberty' and 'justice for all' in a country that has a continuing legacy of oppression and intimidation within its own boundaries" (p. 200). Heeding Rains's words as a call to respond to this dilemma, CRC interprets young people's reflections on their civic learning in both their communities and their classrooms to point us in the direction of reliable answers.

Conclusion: Reflections on critically relevant civics practice

This article corroborates what many scholars, parents, and Black and Latinx youth have long reported: that youth of color feel that they are subject to rote, uncritical, and irrelevant pedagogical renderings of civics and history education. In communities

historically shaped by processes of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, police repression, lack of access to equitable housing, jobs, and labor-rights, young people find very little of this content reflected in their school-based learning. These “civics lessons” indicate the need to move beyond the aim of closing the “civic opportunity gap” (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levine, 2009) and toward a more relevant, critical—even transgressive—approach to civic learning in school.

While traditional civics content may address some areas relevant to young people’s lives, it is limited in scope and encumbered by a liberal-democratic bias. However, youth take part in new media platforms, speak with elders, and conduct their own research to make sense of their lived civic experiences, including complicated issues of racial inequality. While youth-directed inquiry is certainly beneficial, this research suggests that young people also require support in navigating and evaluating complex, dissonant, and often-unvetted information. Critical, youth-led inquiry in after-school and out-of-school contexts has many advocates (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright & James, 2002; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). Findings from this study suggest that civics classrooms would do well to harness young people’s out-of-school inquiries and build on them to support a critically relevant civics education. This approach is in line with the National Council for the Social Studies’ (2013) *C3 Framework*, which places inquiry at the heart of social studies instruction.

Historical, social, and economic inequalities and patterns of racialized injustice continue to mark U.S. society, providing powerful “civics lessons” about the nature of democracy and justice for youth from marginalized communities. These lessons are often compounded by school-based civic education in which youth facing the most conflict and ambiguity in their relationship to citizenship tend to receive the most traditional and irrelevant civic instruction. By shying away from engaging marginalized youth in issues that are politically and contextually relevant to them, schools miss an opportunity to support young people in developing knowledge and skills that might allow them to analyze and challenge the institutional structures that have facilitated and normalized their civic disenfranchisement.

It is critical that youth be able to draw on these important narratives in their school-based civic learning and that they are armed with tools to help them examine and complicate narratives of the past. While online social platforms like Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram can be an important resource for developing critical analytic capacities and networks of people to share information, they should not have to be a substitute for meaningful school-based civic education. Despite the usefulness of online platforms, scholars note that social media has its limitations and is not a substitute for in-person civic and political engagement (Evans, 2013; Marchi & Clark, 2019; Shirky, 2011), as it does not replace the need for critical education and mentorship that researchers and youth themselves find to be a critical component of young people’s civic and political development (Fullman, 2017).

Supporting youth in developing methods to verify the legitimacy, usefulness, and robustness of their sources is a critical task in civic education (Woodson, 2015), one that schools must take seriously if they are to offer an education that is critically relevant. Drawing on resources such as the video Selena mentioned that shaped her perspective on White privilege may support a school-based civic education that youth from marginalized

communities find critical and relevant. Examining these resources in the classroom is also a way for instructors to engage young people in conversations about the value of certain kinds of sources and to unpack topics that address how social identity may inform civic behavior.

CRC educational practices, we imagine, are those that push instruction beyond the facade of political objectivity that is characteristic of many social studies classrooms to engaging youth in an exploration of *the civically taboo*. Ayers and Ayers (2011) described a transgressive and imaginative pedagogy in what they call *teaching the taboo*. They define the taboo as,

... something beyond the formal or the legal—indeed, wherever we uncover the illicit or the forbidden, the unbridled or the unruly, anything that threatens to throw open the gates to tumultuous wild anarchy here we’ll likely find the taboo, greeting us with open arms and, we imagine, a lip-smacking leer” (p. xii).

It is from this formulation of “taboo” that we envision what a CRC practice might look like. An exploration of the civically taboo in school makes room for interrogating taken-for-granted liberal-democratic ideals, such as the value of electoral politics for social change, the legitimacy of U.S. meritocracy, the stability of capitalism, and how local policy, social power dynamics, race, and gender shape students’ lives and communities. In this way, a CRC education can open the possibility that what is typically understood as politically neutral civic education in American schooling could also be seen as a predilection toward uncritical patriotism and a belief in the sovereignty of markets.

Ayers and Ayers (2011) wrote, “The best teaching encourages students to develop the capacity to name the world for themselves, to identify the obstacles to their full humanity, and the courage to act upon whatever the known demands” (p. 11). Findings from this study reveal that young people are already locating and creating opportunities to engage in critical and meaningful civic and political learning in the absence of school-based opportunities. A CRC education in this context is one that invites these out-of-school, informal civics lessons into the classroom to be explored (Cohen et al., 2018). Young people respond powerfully to calls for engagement based on recognition and critical analysis of injustice that directly impacts both their own communities and those with historically and politically aligned interests and experiences. Educators must also facilitate opportunities within their classrooms for students to analyze and grapple with the racial injustices they see around them, moving toward an education that is both critical and relevant.

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