

**Panel on the Social and Political Contexts of Civic Learning:**

**Civic Reasoning and Discourse amid Structural Inequality, Migration and Conflict**

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## Abstract

Young people live amid enduring patterns of social and economic inequality and injustice; they move within and across different national contexts; they make their homes amid or in the aftermath of violent conflict. Educational spaces—sites of the civic reasoning and discourse that is the focus of this NAE panel—are shaped by these broader realities. The social contexts committee of the NAE panel on civic reasoning and discourse explores the connections between the social and political contexts structuring youth experience globally and opportunities for and enactments of civic discourse and reasoning. In this paper we highlight three interwoven aspects of context that are underexplored in the traditional research on civic education - structural inequality, migration, and violence - to shine attention on the perspectives of young people whose civic encounters, histories, and practices may not be aligned with the content and approach of mainstream civic education. These experiences of civic disjuncture can lead to important critical perspectives on democratic practice, enriching civic discourse, reasoning and engagement. The report takes a global perspective, making use of comparison across settings to illuminate patterns in how civic discourse and reasoning vary within and across social and political contexts. This report first explores how injustice, inequality and conflict, both within countries and across borders, marks the contexts within which young people develop as citizens, shaping the content, nature, limits, and possibilities of civic discourse and reasoning. It then considers diverse forms of civic participation and promising, contextually informed practices, including activism, critical curricular approaches, youth participatory action research, and arts-based modalities. Finally, we draw out implications for civic reasoning and discourse.

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In the aftermath of

59 the murder of George Floyd, young people across the United States (U.S.) and the world were at  
60 the forefront of protests against racial violence and police brutality. As made visible in this  
61 photograph, young people engaged in civic and political discourse rooted in the connections  
62 between contemporary experiences of racial violence and injustice and the historic legacies  
63 continuing to underpin life in the U.S. today. In fact, as protests unfolded across the country

varied opinions about the very nature of civic discourse and action (e.g., toppling statues, disregarding curfews, and writing graffiti on public property) were tied to differing, contextually embedded understandings of national history. The contexts in which young people live and learn frame and shape their civic understandings, influencing the form and content of their civic discourse and action.

## **Introduction and Definition of Problem Space**

Young people, regardless of their race, ethnicity or socio-economic status, live amid enduring patterns of social and economic inequality and injustice, though depending on their positioning in their society they may respond differently (Shin, Freedman et al., in progress). Educational spaces - sites of the civic reasoning and discourse that is the focus of this NAE panel - are shaped by these broader realities. The social contexts committee of the NAE panel on civic reasoning and discourse explores the connections between the social and political contexts structuring youth experience in the U.S. and globally, and how those experiences relate to the opportunities for and enactments of civic discourse and reasoning in the U.S. In this paper we highlight three interwoven aspects of context that are underexplored in the traditional research on civic education—structural inequality, migration, and violence. The goal is to better understand how social and political contexts shape civic learning differentially. This understanding is necessary to develop meaningful classroom approaches to civic reasoning and dialogue.

This report first explores how inequalities, migration, and violence mark the contexts within which young people around the world develop as citizens and also shape the content, nature and limits of civic discourse and reasoning. It then considers diverse forms of civic participation and promising, contextually informed practices. Finally, it draws out implications for civic reasoning and discourse in the United States.

## **Putting Civic Reasoning and Discourse into Context**

Several decades of research illuminate how civic development takes place amid unequal access to resources and rights, informing varied experiences and perspectives, and creating differential connections to, motivations for, and approaches to participation in public life (e.g. Abu El-Haj, 2015; Banks, 2008, 2017; Bellino, 2017; Cohen, Kahne and Marshall, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Levinson, 2012; Rubin, 2007). In classrooms, students are often treated as unencumbered subjects who come to civic dialogue with the same histories and vested interests. These assumptions preclude authentic dialogue drawing on the rich civic understandings that young people develop through their varied community experiences. In what follows, we explore how inequality and injustice lie at the center of social and political life, contributing to experiences of civic “congruence” and “disjuncture” between what young people have “learned about the ideals of the United States...and their personal experiences as citizens” within particular social, economic, institutional, political, and historical contexts (Rubin, 2007, p. 458). The experience of civic disjuncture can lead to important, critical perspectives on democratic practice, as exemplified in the opening image of a young Black Lives Matter protester. Interventions aimed at enhancing the civic learning of young people - including those directed at civic discourse and reasoning - must be developed with an awareness of how these gaps, tensions, and opportunities for critical analysis and engagement shape youth civic experience and development.

In this section we examine three key dimensions of the contexts framing youth experiences with civic life. First, we explore the ways that structural inequalities shape and constrain the varied educative settings in which children and youth learn citizenship. Historically rooted social differences, (e.g. race/ethnicity or socioeconomic class) structure differential

opportunities, outcomes, and experiences with social and political life, including educational experiences. Second, we examine how increased global migration is profoundly reshaping family, community, and schools in the United States, while broadening young people's civic identities and the communities in which they are positioned as civic actors. Migrants fleeing conditions of economic and societal precarity experience multiple disjunctures, as they are often unable to access rights or experience structural inclusion in the countries in which they seek asylum—what Brysk and Shafir (2004) call the “citizenship gap.” Moreover, through processes of migration, people develop multilayered and nuanced affiliations across nation-states (Yuval-Davis, 2011). This citizenship gap and these transnational affiliations frame the citizenship identities of many young people, in the U.S. as well as in other countries around the world. Finally, we discuss violent conflict as both a consequence of, and a contributor to, the disruption of civic life. Young people growing up in contexts of violent conflict experience extreme civic disjuncture. At the same time, in post conflict societies, civic education is promoted as a high stakes activity aimed at repairing the social and political fabric, with implications for individual citizens and democratic institutions and governance. Global comparisons from settings of extreme conflict and that examine educational responses in different phases of conflict (e.g., latent conflict, acute conflict, and post-conflict) are useful in shedding light on possible approaches to thinking about violence and its potential effects within the United States.

In what follows, we argue that these three critical, consequential and intersecting dimensions of context—*structural inequality, migration, and violence*—undergird contemporary citizenship in the U.S. and in many countries around the world, fundamentally shaping the content and nature of young people's civic discourse and reasoning.

### ***Structural Inequality***

Structural inequalities are part of young peoples’ evolving understandings of themselves as citizens—a lived, daily civics central to learning and identity (Cohen, Kahne, & Marshall, 2018; Rubin, 2007, 2010). It is beyond the scope of this paper to address all of the dimensions of structural inequality that shape young people’s experiences and understandings across various national contexts. In what follows we choose to explore racial injustice in the U.S. as one robust example. Race is always inextricably bound up with other aspects of structural inequality, compounded by class, gender, sexuality, and disability. A focused examination of race— a particularly powerful dimension of the historic civic context in the US - offers a layered depiction of the varied ways that one dimension of structural injustice influences all young people’s civic development.

Numerous interpretive studies of civic learning and identity describe how young peoples’ rights and experiences as citizens are fundamentally shaped by their positionality within racialized systems (e.g., Abu El-Haj, 2007; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Guajardo & Guajardo; 2008; Kwon, 2013; Lee, 2005; Levinson, 2012; Maira, 2009; Nygreen, 2013; Rubin, Hayes, & Benson, 2009; Shirazi, 2019). This includes experiences with state institutions and their agents, for example law enforcement and the judicial system; school-based disciplinary practices; curricular treatments of race and inequality; and academic and social divisions within schools. It includes legacies of denial of the injustices by those in power as well as rich traditions of civic and political activism within families, communities, and schools that nurture and influence the civic engagement of young people from varied walks of life (For examples of the influence of historical legacies of activism, see Anderson, 1988; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Siddle Walker, 1996; Parker, et al’s panel, “History of Democratic Education”;



McAdam, 1988; Warren, 2010). Young people draw on such experiences to make sense of their relationship with the state, with consequences for civic discourse and reasoning.

In the U.S., research on civic learning and engagement has often 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 reflects the limitations of the measures typically used to ascertain civic learning and engagement, which put undue emphasis on traditional markers such as knowledge of facts about the political system and intent to participate in formal civic acts, such as voting. It is also connected to inequities in access to high quality school-based civic education for low income communities, particularly in relation to the degree of student-centered, discussion-based and experiential practices— all considered best practices for civic education - provided by schools (Guilfoile & Delander, 2014; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). For racially and otherwise minoritized youth, however, the frequent absence of optimal learning opportunities in civics classrooms echoes their daily experiences with racialized and other systems of injustice, both outside and within school settings. These facets of inequality shape the contexts within which young people are expected to engage in civic discourse, informing the nature and content of their reasoning.

For example, young people’s experiences with law enforcement and carceral violence can affect their sense of trust in the legal and judicial system (Cohen, Kahne & Marshall, 2019; Rubin, Hayes, & Benson, 2009). In the United States, negative encounters with state agents, 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 (Morris Justice Project, n.d.; Rogowski & Cohen, 2015). This is a “hidden curricula” of adjudication, incarceration and policing that negatively positions

marginalized young people in relation to the state, undermining positive versions of civic life offered in the overt curriculum (Justice & Meares, 2014). Cohen and Luttig (2019) argue that this carceral violence is so endemic that it forms an essential part of the political knowledge of Black and Latinx youth. Racialized experiences of justice shape the contexts within which young people talk and think about civic life, deeply informing their civic reasoning and discourse, as we see in the recent swell of activism around anti-Black racism and police violence.

Students who have experienced only congruence between lived civic experience and official civic promises, and who have not been exposed to the disjunctive experiences of others, can develop a problematic “complacency.” In Rubin’s 2007 study of civic identity development across distinct school and community contexts, one such student defined good citizenship as “just enjoying being in the place, not worrying completely about politics or what’s concerning the world outside” (472). Students with limited exposure to different perspectives on civic life can feel doubtful about the challenges their peers have faced; for example Frank, an affluent, white student in a homogeneous suburban school district, explained that he felt that students who spoke out on civic issues were making “a big deal out of nothing” (468). School-based practices, as will be described later, can mitigate this by providing opportunities for young people to learn from the experiences of their peers (Freedman, Barr, Murphy, & Beširević, 2016; Seider & Graves, 2020). Disjunctive encounters with institutionalized authority in public space are often mirrored in classrooms and schools, compounding the inequitable experiences described above. Classroom management and school discipline practices, for example, can constitute an implicit, affective civic education that socializes children and youth into particular forms of civic identity in relation to the institutionalized authority of the state. For example, restrictive behavioral management programs and strategies, a common feature of education in urban, high poverty

201 contexts, demand compliance to institutional authority even in situations of clear unfairness,  
202 creating stifling contexts for meaningful civic discourse (Graham, 2019).

203       The term “school-to-prison pipeline” is increasingly applied to describe the apparent  
204 connections between educational exclusion and justice system involvement (Ginwright, 2004).  
205 There is extreme disparity in disciplinary referral and suspension rates for students of color in  
206 U.S. schools. African American students, both male and female, are referred for discipline and  
207 suspended at two to three times the rate of their white peers (Fabelo et al., 2011). Similar  
208 disparities exist for Latinx students, Native American students, and students in special education  
209 across racial groups (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014), and there are  
210 indications that this disproportionality may extend to bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender  
211 students as well (Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011; Poteat, Scheer, & Chong, 2015). The negative  
212 consequences associated with exclusionary discipline include “academic disengagement,  
213 depressed academic achievement, school dropout, and increased involvement in the juvenile  
214 justice system (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014)” (Gregory, 2017, p. 256). The result is the  
215 exclusion of particular groups of students from opportunities for civic discourse and reasoning  
216 by decreasing the amount of time they spend in class (or in school) and the quality of that time.  
217 More consequentially, such practices position racially and otherwise minoritized students as  
218 outsiders to the civic community. These experiences can educate youth into limited and  
219 disenfranchised identities as civic actors, but can also foment critical consciousness and,  
220 potentially, be leveraged within educational spaces to enrich civic discourse and reasoning  
221 (Seider & Graves, 2020).

222       Curricular treatments of race are also part of the contextual architecture of young  
223 peoples’ civic development, framing discourse and reasoning in and outside of school spaces.

Textbooks, pedagogies and learning standards can be distant from or at odds with students' racial and cultural identities and experiences (Epstein, 2008) or they can be consistent with the power and privileges that other young people experience. Banks (2020) has described ways in which the mainstream or dominant school curriculum reinforces the cultures, languages, and experiences of majority groups within the United States. Mainstream school knowledge often depicts the cultures of Europeans as central to the development of the United States and the contributions made by other groups as marginal. Moreover, such curricula tend to minimize both the brutality of slavery, genocide and other forms of racial violence, as well as the long history of political resistance to oppression (Brown & Brown, 2015; Chandler & Branscombe, 2015; King & Chandler, 2016; King & Woodson, 2016/2017; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Woodson, 2015). Moreover, not only can the curriculum ignore some groups' experiences, but it can also reinforce stereotypes and promote a sense of exclusion. For example, Muslim youth in U.S. schools often encounter nationalistic curriculum that cast them as enemy-aliens whose very citizenship and identity is in conflict with the state (Abu El-Haj, 2015). Within this curricular context, neither privileged students nor those who have less privilege are encouraged to critically analyze connections between their own experiences and observations and historical patterns (Brown & Brown, 2015). Possibilities for civic discourse are constrained by these curricular omissions and manifestations of racial injustice. Indeed, civic discourse limits the full potential of civic dialogue by constraining opportunities for all students to engage with each other in free and open discussion on complex and polarizing issues.

“Status differences” among young people may create differential access even within schools with high quality civic learning opportunities (Cohen & Lotan, 2014). Within racially and socioeconomically diverse schools, hierarchies mirroring those that permeate the

surrounding society persist by means of students’ interactions, classroom practices, parental intervention, educator misconceptions and school structures (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Rubin, 2003; Rubin, 2008; Yonezawa, Wells & Serna, 2002). These dynamics, reflective of intractable structural inequalities, also provide a fraught and inequitable context for the development and expression of civic discourse and reasoning.

Young people’s varying experiences of injustice and othering, both within schools and beyond, position them differently in relation to citizenship. Structures of inequality separate young people in schools and communities, limiting possibilities for authentic and meaningful discourse across difference and opportunities to learn about and from unfamiliar experiences. Finally, young peoples’ lived experiences of structural inequality, alongside their experiences of rich cultural and political traditions of community resistance, contribute to unique civic understandings and ways of being that are currently underexplored in formal educational settings. The literature indicates that the historical argument being made by the young Black woman in the opening image is likely to have developed outside of rather than within school. Centering varied student civic experiences inside schools is essential to the full enfranchisement of all youth; a multiplicity of experiences and points of view must be meaningfully incorporated into practices aimed at developing civic reasoning and discourse.

### ***Migration***

Global migration trends are changing how people experience, understand, and orient toward citizenship and belonging (Abu El-Haj, 2007; 2015; Banks, 2009; Banks, Suarez-Orozco, & Ben-Peretz, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2011; Suarez-Orozco, 2001), reshaping contexts for and content of youth civic reasoning and discourse. Mass global migration, forced displacement (due

to wars and environmental disasters), and statelessness affect many young people's understandings of and relationship to civic belonging. These conditions require careful attention to how young people living in conditions of mobility, economic instability, and legal precarity develop as civic and political actors, and the implications for civic reasoning and discourse. The implications are particularly important in the United States, where Suarez-Orozco (2018) notes, "over 25 percent of children under the age of 18, a total of 18.7 million children, have an immigrant parent" (p. 2).

Although civic and political participation are typically conceptualized in relation to one's juridical citizenship, when citizenship is viewed as a lived, everyday experience, many people, including youth, actively engage as civic and political actors, even without the formal rights conferred by states (Bosniak, 2006; Levinson, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2011; Sassen, 2004). Recent research illustrates that children and youth develop multifaceted citizenship identities and practices through their experiences growing up across transnational social fields. Transnational social fields reference both actual movement of people across borders, but also the practices through which im/migrant communities sustain ongoing relationships with multiple places, through media, cultural, linguistics, and political practices, as well as cross-border familial relationships (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994). Modern technologies are a key component of transnational social fields, making it possible for people to maintain significant ties with people, places, cultural forms, economies, and politics of "home." Transnational social fields complicate the landscape, purposes, and repertoires with which young people engage in civic dialogue, while interacting within and across multiple state contexts. Given the large numbers of youth in US schools who live transnationally, and the political and economic

influence the U.S. has on countries across the world, a global perspective is particularly important when thinking about civics education.

For many children, youth, and families, migration also creates new vulnerabilities as they deal daily with the consequences of unauthorized status. A growing body of research explores how children and youth who are undocumented, or who live in mixed status families, learn to navigate the public sphere, negotiating multiple obligations around school and work, while not putting themselves and their families at risk of detention and deportation, and how teachers can address these complexities (Abrego, 2006, 2008; Allard, 2015; Dabach, 2015; Dreby, 2015; Gonzales, 2011, 2015; Mangual Figueroa, 2017). Research in the U.S. has documented the challenges young people face as they transition from the space of public education (a right still guaranteed to children regardless of their juridical status) to post graduate life, focusing on the extent to which they can leverage social capital to fulfill (or not) their aspirations (Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2010, 2011; Sepulveda, 2011). For many undocumented young people, this transition begins even before exiting K-12 schools, when jobs and driver's licenses come into play and when undocumented status as an identity becomes a stigma to hide, closing off social relationships. Immigration status also mediates young children's understandings of differential access to rights (for example, to move freely in public and across borders) and future opportunities (Mangual Figueroa, 2011, 2017; Oliveira, 2018). One of the particular challenges for civic education (and civic dialogue) is that children and youth growing up in unauthorized or mixed status families are deeply knowledgeable about civic and political life, but their knowledge and experiences must, for the most part, remain silent in both formal educational contexts, (in addition to mainstream public political spaces) (Gonzales, Heredia, & Negron-Gonzales, 2015). Inclusion of children and youth who live with unauthorized status, or who are

in mixed status families in civic dialogue requires careful thought to the particular risks of visibility and voice for these communities.

Young people growing up in transnational social fields may develop a sense of belonging that does not line up neatly with the states in which they reside. Whether they are actually moving physically between two or more countries, or they are living in one place, but in a community that maintains ongoing contact with the social, cultural, linguistic, and political spheres of “home,” these young people are having experiences, learning about, and developing affiliations across multiple boundaries of belonging. A range of experiences—from occasional or routine trips “home,” to the everyday linguistic and cultural practices within families and communities; to consumption of international media; to political action on behalf of the “homeland”—educate young people to feel a sense of belonging to the places from which they or their families migrated (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2017; Dyrness & Sepulveda, 2020; Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Oliveira, 2018; Sánchez, 2007; Wolf, 2002; Zuñiga & Hamann, 2009). Thus, whereas the social incorporation of newcomers is typically premised on a belief that with time, they, or at least their children, will primarily orient to the new nation-state, this is no longer necessarily the case (Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2020; Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In some cases, the legal right to vote in one’s country of origin is maintained, so that young people are formally participating in multiple political systems. These transnational realities require young people to understand and adapt civic reasoning and discourse to multiple contexts.

At the same time, states continue to structure and mediate legal definitions of citizenship and formal opportunities for exercising one’s civic voice. Refugees and asylum-seekers find themselves caught between global promises, and the commitments and capacities of the states willing to host them (Bonet, 2018; Dryden-Peterson, 2016), inhabiting “the gaps between states”



(Haddad, 2008, p. 7). Developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions towards civic engagement is often deemed irrelevant to displaced populations who lack formal opportunities to participate and whose future participation is unknown (Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2017; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).

Even with formal legal immigration status, the affiliative ties cultivated through experiences growing up in transnational social fields often develop in concert with young people's encounters with racialized landscapes that position them as "impossible subjects" (Ngai, 2014) of the nations within which they reside. For example, in the post 9/11 era, Muslim, Arab and South Asian youth in the U.S. (see for e.g. Abu El-Haj, 2015; Ali, 2014; 2019; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Maira, 2009) and Europe (Garcia-Sánchez, 2013; Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Rios-Rojas, 2011; Tetraut, 2013) found that their capacity to identify as "Americans" or as "Danes" or "French" or "Spanish" was continually challenged by the racist political discourses and policies that framed their communities as threatening and unassimilable subjects of the nation. Islamophobia and public discourse around U.S. military involvement in Muslim-majority countries influence the relationships that students form with one another and their teachers in U.S. schools, as well as the conversations that take place there (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Bajaj, Ghaffar-Kucher, & Desai, 2016). For example, everyday civic rituals such as pledging to the American flag, became flashpoints for contentious civic dialogue around the meaning of national belonging, the parameters of patriotism, and what constitutes acceptable political critique of the country—dialogue that was often suppressed rather than engaged. (Similar conflict over civic rituals have arisen in other contexts, for example, around whether or not athletes can kneel during the national anthem.) Policies of detention, deportation, and exclusion, as well as educational projects that claim to "counter violence extremism" targeting Muslim communities

are part of the context for youth civic development (Ali, 2016; Nguyen, 2019). The long history of policies that threaten Latinx communities with detention and deportation in the U.S. has been compounded by the recent intensification of restrictive policies, punitive measures and hateful speech directed at these communities, fundamentally shaping the ways that children and youth understand their place in the U.S. (Hernández, 2008). Many young people’s civic reasoning and discourse is situated within and in response to political speech and policies affecting their communities.

Finally, transnationalism can be a generative context for young people’s civic learning, supporting them to develop critical consciousness about rights and justice across borders. Young people who have experienced life across states, learned of family members’ experiences, or have lived with the vulnerability of unauthorized status, are often cognizant of uneven and inequitable access to rights across borders. This comparative perspective educates many young people into political perspectives that can lead to activism around both local and global issues, (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Ali, 2019; Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2020; Dyrness & Sepulveda, 2020; Maira, 2009; Nicholls, 2013a; Shirazi, 2019). One challenge is how to integrate their perspectives, often nurtured in out of school contexts, into formal civic education. This is particularly important since their perspectives often are not part of and may even contradict mainstream narratives taught in state schools, and thus, can expand the scope of civic dialogue in classrooms. Young people from migrant communities learning in formal civic education settings have a right to opportunities for civic dialogue in which their narratives can be heard and engaged.

### ***Violence***

National, political, and ethnic conflict, a core feature of many contexts, including the U.S., is salient to young people’s civic development, in many cases setting parameters for civic

discourse and reasoning. Democratic civic education is often posited as an antidote to political conflict and violence, an ideal pathway for fostering informed, engaged, and ethical citizens (Bellino, Paulson, & Worden, 2017; Davies, 2004; Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy, & Longman, 2008; Levine & Bishai, 2010; Weinstein, Freedman, & Hughson, 2007). In settings emerging from recent violent conflict, civic reasoning and discourse intersect with societal goals for peacebuilding, democratic consolidation, and violence prevention. This global context is relevant for discussions in the United States for several reasons: teachers who seek to support young people from communities that have experienced war must know about those contexts; moreover, understanding the impact that violence has in shaping civic experiences elsewhere, can shed light on the violences that are embedded within the U.S. context. Young people in post-conflict settings develop amid civic education initiatives, curricula, and practices that tend to cast them as future “peacemakers” (McEvoy-Levy, 2006), discursively linking youth citizenship and peacebuilding (also see Bickmore, 2004). However, young people’s everyday experiences in contexts shaped by partial, fragile, or contentious peace processes may impede these imagined civic roles. Despite stated commitments to open, civic dialogue, some post-conflict settings lack the political and structural shifts required to support these engagements and the democratic norms on which they depend.

Incomplete or contradictory democratic processes paradoxically expand opportunities for civic expression and participation, while simultaneously restricting everyday rights and freedoms. In the context of postwar Guatemala, for example, young people are positioned as “wait-citizens” in which the rules and norms of the authoritarian past co-mingle with recent democratic reforms (Bellino, 2017). Collective movements and indigenous demands for inclusion in this context have repeatedly met with state repression and violence, and civic

engagement is criminalized in public discourse. The danger inherent in being associated with popular movements is an enduring legacy of authoritarianism; these risks are inseparable from the contexts in which young people develop as citizens and exercise basic rights. Young people's sense of civic efficacy interacts with their interpretations of, and identifications with, historical injustice and the civic messages mediated by teachers, families, peers, and communities (Bellino, 2016; Rubin, 2016a, 2016b). Accordingly, conceptions of "good citizenship" in this setting revolve around young people's dispositions towards embracing or avoiding risk (Bellino, 2015b). Similar tensions characterize youth civic development in postwar El Salvador, where high rates of criminal violence and emigration are both outcomes of violent civil war and legacies of the structural inequities that contributed to conflict and division (Dyrness, 2012, 2014). In high-risk settings such as these, youth citizenship cannot be separated from daily experiences with violence, which reinforce a sense of abandonment by the state and resentment towards an "inverted" civil contract (Bellino, 2015a, p. 120; also see Freedman & Abazovic, 2006). Young people make strategic decisions about civic participation based on their everyday experiences with state actors and institutions, their levels of (dis)trust in fellow citizens, and the ways that citizenship has been historically constructed and contested. These decisions can lead young people to challenge oppressive conditions, such as during the Arab Spring or in recent Black Lives Matter protests; young people's sense of civic disenfranchisement can galvanize movements for social change. Risk and resistance co-exist, shaping, constraining and also spurring civic discourse and action.

In many national settings, teaching about ethnic and civic identity in nuanced and complex ways conflicts with state sponsored narratives, and thus is not only difficult but also potentially dangerous (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008). In the aftermath of Rwanda's genocide,

for example, critical thinking was identified as an explicit goal for civic education and a necessary deterrent for future violence, ensuring that citizens would question authority and recognize propaganda. But this goal was undercut by an increasingly repressive political context in which alternative viewpoints on the history of genocide and the existence of ethnicity would not be tolerated. As the state institutionalized a single national identity narrative, laws prohibiting “genocide ideology” have made it virtually impossible to question this viewpoint (Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy, & Longman, 2008; King, 2014; Russell, 2019). Political repression and access to rights shape the possibilities for civic learning and expression. Threats such as physical violence and surveillance impede open dialogue and collective organizing, necessitating alternative forms and spaces for civic engagement. These studies remind us that a narrowing range of acceptable discourse in the public sphere has implications for the ways that schools are able to address the root causes and consequences of conflict, particularly when legacies of violence continue to mark young people’s social worlds. When open, critical dialogue is restricted in any society, young people learn more than the boundaries around what can be said and not said; censorship also impacts how young people understand themselves and their rights and obligations as democratic citizens. Beyond calculations of exercising one’s civic voice in ways that are secure, feasible, and socially acceptable, fear and distrust have an affective impact on the relationships forged between citizens and the state and between members of distinct identity groups. They also extend to young people’s conceptions of civic agency more broadly, reinforcing compliance and submission to authority figures, and risking a sense of impotence and fatalism in the face of impenetrable, unresponsive state structures.

Civic dialogue must pay particular attention to including marginalized communities because these groups of youth are the most likely to be alienated and excluded from mainstream

civic life. Without their voices, civic discourse is diminished for all people, not just for those who are marginalized. Recognizing the constraints that contexts of inequality, global migration, and violence place on young people’s civic expression means that we need to constantly work to equalize power within schools, particularly between groups with unequal status. Doing so requires broader acknowledgement of historical and structural inequities in the formal curriculum, while supporting young people’s efforts to participate in their democracies and recognizing the varied modalities through which young people are making civic arguments. Studies accounting for promising practices identified in the previous section illustrate how thoughtful curricular approaches, youth activism, participatory action research, and arts-based modalities enact these principles.

All states, including the U.S., contend with difficult decisions about how to address histories and legacies of violence such as colonialism and enslavement, as well as more localized sources of societal discord. Educational research illustrates the prevalence of conflict-avoidance in civic education initiatives, particularly in settings impacted by armed conflict. Curricula silence, neutralize, and rationalize periods of violence, and these difficult topics are often delivered through rote pedagogy rather than critical or constructivist approaches (Sabzalian & Shear; 2018; Brown & Brown, 2015; Paulson, 2015; Quaynor, 2012), suggesting that they are closed for discussion in schools. The routine avoidance of conflict that characterizes curriculum in post-conflict settings poses a conundrum: on the one hand, civic education should be grounded in young people’s lived experiences, which may include direct exposure to conflict and its legacies; on the other hand, efforts to understand the dynamics of conflict are pedagogically—and often, politically—fraught. Intergroup tensions and grievances are often ongoing, impeding possibilities for historical distancing. Moreover, for members of historically oppressed groups,

476 constructions of identity are linked to these conflicts (Bashir, 2008). And yet membership in  
477 marginalized social and political identity groups functions in different ways in different societal  
478 contexts and may not predict one's civic orientation or stance on historical grievances in a  
479 universal way across societies. A multicountry comparison of young people learning in similarly  
480 designed civics classrooms across the U.S., South Africa, and Northern Ireland suggests greater  
481 attention is needed to the conditions that govern how group identity affiliations matter to young  
482 people's civic learning (Shin, Freedman, Barr, & Murphy, in progress). The study in the end  
483 demonstrates the likely role of national context and particular histories of conflict in explaining  
484 different countries, and in the ways youth become civically engaged.

485         Curricular erasures, coupled with unfulfilled promises to reconcile root causes of  
486 violence, risk further alienating particular identity groups from the national imaginary and can  
487 lead to intentional efforts to disengage from civic life. Schools contribute to "failed citizenship"  
488 when they do not help young people to develop a sense of civic efficacy and structural inclusion  
489 (Banks, 2015). In extreme cases, lack of political voice, isolation from state services and  
490 experiences of discrimination and disenfranchisement motivate young people to take up arms,  
491 becoming a driver of violence.

492         Given the persistent tensions over curricular representations of conflict, some civic  
493 initiatives opt to emphasize skills and competencies over knowledge, casting these as neutral,  
494 apolitical, and individually developed. Rather than discuss, analyze, or critique the conflicts that  
495 students encounter on an everyday basis as relevant to their civic development, the goal is to  
496 support young people in developing the skills to engage in critical reasoning and dialogue as  
497 nonviolent means for participation and resolution of conflicts. Amidst decades of armed conflict  
498 in Colombia, for example, state-led efforts to infuse citizenship competencies across the

curriculum have explicitly linked to peacebuilding efforts, aiming to reduce the negative effects of citizens' routine exposure to violence (Chaux, 2009). Critiques of Colombia's approach argue that emphasis on civic discourse and critical reasoning in the absence of curricular coverage of the country's armed conflict risks perpetuating civic disjunctures and normalizing violence (Padilla & Bermúdez, 2016; Mejía & Perafán, 2006; Rodríguez-Gómez, Foulds, & Sayed, 2016). Consequently, young people are increasingly skeptical of the nation's peace process and the possibilities for dialogue as a means for resolving conflict (Velez, Ballesteros, & Sanchez Meertens, in press). This skepticism is expressed more acutely by young people living in communities controlled by armed groups and criminal networks, where everyday civic actions have limited impact (Nieto, in press; Velez, 2019). In the U.S., as described in the first section of this paper, civic education that focuses on the development of these skills without attention to students' experiences of racial injustice, can result in frustration and distrust in state institutions, including schools (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Clay, 2018; Rubin, 2007). Individual competencies such as discursive, reasoning, and conflict-resolution strategies cannot be separated from the broader contexts in which they are developed and exercised.

Open discussion in school spaces of controversial topics, such as violent conflict and societal divisions, can raise concerns for educators and families, particularly in times of heightened polarization and partisanship. Even in stable democratic contexts with low levels of violence and high economic growth, studies report that teachers tend to depoliticize, dehistoricize, and deracialize periods of violence to avoid confronting highly contested topics (e.g., Abu El-Haj, 2015; Mulimbi & Dryden-Peterson, 2019; Teegeer, 2015). Tensions within polarized societies permeate civic curricula, posing challenges for open dialogue among educators and young people. Conflict, in all of its manifestations, permeates the contexts within



which young people develop their capacities for civic reasoning and discourse; it can both spark and repress civic engagement.

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In the first portion of this paper we have outlined the ways that structural inequality, migration and violent conflict frame youth civic learning and engagement, with implications for civic discourse and reasoning within and beyond schools. Young peoples’ civic experiences within structurally inequitable societies shape civic identity disparately and consequentially. Those with more critical views or marginalized perspectives are sometimes openly censored in schools, not allowed to voice their civic concerns and experiences. Moreover, young people can be positioned differently in relation to allowable speech, creating rifts and inequalities in whose voices are nurtured, valued and validated. Indeed, the very manner of speech can vary depending on young peoples’ direct or indirect connections to particular issues and concerns; the promotion of dispassionate speech often encouraged within school settings as a marker of critical reasoning can delegitimize or even penalize more impassioned or emotional discourse that may arise in response to experiences of justice and injustice.

The social and political contexts of civic life are complex, contentious and structurally unequal. Traditional approaches to civic education have fallen short in accounting for the ways that the school environment and its surrounding settings shape civic learning and engagement, often neglecting forms of civic discourse and action that develop amid these uneven structures, disjunctive experiences and fraught histories. “Failed citizenship” can result (Banks, 2017). Meaningful forms of civic education - including those aimed at developing civic discourse and

reasoning - can only be built upon a clear understanding of how social and political context shapes civic learning and engagement.

### **Diverse Forms of Civic Participation and Promising, Contextually Informed Practices**

Drawing on what we know about the ways that belonging and disjuncture frame young people's civic identities, this section describes diverse forms of civic participation emerging from young peoples' experiences within contexts of inequality, conflict, and migration, and describes a selection of contextually-informed educational approaches that recognize and amplify the civic learning and voice of youth. We begin by expanding definitions of civic practice to encompass the sociopolitical and affective realms of experience, showcasing activist initiatives as powerful contexts for the development of civic discourse and reasoning. Next, we examine three, intersecting approaches to civic education that engage youth in dynamic explorations of their lived experiences with the civic and political spheres: 1) critical curricular approaches in which young people engage with questions of power and inequality to understand and act upon their society; 2) youth action research initiatives that develop critical inquiry skills embedded in an activist frame; and 3) arts-based approaches to developing critical counternarratives through which young people analyze and speak back to conditions of injustice and insert their voices into civic dialogue.

### ***Sociopolitical development, affect, and activism: Civic reasoning and discourse in situ***

All civic reasoning and discourse is embedded within young people's social and political realities. Practices aimed at strengthening these skills and capacities go hand-in-hand with sociopolitical development, defined as growth in young people's "knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and capacity for action in political and social systems" (Watts, Williams, &

Jagers, 2003, p. 185). Civic identity development is deeply affective as well; as a lived practice, citizenship is entwined with people's sense of belonging to communities at multiple levels—local, national, and transnational (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Bellino, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2011); Young people craft civic and political practices in relation to their sense of inclusion or exclusion from civic and political spheres. These can be enhanced by both “macrosupports,” larger school structures that facilitate youth civic belonging, and “microsupports,” small, daily acts of support within the school environment (Freedman, Murphy, Barr, & Besirevič, 2016). Practices of civic reasoning and discourse must engage young people's affective attachments to civic and political life and occur within a web of supports, both structural and interactional.

Ginwright and James (2002) offer a framework for and practices to support young people's sociopolitical development that includes developing their analyses of power; affirming, exploring, and building identity; working to create systemic change through collective action; and drawing upon and embracing youth culture in this political involvement. Youth activism emerges from young peoples' civic experiences, understandings and opportunities amid contexts of structural inequality, conflict and migration. Youth-led groups, such as the Black Youth Project, have focused attention on disproportionate policing practices, using research to galvanize and inform advocacy and activist efforts (Cohen, 2012). High profile school shootings in the U.S have ignited the widespread civic engagement of young people in multiple fora, sparking national debate and inciting political discourse and legislation (Knight Abowitz & Mamlok, 2019). Undocumented youth have led the movement advocating for changes to U.S. immigration law that has kept them in limbo (Gonzales, Heredia, & Negrón-Gonzales, 2015; Nicholls, 2013b). Youth from varied socioeconomic backgrounds have also been at the forefront of climate action (Gallay et al., 2016) and gun control advocacy (Knight Abowitz & Mamlok,

2019). Youth activism in contemporary contexts draws upon new forms of communication and interaction. For example, during the “Arab Spring” of the early 2010’s young people’s use of social media was a powerful force for organizing local action and generating international attention and support for the movement (Herrera, 2014).

Youth organizing can be a cultural practice and a context for civic development, in which young people experiment with distinct civic identities, discourses, and strategies (Kirshner, 2009). Young people’s civic identity formation depends on their access to particular discursive communities and the underlying ideologies that motivate those discourses; they draw on available discourses and ideologies as they develop attitudes towards collective action on particular social justice issues. As previous sections have shown, these discursive repertoires are culturally and historically situated and can, in some cases, actively work against traditional models of civic discourse. Educational experiences that foster sociopolitical development, critical inquiry and belonging contribute to the civic empowerment of youth, supporting their authentic engagement in civic discourse and reasoning (e.g. Abu El-Haj, 2009b; Dyrness, 2012; Morrell, 2004; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Clay, 2018).

### *Critical curricular approaches*

A variety of critical curricular approaches show promise for developing informed and engaged citizenship identities and practices among young people. These approaches are rooted in the understanding of how context frames civic learning and development described in the first section of this paper. Critically relevant civics establishes a framework for youth to analyze disjunctive experiences rooted in racial and economic inequality impacting their daily civic lives (Clay & Rubin, 2019; Cohen, Kahne & Marshall, 2019); this can include discussion of

controversial and relevant civic issues (Hess, 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008) and “teaching into” political events with racially minoritized and immigrant and undocumented students (Jaffe-Walter, Miranda, & Lee, 2019; Rubin, 2015).

Critical approaches to history education (King and Woodson, 2016/17; Parkhouse, 2018; Rubin, 2012; Woodson, 2015) and critical transnational curriculum (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017) can also provide a basis for student understanding of the civic inequalities and challenges confronting their communities. Anthony and Kefferlyn Brown (2015) note, “curriculum is about memory making, or the way a nation imagines and shapes what people come to know about the past and present” (p. 104). Curriculum, in social studies, is deeply political; the way that content is framed and presented can either upend or reinforce entrenched misconceptions of the country’s past and present. Unfortunately, the social studies curriculum has traditionally played a role in upholding a Eurocentric view of U.S. history. In their review of social studies standards, Shear, Knowles, Soden, and Castro (2015) explain that, “despite recent movements to address social justice issues, and the one-sided nature of US history textbooks, social studies scholarship routinely finds that Euro-American voices dominate textbooks and content standards” (p. 69). Race and racism have not been fully or effectively engaged within the frameworks created by the National Council for the Social Studies (Chandler & McKnight, 2011), tending toward a “raceless perspective” (King & Chandler, 2016, p.9) that ignores the context of historical learning. Approaches to history education that critically and directly engage with questions of race and power create more authentic and meaningful contexts for civic reasoning and discourse for all students, no matter their social and political positioning.

Similarly, critical curricular approaches to human rights and peace education can help young people connect their lives and experiences with a broader civic discourse of rights (Bajaj,

Canlas, & Argenal, 2017). The extent to which schools might explicitly engage with conflict may depend on the political-societal conditions in which they operate; some contexts may allow for approaches that explicitly engage with conflict, while educators in other contexts may be limited to more indirect approaches that focus on developing skills such as perspective-taking and conflict-resolution, depending on the broader peace and conflict dynamics operating in society (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009). Bekerman and Zembylas (2012) posit teachers and students as “critical design experts” who create “small openings... to navigate through contested narratives” (p. 196), even in the context of intractable conflicts. In their work across Israel, Palestine, and Cyprus, they find that these openings depend on sociohistorical, political, and educational conditions such as the nature and extent to which oppositional identity groups interact on a daily basis in society, in formal political spheres, and in school spaces. Curriculum can frame engagement in civic discourse and reasoning in productive and affirming ways when attentive to the contextualized experiences of youth.

#### ***Youth participatory action research***

Acknowledgement and analysis of structural inequality provides the basis for some of the most powerful civic learning experiences available to young people, providing opportunities for analysis, voice, and participation in change. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) provides meaningful opportunities for young people to develop civic voice as researchers and change agents in their schools and communities (Fine, Torre, Burnes, & Payne, 2004; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008; Morrell, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). YPAR is premised on recognizing young people as experts on their own lives and the contexts that constrain and enable their civic expression. This recognition is key to empowering youth as civic actors with the power to challenge and change oppressive conditions (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright,

Cammarota, & Noguera, 2006). Moving from knowledge production to acting collectively upon that knowledge is a distinctive element of YPAR, one uniquely suited for supporting young people's civic development (Ginwright, 2008).

The scope of YPAR projects can range from small-scale classroom efforts to investigations spanning numerous school districts and communities. Many student action research projects focus on investigating and improving the school as a social and academic unit. In one California university partnership with schools serving largely underrepresented minority and low-income students, researchers co-constructed "inquiry groups" with high school students, meeting monthly for discussions that led to presentations to school faculty (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002). An ongoing student action research initiative sponsored by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) apprentices urban youth as critical researchers (Morrell, 2004). Researchers from the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center worked with over 100 youth from urban and suburban high schools in New York and New Jersey to assess racial equality in schools 50 years after the Brown v. Board of Education school desegregation decision (Torre & Fine, 2006). Within social studies classrooms, youth participatory action research-based curricula open up opportunities for relevant civic discourse and reasoning (Rubin, Ayala & Zaal, 2017; Rubin, 2012).

YPAR approaches support young people in understanding and participating in civic dialogue and debates, particularly when they are directly impacted by issues under discussion. Speaking back to and complicating dominant discourses through counter-narratives is a central component of many YPAR projects (Cahill, 2006; Kohfeldt, Bowen, & Langhout, 2016). Collaborations often aim to connect young people to local decision-makers, allowing youth to enter conversations they are typically barred from, voicing their experiences with civic

disjunctures, and making demands directly to accountable agents and institutions (e.g., Dallago et al., 2010; Ginwright, 2008; Kirshner 2010).

YPAR collaborations can create more egalitarian contexts, even when these educative spaces are set within highly unequal or constrained, institutional environments such as prisons (Torre & Fine, 2006) or refugee camps (Bellino & KYRG, 2018). Importantly, youth empowerment through approaches like YPAR necessitates attention to youth status and agency, with attention to cultural norms and local expressions of agency, as well as broader structural arrangements in which youth are embedded (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). A persistent goal and challenge across this work is supporting young people in accessing civic voice and power, attending to lived experiences of civic disjuncture in ways that support discourse and reasoning.

### *Arts-based approaches*

Arts can be an important vehicle for engaging civic issues of direct relevance to the social, cultural, political and economic conditions affecting children and youth (Abu El-Haj, 2009; Bell & Roberts, 2010; Kuttner, 2016; Rhoades, 2015; Fisher, 2005a, 2005b). Forms of civic learning that go beyond the cognitive to engage young people physically, emotionally and aesthetically—embodied approaches—offer new forms of critical, justice oriented, culturally sustaining, civic education practice. For example, Kuttner (2016) describes a tradition of youth cultural organizing that leverages the arts and other forms of cultural expression for the purposes of organizing political action and change. Drawing on a case study of Project Hip Hop, Kuttner argues that this kind of cultural organizing, “[t]eaches young hiphop artists to use artistic practice and other forms of cultural expression (e.g. rituals, celebrations) to challenge oppressive ideologies and catalyze action toward social justice” (p. 536). In the aftermath of 9/11, Al-



Bustan (an Arab American community arts organization) created opportunities for Arab American youth to develop films in which young people spoke back to dominant, racist images of their community; thus, leveraging the arts for political expression (Abu El-Haj, 2009). Abu El-Haj argues this kind of programming creates democratic counterpublics in which youth learn to develop a politics of inclusion, inserting their voices into spaces of exclusion. Winn has shown the power of poetry (Fisher, 2005a; 2005b) and Theater of the Oppressed (Winn, 2011) to engage racially minoritized youth, and in the latter case, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls to write, speak, and perform their experiences, and in doing so, to create community, critically explore white supremacy and structural oppression, imagine possible futures, and participate in shaping public discourse about their communities. Norman (2009) explores the power of participatory youth media (forum theater, photography, and film) in Palestine to support individual and collective agency to engage in reflection, action, and advocacy, particularly in relation to creating counternarratives about their community that counter racist discourse and advocate for peace. In all of these examples, the arts created a space for young people to wrestle with and respond to the felt dimension of their experiences with exclusion, injustice, oppression, and violence. Moreover, one of the most promising aspects of arts-based civic education is that by moving beyond discourse and reasoning to engage affective learning, these approaches hold the potential to offer counternarratives and images that can build bridges between communities often stuck in singular narratives and political positions.

These examples of contextually attuned forms of civic education provide educators with a roadmap for developing more relevant and effective approaches to the civic enfranchisement of their students. Traditionally, civic participation has been described and measured in relation to intent to participate in mainstream political and community activity, such as voting or

volunteering. However, recent research and theory has expanded our understanding of how young people participate civically, challenging us to reconsider what counts as civic engagement and practice. Moreover, recognizing that young people develop their civic and political identities in relation to social/ecological contexts that are, for many, shot through inequality and conflict, also requires rethinking the design of civic learning opportunities to address directly these contexts. Contexts of inequality, conflict and migration shape the nature of civic learning such that particular forms of discourse and reasoning are more or less possible, more or less effective. Of course, each of these approaches may be implemented poorly, or in ways that subvert critical aims. To be effective, these approaches must be rooted in an understanding of civic disjunctures, and support young people’s development of knowledge, skills, and opportunities for meaningful change.

#### **Recommendations for Considering Context in Civic Reasoning and Discourse**

We recommend that school-based interventions to cultivate youth civic reasoning and discourse be constructed with attention to the importance of the contexts in which young people develop. We need approaches to civic education that account for the ways that contexts of inequality, migration, and violence shape civic learning and engagement, including forms of civic discourse and action that develop amid uneven structures, disjunctive experiences and fraught histories. Educational experiences that foster sociopolitical development, critical inquiry and belonging contribute to the civic empowerment of all youth, supporting their authentic engagement in civic discourse and reasoning.

1. Civic education programs should help all students, including those from both privileged groups and minoritized groups, acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to

participate in the civic communities of their schools, communities, and country, recognizing that the needs of different students may vary, depending on their positions in society and their experiences.

2. Contextually grounded approaches to curriculum should validate all young peoples' civic experiences, and create authentic and meaningful contexts for civic reasoning and discourse, helping all students develop a sense of political efficacy and inclusion within the nation-state.
3. Civic education programs should help all students to develop reflective identities with their cultural communities, the nation, and the global community.
4. Opportunities for youth civic engagement should be meaningful for them. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) has been found to provide meaningful opportunities for young people to develop civic voice as researchers and change agents in their schools and communities; when youth engage in discourse and reasoning on authentic topics with civic impact, they develop civic agency along with expression and thinking skills.
5. Arts-based approaches have been found to go beyond the cognitive to engage young people physically, emotionally and aesthetically, offering new forms of justice-oriented, culturally-sustaining, civic education practice that can deepen young people's civic development in ways that attention to discourse and reasoning alone cannot. Arts-based approaches can draw young people not just into dialogue, but into affective relationships and collaborations, with others within and across social groups.

## **Conclusion**

We write this in a moment of global crises. COVID-19 is raging across the world, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable. Support for democracy is declining. Economic inequality within and between countries is rising. Unstable and unjust social and political conditions, violent conflict, and the unequal impact of environmental destruction have led to the largest numbers of displaced persons in recent history, with consequences for nations everywhere. Incarceration and police brutality affect minoritized groups in many societies. Many young people are growing up in conditions of economic, social, and political vulnerability that leave them with little reason to trust the state and its institutions, including schools, to provide them with the tools for crafting bright futures. Thus, it should come as no surprise that studies exploring young people’s knowledge and attitudes towards democratic governments demonstrate increased skepticism, particularly in settings where inequality, injustice, corruption, and violence are features of everyday life. Meanwhile, we are witnessing a global rise of youth activism and an expanded set of issues and modalities that link young people’s concerns within and across national borders. Our current moment is ripe with reason for both concern and hope for young people’s futures as civic and political actors.

This paper has argued that young people’s civic development is always shaped by the social and political contexts in which they grow up—contexts that, for many children and youth, are riven with injustice and inequality. We have focused on the specific ways that structural inequality, migration, and violent conflict shape young people’s civic development and foster new expressions of civic engagement. Civic education, including the practices of civic reasoning and dialogue, must be grounded in an understanding of the ways that social and political contexts differentially mediate young people’s development as civic actors. It must be attentive to the

ways that young people conceive of themselves as civic actors and the varied ways in which they exercise civic voice.

We can create powerful opportunities for young people’s civic learning when we attend to the ways that their civic development is shaped by these constraints and opportunities. We need to think about how young people internalize and use the civic knowledge and skills (learned in schools and elsewhere) in their everyday lives. Too often, civic education “proceeds as though all students draw upon an identical well of experiences to make meaning from the curriculum” (Rubin, 2007, 451), as if all students come to the classroom on equal terms. We design civic reasoning and dialogue with the presumption that what matters is creating a framework for the most rational and well-reasoned argument to prevail. However, neither young people nor the contexts within which they live and learn, exist on a level playing field. Civic learning is embodied, enacted, and mediated differentially by cultural frames, historical legacies, and social, economic, and political forces that shape the modes and content of discourse and reasoning.

Civic dialogue must pay particular attention to including the political expressions and protest of marginalized communities because these are the groups of youth most likely to be alienated and excluded from mainstream civic life. Without centering these voices, civic discourse is diminished for all people, not just for minoritized and marginalized groups. Recognizing the constraints that contexts of structural inequality, global migration, and armed conflict place on young people’s civic expression means that we need to constantly work to equalize power within schools, particularly between groups with unequal status. Doing so requires broader acknowledgement of historical and structural inequities in the formal curriculum, while supporting young people’s efforts to participate in their democracies and recognizing the varied modalities through which young people are making civic arguments.

Studies accounting for promising practices identified in the previous section illustrate how critical curricular approaches, youth activism, participatory action research, and arts-based modalities enact these principles.

An episode of the National Public Radio podcast *Code Switch* produced before May 2020 explored research on cross racial friendships in the U.S., focusing on the long-term consequences of racially isolated schooling on friendship patterns (2020). One particularly notable finding was that cross-racial friendships are seriously impeded by many white people’s preference for avoiding conversations about race and racism, preferring to maintain “colorblindness,” in marked contrast to the desire by youth of color (and people of color in general) to talk about race and racism with their friends (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). This small example about the difficulties of cross-racial friendships in the U.S. reflected a larger, global problem of failed civic dialogue across social and political differences. In contrast, during the national and international BLM demonstrations in the summer of 2020, a multi-racial coalition of people united to protest anti-Black racism, igniting powerful civic dialogue both among participants and the general public. This powerful movement arises from and draws upon the strengths of civic reasoning and knowledge developed within the social and political context of Black communities. The Movement For Black Lives illustrates vividly why engaging young people in robust forms of civic reasoning and dialogue must begin by drawing on the distinct, often contradictory, experiences that youth have had within their social and political worlds. Civic action aimed at equality and justice begins with civic dialogue that directly engages the vastly different socio-political contexts that shape young people’s lives.

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