

Aware, Complacent, Discouraged, Empowered: Students' Diverse Civic Identities

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Abstract

*Based on a qualitative study of civic discourse in four distinct school settings, this article describes how students' **civic identities**—the sense of who one is as an American citizen—are rooted in their experiences in particular schools and communities. Students' developing civic identities vary from **aware and empowered** to **complacent and discouraged**, depending on their experiences both **in** and **out of** school. A civic education that taps into these experiences may be successful at creating a more active, engaged citizenry. This article describes a new understanding of youth civic identity and a problem-posing approach to civic education.*

Introduction

In an urban middle school social studies class, students engage in a lively discussion of the Pledge of Allegiance.

- Amber¹: WE [loudly] are the one nation, under God--One nation.*
- Jessica: When the Pledge of Allegiance says "under God," it can't actually say that and expect people to pledge allegiance to the flag because there's other races that really don't **BELIEVE** in God. So if you don't believe in God, why would you pledge allegiance to the flag that states, "under God?" You won't...it's...*
- Angelica: Well, me and her [referring to another student] were discussing. She said that it's not one nation because of segre..., like we had segregation, all this stuff, all this hate. But you're not pledging to the people **IN** America, you're pledging **To AMERICA** itself.*

This brief snippet of classroom conversation displays students' interest **in** and engagement **with** complex civic questions. Who is the "one nation" invoked in the Pledge? Does our nation's history of segregation and "all this hate" provide a challenge to this notion? Can all Americans be expected to agree to a pledge that invokes belief in a deity? What about those "other races" who don't believe in God; can they be expected to make the same pledge?

Although quantitative measures of civic attainment consistently rank low-income African American and Latino students behind their white and more affluent peers, Amber, Jessica, Angelica, and their classmates—African American and Latino eighth-grade students at a middle school in a low income urban area—energetically pursued such questions for over two hours, leaving the room reluctantly and still talking. Current measures of civic knowledge and engagement are unable to capture this whole-hearted engagement with complex civic issues;

however, much of the classroom-based civic education found in our schools today fails to inspire it.

In this article I describe how students' *civic identities*—the sense of who one is as an American citizen—are rooted in their experiences in particular schools and communities. A civic education that taps into these experiences may be successful at creating a more active, engaged citizenry. This new understanding of youth civic identity and a problem-posing approach to civic education that grows out of it are both described below.

Research on Youth Civic Learning and Engagement

Youth civic learning and engagement have long been studied through statistical analysis of large, national data sets. Thousands of students have been surveyed about their civic awareness with questions that test their knowledge concerning the workings of national, state, and local levels of government as well as their civic engagement through questions quantifying indicators like newspaper readership and intent to vote.

This research reveals troubling differences in young people's civic engagement by race, social class, and educational background. 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 (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001; *Highlights*, 2001; Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazer, 1998; Niemi & Junn, 1998). Yet these statistics do not capture what many other researchers have noted: Urban youth are frequently passionately concerned with civic issues (e.g., Fine, Torre, Burns, & Payne, in press; Jackson, Gilmore, Bedolla, Jimenez, Flores, Espinoza, & Perez, 2004-2005; Morrell, 2004).

Part of the problem may be that much of current research is based on adult-devised understandings of what is necessary to participate in civic life. These studies can quantify what large numbers of students *do* and *do not* know about civic life in the United States, but they reveal little about how students themselves define, experience, and understand civic life. A new approach is needed to understand the civic experiences of diverse students and how they relate to civic learning.

A Different Approach: Understanding Civic Identity Development

This article takes a different approach. By examining what young people do know about civic life from their daily experiences as citizens, rather than what they do not know, it builds on the work of researchers who argue that larger social forces affect young people's emerging senses of themselves as civic beings (i.e., Bhavnani, 1991; Ginwright, & James, 2002; Hart & Atkins, 2002; Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003; Rippberger & Staudt, 2003; Rubin, in press; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

This research explores students' civic identities. Identity, as described by Nasir and Saxe (2003), is defined "not as purely essentialist properties of a static self, but rather as multifaceted and dynamic as people position themselves and are positioned in relation to varied social practices" (p. 17). The present study considers how students' daily experiences in a society marked by racial and socioeconomic inequalities become part of their evolving understandings of themselves as citizens. This study reframes the idea that civic knowledge and learning is something that is (or is not) attained, making a shift to the notion that "civic identity" (Youniss,

McLellan, & Yates, 1997) is constructed or developed amid particular structures and practices (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). It is designed to investigate diverse students' senses of their relative value and importance within U.S. civic institutions and their beliefs in their abilities to affect the system.

Methodology: An Interpretive Framework for Exploring Civic Identity

The study was grounded in both the interpretive and critical research paradigms. The interpretive perspective highlights the socially constructed and locally negotiated nature of experience, while the critical research paradigm is rooted in a concern with how larger structures of inequality frame the possibilities of individuals and groups with the least power (Mehan, 1992; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The merger of these two perspectives provides a theoretical framework from which to analyze varied meanings of civic life for diverse participants who are situated within broader school and societal patterns of racial and socioeconomic inequality. The study method was also designed to elicit perspectives of a varied group of students in order to better understand the nature of diverse students' civic identities and the roles that formal civic education played and could play in the development of these identities.

To gain a perspective on civic identity that was more inclusive of students' school and community experiences, we² engaged students at four public schools in open-ended discussions of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights in relation to their daily lives; we followed up by interviewing students from each school. The four schools included the following: a middle school located in a poor, urban area serving an African American and Latino student body; a high school in an affluent, suburban area serving a largely white student body; a middle school in a working class suburb with a diverse student population including many children of immigrants, and a high school located in a racially and socioeconomically diverse town largely serving an African American and white student body. Over 80 students participated in the 2 in-class seminars, and 20 students, 5 from each school site, took part in hour-long interviews.

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

A Range of Civic Identities

The classroom-based, seminar-style discussions of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights along with the student interviews revealed a range of civic identities. In these sessions, students described daily experiences that varied from being completely consistent with ideals expressed in key civic texts to completely at odds with them. Students also expressed views of citizenship that ranged from a belief that good citizens were active change-makers to the idea that compliance was the essential duty of a citizen and dissent was unpatriotic. The diversity of

the school settings, the curriculum, and the pedagogy of the students’ social studies classrooms appeared to influence students’ emerging civic identities.

Figure 1 organizes the two dimensions explained above (civic experiences consistent or at odds with civic ideals and active or passive attitudes toward civic participation) into a grid, resulting in the range of civic identities labeled as follows: aware, complacent, discouraged, and empowered.

Figure 1:

A Range of Civic Identities

	Daily Experiences Consistent with Civic Ideals...or At Odds with Them	
Believes a good citizen is active or passive	AWARE	EMPOWERED
	COMPLACENT	DISCOURAGED

Aware

Aware students had not personally experienced discrimination (“I don’t feel like I am going to be arrested because I look a certain way or because I said a certain thing”), yet they expressed awareness of inequalities and a desire to work for change. As one student commented,

I am not like “down with the government” or anything. But I know that I am more aware of some social injustices...I know that since I am a citizen I can do something about it.

Although the life experiences of aware students meshed with learned civic ideals, these students were conscious that this was not the case for all Americans and were concerned about this situation.

These students attributed their awareness to school-based discussions and activities as well as family influences. Students at the racially and socioeconomically diverse high school in the study frequently participated in discussions about social injustice and civic action. One student, when asked where he had learned about social injustice and how to combat it, explained that his teachers “have been pounding it into my head since elementary school.” Others spoke of in-class discussions about racism, projects to involve students in civic action, and curricular units on social justice movements as sources for their thinking about civic issues.

Complacent

Similar to the *aware* students, *complacent* students experienced a meshing of the ideals and realities of life in the United States. Unlike their aware peers, however, these students expressed a rather passive attitude toward civic participation. One student in a racially and socioeconomically homogeneous school, located in a predominantly white suburban area, described a good citizen as a person who lived his or her life “to the fullest in the nation, abiding by laws...just enjoying being in the place, not worrying completely about politics or what’s concerning the world outside.”

These students generalized from their own experiences of having an ongoing correspondence between national ideals and their daily lives, reaching the conclusion that life in the United States was fair for everyone; as they felt satisfied with the status quo, they did not see any need to work for change and criticized those who did for “making a big deal out of nothing.” Aspects of the homogeneous, suburban school context appeared to foster the development of this identity. In contrast to aware students, these complacent students rarely came into contact with peers whose life circumstances differed from their own, and their social studies class did little to challenge their beliefs that the system was working well for everyone.

Discouraged

Discouraged students experienced a gap between civic ideals and realities of their daily lives and were not optimistic about using civic action to address these gaps. These students had experienced discrimination (“That lady followed us around the store”), rights violations (“Me and my brother were at home, and the cops bust in through the window and though the front door”), violence in their communities (“The way it is around here, if you wear the wrong color, you get hurt”), and connections to historical injustices (“I think we shouldn’t pledge to the flag because, like, we was in Africa and they brung us over here! So there is no reason why I should pledge for a flag”).

For these students, mainly from the low-income, urban middle school, such experiences were powerful daily reminders of the persistent inequalities of U.S. society that they felt could not be assuaged through civic action. As one student explained:

I feel I could do things, but I don’t feel it would make a difference because people are down on children, like we can’t really do anything...He [Martin Luther King] did a right thing, but other people who were against it did wrong, and I think it’s going to happen all over again.

Some students moved back and forth between discouraged and empowered identities, revealing mixed feelings about whether or not change was possible. However, certain classroom practices as well as family and community role models, seemed to nudge some students toward the more hopeful and engaged orientation as described below.

Empowered

Like their discouraged peers, *empowered* students had directly experienced the gap between civic ideals and realities. Yet these students remained passionate about the need to be civically

active and work for change. As one student commented, “If I find an opportunity for me to get my rights, I’m going to try and take it!”

Similar to aware students, empowered students described what they experienced in their social studies classes as pivotal to their understanding of their own rights and avenues for action. One student recounted learning about “freedom of speech, freedom of petition, freedom of the press, and [the illegality of] search and seizure” in her social studies class. Before that, she said, “I had no idea about the amendments...and about our rights that we do have and don’t have.” This change-oriented identity was found most commonly among students at the urban middle school in the study where the social studies teacher engaged students in simulations, discussions, and writing activities designed to connect course content to their lives and concerns.

What Does this Mean for Civic Education in the Classroom?

This is a new approach to understanding both civic identity and the problem of youth civic disengagement, with implications for school-based civics instruction. Across school settings, students in social studies classrooms in which they were encouraged to identify and explore civic problems appeared to develop more actively engaged civic identities. Most civics and government classes are not structured to take into account or build upon students’ varying experiences with civic life; instead, these teachers emphasize covering content through use of traditional pedagogies. Many educators choose to avoid controversial social and civic issues in their classrooms, and discussions like the one quoted at the beginning of this article are rare. If students’ civic orientations are shaped through their daily experiences within particular schools and communities and influenced by factors well beyond civics lessons and textbooks, then we are faced with a challenge.

A Problem-Posing Civic Education

Social studies educators, as well as other teachers, must begin to develop practices that encourage students to wrestle with the gaps between civic ideals and realities and consider how these gaps are unevenly distributed throughout our society. Instructional practices that engage youth in considering problematic aspects of U.S. civic society can benefit *all* students. Frank discussion of civic rights, processes, and social disparities can encourage a more active civic identity, empowering youth who have experienced a gap between civic ideals and realities and challenging students who have not experienced this gap to look beyond their immediate concerns. While such a “problem-posing” approach is nothing new (see Freire, 1970), its application to classroom-based civic education represents a departure from traditional models of civic education and research. The Principles of Problem-Posing Civic Education presented below can provide a framework for accomplishing this feat, and the Pledge Seminar sample lesson is an excellent way to begin this work in the classroom.

For the Teacher

Principles of Problem-Posing Civic Education

- *Civic education should build upon students’ own experiences with civic life, including daily experiences with civic institutions and their agents.* Researchers note that students who feel a gap between their daily civic experiences and what they are learning in school

will disconnect from civic education. Using such experiences as the jumping-off point for more general discussion of and learning about civic issues creates a critical connection between students' concerns and civic learning.

- *Civic education should provide opportunities for students to consider and discuss key issues and controversies in civic life.* Researchers point out that high school students are most engaged in civic education when they are considering civic problems and controversies. Such activities can get students interested in and concerned with key problems in civic life and provide context for deeper learning.
- *Civic education should build students' discussion, analysis, critique, and research skills.* Research supports the idea that the ability to discuss, analyze, critique, and conduct research is critical for active democratic participation. These valuable intellectual skills benefit students in other areas as well.
- *Civic education should build students' knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a way that connects directly to their own concerns.* When students learn about their rights and responsibilities in a more relevant context, they are more likely to find this knowledge to be meaningful.

Lesson Plan: Pledge Seminar

This Pledge Seminar³ is an exciting way to encourage students to begin to explore their own civic experiences in relation to the civic ideals found in key texts. Along the way, students will be developing valuable analytical and discussion skills critical to meaningful civic participation. A video produced by Miller and Singleton (1997) and described by Parker (2001) contains an example of Pledge Seminar in a high school classroom. This lesson plan extends the idea and provides details that will be useful to teachers wishing to implement the lesson.

Objectives

- Students will be able to relate the Pledge of Allegiance to personal or community experiences of citizenship and *being an American*.
- Students will be able to analyze the text closely and articulate their analysis.
- Students will be able to listen to the ideas of others and build upon or respectfully question those ideas in an open-ended discussion format

Teaching Procedures

A. Preparing for the seminar

1. Arrange student desks into a circle or other discussion-friendly formation.
2. Distribute copies of the Pledge of Allegiance to each student.
3. Recite the pledge as a class.
4. Write for five minutes in response to the following prompt: To what are we pledging?
5. (Optional) Discuss the prompt quickly with partner.

B. Seminar

1. Explain the rules and procedures for the seminar:
 - a) Refer to the text and others' comments to move the discussion forward.
 - b) Wait for others to finish before you talk.
 - c) Critique ideas, not individuals.

2. Open the seminar with the question that students responded to earlier. Use new questions (some suggestions are provided below) to move the conversation along when necessary. Encourage reluctant students to speak. Keep teacher input to a minimum, only speaking up to move a topic along to get students to expand or clarify their thoughts or to supply missing perspectives.
3. After discussion is concluded, ask students to write their thoughts about the pledge: What is their opinion now about whether or not students should be required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance? Why or why not?

Suggested Questions for Seminar Leader

1. Do you recite the pledge? Why or why not? Should schools mandate that students recite the pledge daily?
2. Is there anything in the pledge to which you think someone might object?
3. Why does the pledge include the phrase “one nation”? What does this mean to you?
4. How are we “one nation”? How are we not?
5. Have you experienced the “liberty and justice for all” stated in the pledge?
6. Do you think all Americans experience it?
7. Does the pledge express commitment to an ideal or reflect the way things are?

Follow-Up/Extension Activities

1. Write a *position paper* the Pledge of Allegiance: Do you say it or not? Why? Should all students say it or not? Why?
2. Conduct *research* on the history of the pledge. What changes have been made to the pledge over time? Why were these changes made? What do the changes tell us about particular periods in United States history?
3. Create a *personal pledge* that you would like to recite each day.
4. Hold a classroom *debate* or *mock trial* on the recent legal controversy around reciting the pledge in public schools.

NCSS standards addressed through this lesson include as follows: Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Power, Authority, and Governance; Civic Ideals and Practices.

Notes

¹All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

²“We” includes a university-based researcher and four social studies teachers.

³For a useful description of the use of seminars in social studies classes, see Parker, 2001. For an example of students discussing the Pledge of Allegiance in a high school classroom, see the video that accompanies Miller & Singleton, 1997, mentioned in Parker, 2001. For an historical perspective on the pledge, see Bigelow, 1996.

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