

The first Research and Practice column was published in the January 2001 issue of *Social Education* under the thoughtful editorship of Walter C. Parker. Authors of the 35 articles published since then have shared some of the best research in social studies and its implications for teaching and learning. As the column's second editor, I look forward to inviting researchers to share their insights into complex issues confronting social studies educators today. In this column, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Peter Levine describe their research on the significance of controversial issues discussions in racially pluralistic schools.

—Patricia G. Avery, “Research and Practice” Editor

# Challenges and Opportunities for Discussion of Controversial Issues in Racially Pluralistic Schools

Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Peter Levine

As the American public starts to focus on the 2016 election, questions about whether “young people” (generally people who are under 30) really know enough to vote, and whether they will vote, often dominate the media discussion. It's important to know the answers to these questions because they affect our democracy. Indeed, young people have about as much civic knowledge as older adults do, and about half of young people will probably vote, as they have in the last 10 presidential elections. At the same time, this rather narrow view of young adults' civic engagement minimizes the diverse ways in which young people engage civically, such as youth activism and environmental stewardship, and overshadows a key issue that we must tackle as a field: How do we address the existing civic opportunity and knowledge gap by providing *all* students with high quality civic learning experiences, regardless of racial and economic backgrounds?<sup>1</sup>

Racial diversity is relevant to these questions because young people's civic knowledge and engagement differ greatly depending on their race and ethnicity and are also affected by the racial composition of their schools and communities. Already, 40 percent of young Americans are people of color, and that ratio will rise until whites become a minority.<sup>2</sup> Diversity has potential benefits for civic learning but also poses challenges. We will focus this article on how to maximize the advantages and address the challenges.

We recently published a study based on Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge data focusing on three major questions:<sup>3</sup>

1. To what extent do young Americans' opinions and issue priorities vary by racial background?
2. How does the racial heterogeneity of a school's student population

relate to the civic education and civic participation of young adults who attended that school?

3. What other factors may influence students' political participation as young adults?

In this article, we summarize key findings from the study and discuss some implications for policymakers, professional development, and educators.

## **The Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge Study**

Immediately following the 2012 general election, the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge conducted a national survey with support from the Spencer Foundation of 4,483 American citizens between 18 and 24 years of age. The Commission was a bipartisan group of distinguished scholarly experts from diverse disciplines and institutions, and it was convened by The Center for Information and Research on Civic

Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) to study aspects of young people's political engagement as it relates to their experiences with high school civics curriculum, school climate, peer norms, and exposure to democratic practices at home and in extracurricular activities. All surveys were conducted over the phone using random digit dialing and reflected today's youth population: two-thirds of the participants were from cell phone-only households. The sample of young people represented all 50 states and Washington, D.C., and closely resembled the general population of the United States in regard to gender, race, educational progress, and political ideology. For our study, we paid special attention to controversial issues discussion. This is one of six "proven practices," according to the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. Researchers find that teachers who welcome open classroom discussions promote young people's interest in politics and openness to multiple views.<sup>4</sup> We predicted that students who engaged in controversial issues discussions as part of their social studies coursework in high school would be more politically engaged as young adults. We tested this pattern for students from different types of high schools.

### *"Racially Pluralistic" Schools*

In our study, we focused on participants who had attended "racially pluralistic" high schools, for the reasons we discuss below. *Racially pluralistic schools* are defined by the lack of a predominant racial group. Any given person could be classified as attending a racially pluralistic school regardless of his or her own racial background, as long as there were more than two groups and no dominant group in the school. We used the term "racially pluralistic" to distinguish it from *mixed-raced schools* where there is a dominant majority (e.g., 80% Hispanic, 20% white). In order to identify young people who attended racially pluralistic schools, we relied on the survey participants' report of the racial composition at their high schools.

### **What We Found**

We found that attending a racially pluralistic high school was generally associated with lower levels of electoral engagement once the students graduated. However, we also found that if there were controversial issue discussions in civics classes in racially pluralistic schools, the discussions helped ameliorate that negative effect. Further, young people's political ideology and issue priorities varied greatly by racial background, indicating that racially pluralistic schools would in fact surround students with peers who hold different opinions about various issues.

When young people attended a high school that was racially pluralistic, they had less civic knowledge and were less civically and politically engaged than other young people who shared similar backgrounds and educational attainment, but attended schools that had a dominant racial group, regardless of their in-group/out-group status. Put another way, attending a racially pluralistic high school was a very strong predictor of lower levels of civic engagement, regardless of young people's own race, educational attainment, and family socioeconomic status. For example, we found that, on average, a young black person who attended high school as part of a minority group was more engaged than a young white person who attended a racially pluralistic high school. Our statistical analysis accounted for other aspects of a person's background, such as age, educational progress, political identification, and socioeconomic status. Yet, attending a racially pluralistic school remained as a negative predictor of later engagement.

### **Why Diverse Schools Tend to Reduce Civic Participation**

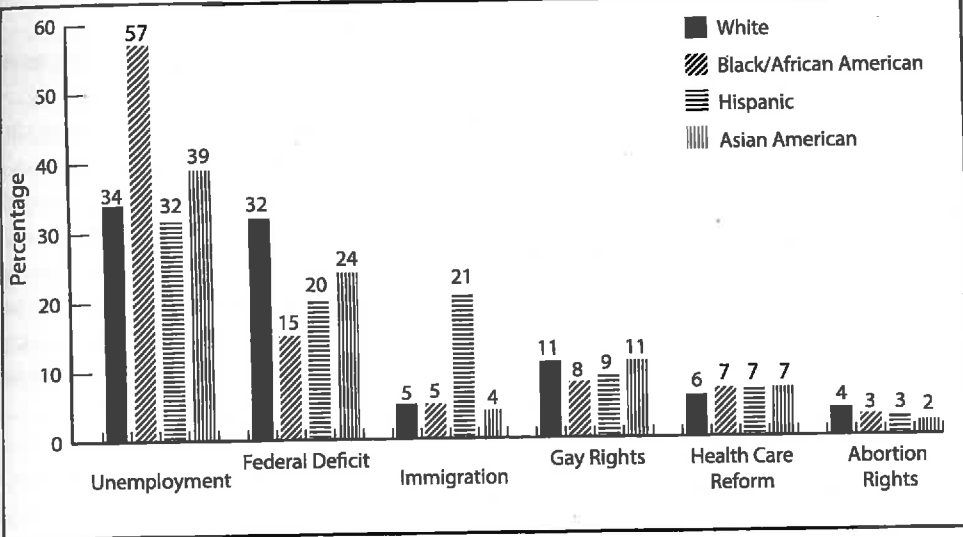
Our findings confirmed a host of previous studies that have found that people who are part of racially diverse communities and schools are less civically engaged than those who live in more homogeneous communities.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Hess and McAvoy documented that students who learned in politically

like-minded classrooms were more politically engaged as students, and later as young adults.<sup>6</sup>

We speculate that it is much harder to figure out what is "safe" to say in a racially pluralistic setting, and therefore, talking about politics carries a more serious social risk. Students in racially pluralistic contexts have to account for a complex mix of opinions and views and cannot easily identify how their own opinions would compare and contrast with the dominant position on any given issue; it is not easy to guess what the dominant viewpoint would be in each social setting. There is no predominant group that is likely to hold (or may be stereotypically perceived as likely to hold) a specific view. As a result, students in a racially pluralistic context may choose to avoid potentially controversial topics, such as politics, not knowing how their own opinions would be perceived by their peers.

Scholars have long pointed out that people are less likely to voice their opinion when that opinion is believed to support a minority position.<sup>7</sup> Thus, people who are in a social network that includes people holding opposing views face barriers to political discussion and civic participation.<sup>8</sup> According to Mutz, a setting where diverse opinions exist suppresses participation because first, hearing diverse opinions casts doubts in people's minds about their original position on an issue and second, people in a diverse setting have multiple stakeholders (i.e., friends from different social groups), making them want to avoid "ruffling anyone's feathers." The result is frequently silence or disengagement.

When we examine this phenomenon in our politically polarized world, the challenge is amplified. Our research confirmed that political views are deeply divided by race and gender among young people. For instance, CIRCLE's analysis of the 2012 and 2014 youth vote based on the exit polls revealed that youth support for a Democratic candidate varied greatly by race and gender.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, an analysis of the Commission survey



**Figure 1: Percent of Young Americans Choosing Each Issue as "Most Important" by Race**

Data from The Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge Youth Survey – percentages represent the proportions of respondents in each racial/ethnic category who chose each issue as "the most important." Percentages do not add up to 100% for each group because of "I don't know" and "other issues" responses in each group.

data (the data for this study) shows that there is great variation in how young people prioritize key policy issues by race. As shown in Figure 1, African American youth were more likely to emphasize unemployment as the most important issue while white youth were split between the federal deficit and unemployment equally. Hispanic youth, on the other hand, were four times as likely to choose immigration as the priority issue as any other group. As such, racial pluralism often means sharply divergent political views are present within the school.<sup>10</sup>

In racially pluralistic schools (which are also politically diverse, see Figure 1), all students may feel that they hold minority views because there is no one dominant group to ally with or push against. Teaching to a diverse student body has become, and will continue to be, the norm for educators because the current cohort of school-aged children represents the most racially diverse generation in the United States to date,<sup>11</sup> and increasingly, our students need to learn to work across differences in opinions and backgrounds, as they will no doubt go into a diverse workforce one day. We also found that a family environment that encourages discussion and accepts disagreements promotes political engagement for all young people, including those who attended racially pluralistic

schools. Involvement in clubs and groups that address social and political issues is also helpful.

### Discussions Help

Although, in general, attending a racially pluralistic school reduces political engagement, discussing controversial issues within those schools helps a lot. In fact, we found that the benefit of controversial issue discussions was quite large for the group of youth who attended racially pluralistic schools, and negligible for students who attended other types of schools.

A racially pluralistic school provides an unparalleled opportunity for intergroup dialogue that can deepen students' understanding of structural inequalities, and develop empathy and motivation to work across differences. Importantly, research has shown that courses with intergroup dialogue increase students' intent to take civic action in the future.<sup>12</sup>

It is quite possible that controversial issue discussions are better in schools that have many racial groups because the diversity of students' backgrounds and circumstances enriches conversations and causes a boost in student engagement. Another explanation is that controversial issue discussions matter more in racially pluralistic high schools because these students often lack other opportunities for political discussions and deliberations. For these students, an organized

discussion in a social studies classroom may have substantial benefits because they do not have similar discussions at home, in other classes, or in the school community.

Some studies find that racially diverse and politically pluralistic settings can enrich political efficacy as well as attitudes toward the out-groups, and that greater racial heterogeneity is associated with more political discussion, at least among younger people.<sup>13</sup> We suggest that these benefits accrue in diverse schools *when* teachers and other educators make sure that students discuss controversial issues.

### Forces Working against Discussions of Controversial Issues

That said, opportunities for students to grapple with diverse views in and outside of classrooms have decreased for several reasons.

First, some teachers anticipate and may experience pushback from parents and school administrators not to engage in discussions of controversial issues, even if teachers want to engage in conversations about social and political issues in diverse classrooms.<sup>14</sup> About one quarter of civics and American government teachers feel that they may receive criticism from parents for talking about politics and they may also be restricted by district leadership and school boards.<sup>15</sup>

Responding to our Civics and American Government Teacher survey, a teacher said:

My personal feelings are that students should be informed about what is going on with politics in this country. However, after the election in 2008, I had many parents upset with me for discussing and showing the election results and the inauguration in class. So, since then I have not talked about most issues and especially the differences between the Democrats and Republicans.

Second, although a majority of high school students report experiencing current events and discussions of controversial issues in social studies classes, evidence suggests that intensive and sustained opportunities for deliberation, such as classes that involve frequent (if not daily) discussion of current events, have diminished.<sup>16</sup> This is especially the case because of the pressure to prioritize language arts, math, and science curricula at the cost of social studies.<sup>17</sup> Previous studies found that discussions of social issues are rare, and when they do occur, they are more likely to occur in classrooms of privileged students.<sup>18</sup> Finally, we acknowledge that facilitating discussions of controversial issues is no easy task and in-depth training for this skill is not readily accessible. Gaining sufficient training and planning thoughtful discussions can mean more preparation time, something teachers may not have in this era of standardized testing and emphasis on attainment of rote facts. Furthermore, about half of the high school civics teachers we surveyed said that they had not been exposed to a course with sustained issues discussions when they were in college.<sup>19</sup> The same study also found that the amount of in-service training varies greatly among teachers, and helpful support for teachers learning to facilitate contentious discussions, such as mentoring and coaching, is exceedingly rare—less than one in five

civics teachers have access to mentoring and coaching support. While many professional development curricula for social studies teachers aim to increase their ability to engage students in discussions of controversial issues, helping to guide a diverse group of students through a complex and contentious issue discussion requires more sophisticated skills than encouraging students to express opinions.<sup>20</sup>

With all that said, we reiterate that controversial issues discussions in your social studies classroom is critical, especially in racially pluralistic schools, because students in such schools are least likely to experience political discussions at home or in their communities. For these students, class discussions about controversial public issues can increase the likelihood of later electoral engagement.

Findings from our study and many other studies suggest that schools can certainly promote civic development by providing a space for young people to exchange opinions, and develop their own civic and political identity. In some schools, there are many places to do that—in the lunchroom, in the hallway, and during a football game. But in others, before they express an opinion, students have to think about how their peers would react, whether their opinion is the “right” opinion, and how sharing their opinion could impact relationships.

## What Can and Should be Done?

### 1. Establish clear and supportive policies

It is a consistent and clear finding that civics, like other subject areas, maintains a type of educational inequality called the “civic opportunity gap,” with students of color, low-income students, and immigrant students having less access to high quality civic education experiences.<sup>21</sup> In our study, we found that students who attended racially pluralistic schools were also more likely to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds; as such, they also have to navigate more complex social contexts that can hamper

their civic development. For example, low-income schools are more likely to be under pressure to spend more time on test preparation than on activities such as classroom-based controversial issues discussions or other enriching civic education practices. As we stated above, the students in these schools are not likely to have as many opportunities to engage in conversations about controversial topics with their peers in other settings, because of the potential social cost.

Therefore, we need policies that would enable educators in our low-income and racially pluralistic schools to facilitate structured and well-planned controversial issues discussions on a regular basis. Clearly, a district policy that simply states that teachers should incorporate discussions of controversial issues into their classes is inadequate. It must be accompanied by administrative support for the development of teachers’ facilitation and management skills, especially for classrooms in which cross-race dialogues may happen, and as it is commonly the case, where the teacher may come from a different racial or socioeconomic background than the majority of the students in class. Leading productive and deliberative discussions is particularly challenging in the current era of political polarization.<sup>22</sup> Teachers must be supported by their supervisors, principals, districts, and parents to make professional judgments about what students should talk about in their classrooms.

### 2. Expand the availability of mentoring support and training at various stages of teachers’ careers

Teachers may not be fully prepared to lead discussions of current issues in social studies classrooms, and research suggests that this may be especially the case when teachers expect potential conflicts related to race.<sup>23</sup> On a positive note, the latest survey of professional development program providers indicates that increasing teachers’ capacity to encourage discussions of controversial issues is one of the top priorities for many profes-

sional development curricula.<sup>24</sup> However, little is known about how much preservice training for facilitating such discussions is occurring, and whether in-service or preservice training for leading discussions in racially diverse settings is effective. Because having a discussion on controversial issues in a racially pluralistic and ideologically diverse context carries more social risk, students may be reluctant to participate even if there are opportunities. It is likely more difficult for teachers to lead fruitful and effective discussions in a context where conflict may arise. Training resources should be developed to help teachers understand the social cost of discussing controversial issues for some students, and to take on current issues discussions when opportunities rise. Furthermore, because leading discussions of controversial issues in a racially pluralistic setting is a complex and ongoing learning task, we recommend getting informal and ongoing peer support for development of these skills (such as mentoring or peer learning community), in addition to formal professional development programs.

### 3. Consult resources on intergroup dialogue facilitation

Improving policies and expanding professional development opportunities are both important long-range goals. But readers may be left feeling as if there is not very much that can be done today to improve the quality of discussions in classrooms.

There are resources available for educators who are interested in honing their intergroup dialogue facilitation skills, such as a comprehensive guide (at [www.intergroupresources.com/](http://www.intergroupresources.com/)) from the Public Conversation Project and a tip sheet ("Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom," by Lee Warren) from the Harvard Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, our study found that extra-curricular activities that addressed a social or political issue in one way or another boosted later civic engagement, suggesting that creating other settings

where students can find peers who share their passions and feel safe to explore newly emerging political identities and opinions is another useful strategy. In fact, CIRCLE found that as a result of participating in Junior States of America (a club in over 500 high schools nationwide for students who are interested in local, national, and international issues

and leadership development), students reported they deeply valued hearing from students with different political perspectives. Another example is the Urban Debate League (UDL), which provides a space for students who may otherwise be left behind, academically and civically, to engage in research and debates about controversial issues.

## How to Promote Discussions of Issues in Racially Pluralistic Schools

The resources we introduce in this article also offer many suggestions for teachers who want to promote and manage discussions on controversial issues in racially pluralistic schools, but here are some recommendations drawn from experts on deliberation in schools.

Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess recommend selecting a discussion topic that can be expected to draw multiple perspectives from students and creating an open and structured opportunity to explore that topic.

As McAvoy and Hess acknowledge, deliberation can inadvertently favor privileged students who may be more comfortable expressing their views and listening to other opinions over students who are not accustomed to deliberation-style discussions. Teachers must therefore strive to embrace not only multiple opinions, but also multiple modes of expression (e.g., personal experiences, anecdotes, and diverse modes of speech), not just the kinds of communication that they are most comfortable with.

It is important that teachers not only understand how to choose the right issues and create an open and fair climate, but also learn about themselves and their identities when leading discussions in racially pluralistic classrooms. Knowing our own biases and how we react to certain topics and remarks will help modulate how we react to students' remarks and turn them into productive conversations. The Implicit Association Test (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>) is one example of a learning tool about implicit biases. Another is the Political Typology Quiz from The Pew Charitable Trusts ([www.people-press.org/quiz/political-typology/](http://www.people-press.org/quiz/political-typology/)).

Modeling empathy and understanding the reasons for students' contentious remarks can help the class take a step back and reflect on the sources of disagreements. For example, asking why a student made a controversial statement about a contentious topic like alleged police violence may help trigger a productive discussion about differences in perceptions and why these differences may arise. When the discussion is at a stand-still, the teacher can ask students what they might learn from this experience. Even if they do not reach a conclusion, students will be able to take a step back and reflect on the process.

Finally, teachers must model their willingness to grapple with challenging issues and difficult moments, because ignoring uncomfortable issues will send a message to students that they too should avoid difficult conversations about race. When students make remarks that others may take as offensive, teachers should consider the need for civility and potential harms to the other students as well as the value of free speech and candor. Difficult moments rarely have simple solutions, but teachers should display fairness and explicitly discuss conflicts between civility and free expression.

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Research on UDL consistently shows positive effects on students' civic commitment, as well as their academic performance and high school completion rate.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in addition to bringing discussions of controversial issues into their classrooms, it is critical that educators continue to support opportunities for out-of-classroom discussions of controversial issues by acting as mentors and advisors to student groups that address social and political issues. ●

#### Notes

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