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Turning Passion Into Action: The Intersection of Transformational Coaching and a Counter-Narrative of Black Citizenship

Erica D. Kelley

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TURNING PASSION INTO ACTION: THE INTERSECTION OF TRANSFORMATIONAL
COACHING AND A COUNTER-NARRATIVE OF BLACK CITIZENSHIP

by

Erica D. Kelley

Bachelor of Arts
Emory University, 1998

Master of Education
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2017

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Accepted by:

Elizabeth Currin, Major Professor

Leigh D'Amico, Committee Member

Daniella Cook, Committee Member

Caitlyne Steward, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the students of Ms. Jackson's sixth-grade classroom. I assuredly learned much more from them than they learned from me. Their willingness to let me into their world as they shared and shaped their own stories of citizenship is an experience I will never forget. I am filled with sincere optimism for the future they craft for themselves and their communities.

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Thank you to my committee, who had to read this beast of a lengthy dissertation, for your guidance and support. I need to especially acknowledge the tireless work of my committee chair, Dr. Elizabeth Currin, who, we are all convinced, is blessed with magical editing powers. Dr. Currin, you helped me navigate changing careers, having my study rejected, and multiple revisions, convincing me that I could still address my original topic about which I care so deeply. Lo and behold, it worked! There is no way this would have happened without your providing perspective, advice, and levity when I needed it most. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Last, but by no means least, thank you to the real Ms. Jackson and the other adults at Oak Crest Middle School and beyond who showed the student participants what community looks like and helped them recognize the extent of their power to impact

change. To Ms. Jackson, in particular: you are an inspiration and trooper. Your willingness to tackle uncomfortable and difficult things for the sake of your students is what I wish all teachers would do. I am beyond humbled to call you both colleague and friend.

ABSTRACT

This action research study explored Black middle school students' interactions with a high-quality civics curriculum that sought to complicate traditional notions of citizenship; provide authentic opportunities for engagement and participation; center student voices; and foster positive, empowered civic identities. The study also examined whether transformational coaching, with an explicit focus on culturally responsive practices, enhanced one social studies teacher's ability to implement such a curriculum. Critical race theory and social identity theory illuminated how traditional civics education, rooted in white supremacy, excludes and distorts Black citizenship and civic identities; conversely, both theories informed alternative views of citizenship and identity rooted in critical patriotism, community, and activism. Grounded in courageous conversations protocols, students engaged in a series of open classroom discussions about current events, what being a "citizen" means, and how to impact meaningful change. Students also collaborated to identify problems in their communities and designed action plans, which they then implemented, to address their concerns. The combination of a safe space for honest, sometimes contentious, dialogue and opportunities to take meaningful civic action empowered students to develop a counter-narrative of Black citizenship in which they were informed and liberated agents of change. Similarly, the social studies teacher, through her own self-reflection and participation in the transformational coaching cycle, was better equipped to implement high-quality civics instruction for her students. The findings, beyond informing my own practice as a residency coach, may

have implications for social studies teachers who hope to incorporate high-quality civics instruction in their classrooms. Further, instructional coaches may look to the study as an example of implementing explicit training in cultural responsiveness in transformational coaching.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRP	Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
CRT	Critical Race Theory
OCMS	Oak Crest Middle School
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PD	Professional Development
SIT	Social Identity Theory
YPAR	Youth Participatory Action Research

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I reflect on my time as a classroom teacher, some of my most powerful memories are those of a room full of students completely engaged in rigorous, informed, and spirited debate on issues ranging from disparities in school funding to presidential elections. If someone came into my social studies classroom on any given Friday, they were likely to get a healthy dose of conflict and controversy as a bunch of middle schoolers hashed out the week's local, national, and world news. What we called "Current Events Friday" was open season on politicians and public policy; it was also a safe space for students to voice concerns, fears, and confusion about events they had observed in the world around them. The only rules: respect others in the group, practice "accountable talk," cite sources, and value dissent.

I started a version of Current Events Friday after the 2016 election. We had spent a great deal of time gearing up for the day, and the middle schoolers in my classes were very invested in the outcome even though they could not, in fact, vote. They were energized and excited, but many—not all—felt very let down by the results and became bitter and disenchanted. What they did not become, however, was disinterested, and they expressed a near constant desire to continue the conversation. We could not abandon our world history curriculum, but I compromised by carving out time on Fridays to catch up on the week's happenings and openly share opinions, emotions, and questions. We began intentionally practicing courageous conversations, and students not only learned more

about current events, but also how to engage with one another in respectful and encouraging ways.

What I observed in my students was incredible insight, boundless curiosity, and deeply rooted passion. I also observed distrust, fear, disillusionment, powerlessness, and a sense of abandonment in relation to the government and the political process. My students, the majority of whom were Black, felt, at a very visceral level, institutional and social inequality. They may not have known the word “disenfranchised,” but they could verbalize the disconnect they felt with the political process.

I cannot count how often I heard “that’s not fair” on Fridays. Seeing, feeling, and even vocalizing injustice was easy, but finding solutions was a persistent sticking point. Students appeared to struggle with envisioning themselves as part of the political process. It seemed alien and distant due to their distrust of the government or lack of understanding of how to access the political system, including knowledge of its structure.

For my last 2 years in the classroom, students’ frustration, fear, and insight also caught the attention of two pre-service teachers, placed with me through the Project Inspire Teacher Residency. The program addresses educational inequities by training effective, dedicated, and culturally responsive teachers to work in the highest-needs schools here in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Project Inspire partners with Hamilton County Schools to place residents for 1 full year in a high-needs classroom with a highly effective teacher, thus providing space for new teachers to hone their craft and learn how to serve marginalized students. Residents, who receive both a teaching license and a graduate degree by the end of the 14-month residency, are selected, in part, for their

commitment to educational equity. As a clinical instructor, I worked with residents on key elements of teaching, learning, social studies content, and social justice education.

Embedding high-level discourse opportunities like Current Events Fridays illustrated to residents the importance of elevating student voice in a social studies classroom. I had the pleasure of watching them grow and embrace such practices during their year with me; I now have the pleasure of coaching them in their own classrooms as a full-time residency coach for Project Inspire. In my new role, I provide programming and in-class instructional coaching to develop current and former residents' skills as effective teachers of marginalized students. The support we provide at Project Inspire makes them uniquely qualified to address inequities and injustice impacting not only their individual students, but the schools and communities in which they serve.

Project Inspire residents and graduates witness firsthand how Black students' experiences inform their engagement with a curriculum that often excludes and oppresses them. Schools, the most obvious places for young people to learn how to become active in U.S. civic life, are failing them. In May 2020, students witnessed a Minneapolis police officer murder an unarmed Black man on national television and have since observed how "the slow-motion execution of George Floyd has ignited an incandescent social movement" (Johnson, 2020). In the era of the Black Lives Matter movement, students need a safe space to process what they are witnessing, and teachers have a unique opportunity to help students reconcile textbook lessons about civil rights with the real-life expressions of civil disobedience they are seeing on TV and social media. On January 7, 2021, my resident and I transformed our lesson plan into an hour-long discussion of the

insurrection, and the same comment arose in some form each period: “If those rioters were Black, they would all be dead.” These students deeply understood injustice.

Students need explicit instruction in government and political history, which state standards typically address, but they also need a curriculum that helps them develop their own identities as informed and engaged participants in a wider civic community.

Moreover, teachers need explicit coaching in how to implement practices that can yield these types of emancipatory results for their students. Specifically, the social studies teachers I support request help most often in two areas: implementing culturally responsive practices and embedding citizenship education into their curriculum.

Problem Statement

Despite the Tennessee social studies standards’ clear directive to teach principles of citizenship and civics in every grade beginning in kindergarten, policies like No Child Left Behind and a hyper-focus on math and literacy have left most middle school students with a shaky or nonexistent foundational knowledge of civics and civics concepts (Shapiro & Brown, 2018; Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.-b). Assessment data from 2018 indicate the results of this lack of civics education: only 24% of eighth-grade students scored at or above proficient (The Nation’s Report Card, n.d.). More problematic is the racial discrepancy: 31% of white¹ students scored at or above proficient, compared to 10% of Black students (The Nation’s Report Card, n.d.). There are deeper and more insidious concerns, however, than how Black students score on a standardized civics test.

¹ In this dissertation, and in alignment with multiple news outlets like the Associated Press, “white” is not capitalized, while “Black” is (Bauder, 2020). Capitalizing “Black” recognizes both a shared history and culture and the role that blackness plays in historical and present oppression and discrimination. Capitalizing “white” would imply a shared history based on skin color, which simply does not exist (Golden, 2019).

With traditional approaches to civics education, many students struggle to connect the curriculum with their own lives, yet Black students, in particular, experience a disconnection with and even resentment of the manner in which they are asked to engage with civics (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Tillet, 2012; Vickery, 2016). Several factors contribute to the uniquely poor civics education to which Black students have access. First, the traditional social studies curriculum, in which the study of civics is situated, reifies the continued outsider status of Black Americans by presenting a national narrative in which Black students cannot find themselves and by entrenching “authoritarian patriotism,” or blind allegiance, that further alienates those same students (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021; Busey & Walker, 2017; Heilig et al., 2012; Woodson, 2016). Second, many Black students suffer “civic estrangement,” feeling that, while they may be legal citizens, their own lived experiences of injustice and racism conflict with the democratic fundamentals they learn in school, such as liberty and equal opportunity (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Duncan, 2020; Tillet, 2012). Third, when social studies teachers are unwilling to tackle race, racism, and other issues of social justice in instruction, many Black students feel like what they are learning is irrelevant to their lives (Cummings, 2019; Heilig et al., 2012; Vickery, 2017). Last, racial disparities, including tracking policies, zero-tolerance discipline policies, lack of practical civic opportunities, and low expectations of Black citizenship, all contribute to uniquely poor-quality civics instruction for Black students (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016; Pinkney, 2016).

Fortunately, some teachers want to disrupt the traditional model of civics education and create a space where emancipatory outcomes are the norm, not the exception, for their Black students. Unfortunately, training in instructional practices that

would further that end is scarce and/or inadequate (Gladney et al., 2021). Consequently, my problem of practice was the challenge of providing the training and support for social studies teachers to implement high-quality civics instruction that encourages Black students to become informed, engaged, and active citizens. My action research study thus centralized the important role teachers—and instructional coaches—play in the quest for emancipatory student outcomes. High-quality civics instruction includes not only a rich knowledge base focused on government and the political process, but also intentional opportunities for students to develop and nurture a sense of civic identity and responsibility. This action research study did not, and was not intended to, impact how civics is taught on a large scale, but it had the potential to guide my own practice as a residency coach, guide one social studies teacher in her practice, and influence students' exposure to and engagement with high-quality civics instruction.

Theoretical Framework

The study of government and civics, historically included among the social studies, ostensibly helps U.S. students understand the form and function of the democracy in which they are expected to participate as adults. Black students, however, often encounter alienating versions of civics education steeped in white supremacy, so I began my study by examining such extant barriers and exploring alternatives to traditional civics instruction (Duncan, 2020). Because, at its core, civics education is intended to influence students' conceptions of citizenship and their roles in the democratic system, I also investigated how civics instruction impacts civic identities. As a result, critical race theory (CRT) and social identity theory (SIT) were the lenses through which I analyzed the impacts of traditional civics education on Black students, as

well as the student participants' experiences before and throughout the study in relation to their civic engagement, participation, and identities. Transformational coaching, rooted in systems theory, also fostered critical race praxis with the teacher participant in a manner that illuminated not only how certain teaching practices can empower her own students, but also how emancipatory education may influence institutional change.

CRT supports both critiques of root causes or manifestations of racism and the foregrounding of Black history, voices, and experiences (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). As a legal theory, it highlights systemic racism and white supremacy endemic to the legal system; applied to schools, CRT illuminates—to disrupt—similar issues in the education system (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). Evaluating the impacts of white supremacy is especially important in civics and social studies, where “racism is made invisible through the curriculum, participation in the profession, and its policies. CRT can serve as an analytic tool to explain the systemic omissions, distortions, and lies that plague the field” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 9). To apply CRT, this study included critical race praxis, courageous conversations, counter-narratives, and opportunities for civic action. Aligned with CRT, transformational coaching posits that coaching requires a recognition of racism and white supremacy's impacts on students and teachers and a commitment by coach and coached to systems-level change. The approach is thus “unique as a model to address equity—[coaches] work with individuals while surfacing the often invisible and often inequitable systems in which they work” (Aguilar, 2020, p. 34).

Partly because elements of CRT have been largely absent in traditional civics instruction, Black students have a distorted view of their civic selves—their civic identities (Busey & Walker, 2017; Myers et al., 2015). This study examined civic identity

through the lens of SIT, contemplating how students develop concepts of themselves as civic actors and civics education's influence thereof. SIT theorizes that identity is fluid, non-stationary, and created by social interactions (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020; Schachter, 2005). Theorists suggest that a positive civic identity, characterized by a strong sense of agency and self-efficacy, is influenced by civic engagement and participation opportunities. Guided by SIT, I analyzed students' intentional civics discourse and participation in a civics action activity to measure any evolution in their civic identities.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of my study was twofold: (a) to recognize how the unique experiences of Black middle school students influence their perceptions of civic engagement and participation in order to encourage students to engage with civics-related content and participate in civic action that fosters the development of positive, empowered civic identities and (b) to analyze how explicit coaching informed by a critical race praxis impacts one social studies teacher's implementation of high-quality civics instruction. As I learned alongside the participants, I also developed my own understanding of student and teacher experiences to improve my coaching practice. In action research, "changes occur within the setting or within the participants and researchers themselves" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 4). In my study, changes occurred within the classroom in which the study took place (the setting), in students (the participants), in the classroom teacher (the participant/collaborator), and in me (the researcher). My research questions were:

1. What contributes to Black middle school students' perceptions of citizenship?

2. How does high-quality civics instruction impact civic engagement, civic participation, and civic identity among Black middle school students?
3. How does ongoing instructional coaching in culturally responsive practices support teachers in implementing high-quality civics instruction?

These questions enabled me to foreground Black student voices and agency, investigate the impact of CRT-driven approaches to civics instruction, and draw connections between in-classroom coaching and emancipatory teaching practices. Despite having three distinct questions, I noticed considerable overlap as the students, teacher, and I explored civics concepts, activities, and implications together. This overlap is consistent with action research, where important opportunities for sense-making are often “messy” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 90).

Study Design

I conducted a participatory action research (PAR) study to answer my three research questions, incorporating elements of critical ethnography and narrative inquiry, which focus on discovery through observation (Hemment, 2007; Spradley, 1980). Unlike traditional educational research—*on*, rather than *with*, participants—action research provides room for real-time growth of all involved (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Traditional research also has a beginning and an end, whereas the end of an action research cycle is a new beginning, giving rise to new questions.

Action research was optimal for my study for several reasons. First, the cyclical nature of action research aligns with CRT’s demand for ongoing understanding of racism and white supremacy in the education system; it is like peeling an onion, with each research cycle revealing a new layer. The coaching cycle I conducted with the teacher

participant—a kind of cycle within a cycle—was not intended to be an isolated event but rather a continuation of and a prelude to other transformational coaching cycles throughout the year. Just like in action research, we are always rolling discoveries we find in one cycle into questions for the next one. Second, because I wanted to represent student voices and experiences authentically, action research accommodated the necessary subjectivity (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Similarly, transformational coaching aims to transform students, teachers, and systems by focusing on relationships, emotions, and connections, all of which require a level of subjectivity often absent in traditional research (Aguilar, 2020; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Third, action research’s intent to change lives and practice (Beaulieu, 2013) is consistent with transformational coaching, which addresses a coach’s and a teacher’s “own behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being” in order to “transform systems and the individuals within them” (Aguilar, 2020, p. 34).

I chose a qualitative research design to facilitate the subjectivity and open-ended investigation necessary to discern the meaning of student and teacher experiences as they encountered and co-created high-quality civics instruction. The study relied heavily on social interactions and expressed perceptions, whereas a quantitative approach would have reduced the experiences of Black students to mere numbers, counter to the spirit of CRT. Similarly, transformative coaching requires a high degree of vulnerability, trust, and sometimes uncomfortable conversations. Pretending objectivity or attempting to quantify effectiveness would have cheapened the experience for the teacher and for me.

Through purposeful sampling, I worked with one Project Inspire graduate, Bridgette Jackson,² who teaches social studies in a Chattanooga high-needs school and

² A pseudonym.

with whom I worked regularly in a coaching capacity. The student sample included students, based on willingness to participate and parental permission, in one of Ms. Jackson's social studies classes, which had a large concentration of Black students. All students participated in all aspects of the study, but 10 primary participants emerged, all of whom were Black. The elements of the study, which I will elaborate on in Chapter 3, were teacher-facilitated open discussions, a civics action activity, and the transformational coaching cycle. Data included observations, student coursework (surveys and artifacts related to the activity), teacher interviews, and coaching documents. Spradley's (1980) ethnographic inquiry methods, combined with critical narrative inquiry, drove my data analysis.

Positionality

Herr and Anderson (2015) described positionality as a continuum that requires researchers to answer the question, "Who am I in relationship to my participants and my setting?" (p. 37). Because action research inherently involves some level of subjectivity, I acknowledged and sought to monitor how my biases and my position in relation to the students and their teacher may have impacted the study. To maintain the validity of my study, I practiced what Efron and Ravid (2013) termed "disciplined subjectivity" by engaging in "ongoing self-reflection with regard to setting, participants, and the topic" (p. 71). As I interacted with participants, collected and assessed data, and reported findings, I constantly questioned and articulated how my own positionality was impacting the study.

Even as I saw the need for research for and with Black students about issues of race and racism, I had to reflect on and be aware of my own racial identity and how that impacted the study. As a white woman born to relative privilege, I have not personally

felt the impacts of racial and social injustice so endemic to many Black students' lives. As a Southerner, though, I encounter evidence of racism regularly and exist within a society still struggling with prejudice and bigotry. My experience with bigotry and racism drove me to work in campaign politics, for and with candidates who stood against injustice, for a large part of my adult life. I have always been open with students and teachers about my progressive political leanings and was never a teacher who feigned political neutrality. Participation in discussions with Ms. Jackson and her students resulted in similar disclosures. As I designed and conducted my study, I recognized my political leanings and passion for civic engagement as one of my biases warranting particular care and ongoing consideration.

My PAR study positioned me as an outsider co-learning with an insider: Ms. Jackson. As Herr and Anderson (2015) pointed out, “some researchers who are outsiders to the setting have little knowledge of it, while others may have extensive—and often firsthand—knowledge of the context” (p. 39). Having been a classroom teacher with a similar curriculum and student population, I had significant firsthand knowledge of the context. Further, our collaboration was rooted in our collective knowledge of the content, my expertise in applying culturally responsive practices to the content, and her developed relationships with her students.

Herr and Anderson (2015) acknowledged the complexity of collaborative research, especially in terms of reciprocity, explaining that “what each stakeholder wants out of the research” warrants careful negotiation (p. 50). Because my teacher participant was a Project Inspire graduate, my coaching was at her request; unlike a formal evaluator, (e.g., an administrator or a district instructional coach), I operated outside the district

hierarchy. That said, I had to be aware that, based on level of expertise and experience, a power imbalance—perceived or actual—could exist; therefore, I sought an egalitarian working relationship conducive to the collaborative nature of transformational coaching (Aguilar, 2020). Additionally, because I stood to earn a doctorate from this study, I was transparent about my goals and actively sought to honor the teacher participant’s goals. Her participation in the study needed to be worthwhile for her and her students; otherwise, I would have been conducting research *on* and not *with* the participants, which is antithetical to the purpose of action research (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Limitations

Despite my efforts for quality control and ethical practice, issues inevitably arose throughout the study. Possible limitations to my data sources include my own subjectivity and positionality, namely as a white woman and an outsider attempting to conduct research about race and racism with Black students. As much as I wanted to encourage a safe and open space for dialogue and student voices, as an adult authority figure, I likely influenced student responses such that they said what they thought I wanted to hear. Once students were aware of my passion for civics and civic participation, they may have answered survey questions in ways that seemed consistent with my espoused beliefs. I also experienced some pushback from the district based on what it perceived as the political nature of the study, which I will discuss further in Chapter 3.

Rationale

Myriad academic studies have addressed poor civics instruction, lackluster performance on civics assessments, and even how race impacts civic identity, yet implementation of high-quality civics instruction designed with students of color in mind

remains rare (Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016). My own experience as a teacher and ongoing observations as a coach illustrate that fact. Research on culturally responsive teaching practices, some even related to civics education, mostly addresses teachers rather than coaches (Gay, 2018), and an exhaustive search found no research on coaching related directly to high-quality civics education (Gladney et al., 2021).

Because I have witnessed how a lack of a rich civics experience impacts students, I felt compelled to take action to help teachers implement a curriculum that is conducive to creating positive civic identities among Black students. As Kinsler (2010) argued, action research “must also seek to produce change in the real lives of oppressed people everywhere, not just in educators’ attitudes, knowledge, and theories” (p. 187). Positive civic identities will, I hope, yield emancipatory outcomes for the student participants.

The primary stakeholders in my study were the students, the teacher participant, and me. As Chapter 4 will reveal, students benefited from exposure to the various study elements like the open discussions, the civics action activity, and even the opportunity to express themselves on surveys. One of the study’s emancipatory goals was for students to feel empowered to participate in and contribute to their world as informed and engaged citizens. Emancipatory action research can

produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives, and through this knowledge, [...] contribute to the increased well-being of human persons and communities to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology, leading not just to new knowledge, but to new abilities to create knowledge. (Kinsler, 2010, p. 186)

As students continue to develop their civic identities, their own communities will be impacted; if they develop more positive civic identities, communities will benefit from having members who are committed to service and political representation.

I fervently hope the student participants were inspired to become active and engaged in civic life, although their responses to the study were complex and diverse. Many students drew conclusions about civic life that did not necessarily align with my own civic identity, which is deeply rooted in voting and political action; however, having a safe space to consider their own beliefs and experiences may, in itself, have proven emancipatory. I had to remember that civic action does not begin and end with voting and politics; rather, it extends to social and community engagement. Determining the impact of my study on students required looking at if and how their civic identities developed in ways that made sense to them, not me.

I cannot measure the success of my study by whether students suddenly “awakened” to their new political selves and were ready to engage with politics; I knew success would be more nuanced—encompassing students’ using the power of their own experiences to frame their understandings of their civic identities and my learning from them to inform my own practice. Because I am a step removed from an actual classroom of my own, success also rested on whether my guidance as a coach influenced the teacher participant’s engagement with both the students and the civics curriculum. The study stood to impact my practice as I continually resolve to help teachers develop and implement high-quality civics instruction in their classrooms that is respectful of and responsive to students’ needs.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the wake of increased attempts at voter suppression; growing evidence of police violence; and ongoing housing, employment, educational, and income inequality, Black youth understand at a visceral level what injustice feels like. They need chances to process their experiences and develop proactive responses. Social studies classes have the potential of being the emancipatory space in which Black students can explore structural and institutional racism and consider their capacity to participate as change agents (Pinkney, 2016). Ladson-Billings (2003) noted, “The social studies can serve as a curricular home for unlearning the racism that has confounded us as a nation. Yet, we still find teachers continuing to tell us lies” (p. 8). Rather than revolutionizing instructional approaches to social studies, and, more specifically, civics content, the same whitewashed curricula, tone-deaf practices, and stale ideas are the standard for social studies education (Busey & Walker, 2017; Journell, 2016b).

At the urban schools I serve in Chattanooga, TN, whose populations are predominantly Black, I encounter students who often already have a cynical attitude toward the government; they lack intentional instruction on citizenship and the political process, as well as opportunities to critically and openly examine issues of race, racism, and structural inequalities that impact their civic lives and identities. Enveloping this problem of practice is social studies teachers’ own lack of sufficient training and support

to implement high-quality civics instruction. Therefore, this action research study investigated the following questions:

1. What contributes to Black middle school students' perceptions of citizenship?
2. How does high-quality civics instruction impact civic engagement, civic participation, and civic identity among Black middle school students?
3. How does ongoing instructional coaching in culturally responsive practices support teachers in implementing high-quality civics instruction?

Retracing my preparation for answering these questions, this chapter examines the history of civics education in the United States and, more specifically, how concepts of Black citizenship both complicate and are complicated by social studies instruction. The review also examines how instructional coaching has addressed racial inequities in schools by embracing key elements of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). Further, explaining fundamental tenets of my theoretical framework, linking CRT and SIT, justifies my use of those lenses. To illuminate the problem of practice, I also examine literature at the intersection of race, racism, and social studies practices, including how history and civics curricula, civic estrangement, lack of connection, and racial disparities in instruction uniquely harm Black students' civic identities and decrease the likelihood of civic engagement and participation. Next, the chapter details how high-quality civics instruction—marked by critical race praxis, courageous conversations, counter-narratives, and meaningful civic action—contributes to high-quality civics education for Black students. The review concludes with literature on how instructional coaching, specifically transformational coaching within a culturally responsive framework, can address systemic racism and inequities.

Literature Review Methodology

I conducted this review using online search tools, including EBSCO, ERIC, and Google Scholar. I also borrowed physical resources from the University of South Carolina library and purchased relevant books. Author and topic searches using the following keywords were instrumental to preliminary research: civics education, Black citizenship, critical pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, critical race praxis, civics curriculum, civic identity, coaching for equity, and transformational coaching. As the research progressed, other key terms emerged: critical patriotism, authoritarian patriotism, messianic narratives, counter-narrative, and action civics.

Historical Perspective

The American democratic experiment has always hinged on the idea that citizens determine both the members and function of the government, and the nation's founders deemed education to be essential to its successful continuation (Jennings, 2011). Samuel Adams (1779) wrote about the need for explicit civics instruction:

systems of education should be adopted and pursued which may not only diffuse a knowledge of the sciences but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country. (as cited in Thorne, 2010)

As education evolved in the United States, progressive reformers continued to see connections between education and democracy. Dewey (1938/2012) wrote of “the inherent, the vital and organic relation [...] from the side of education, the schools, and from the side of the very meaning of democracy” (p. 5). Civics education has been a

cornerstone of U.S. schools for centuries, attempted to prepare youth for a coming of age as fully realized participants in the democratic system (Journell, 2016b). Basic instruction in the structure and function of government and the political process, combined with elements of character education, has long been a hallmark of traditional civics education (Pinkney, 2016). Intended to prepare students to become “good citizens,” civics education is failing both to transmit basic understanding of civics knowledge and to inspire students to participate civically. Moreover, even as the principles laid down by the founders and early progressives still ring true, they remain principles voiced by white men responding to the urgent needs of their own times. Unfortunately, civics education has been mired in the continued transmission of white ideals of citizenship, paying little attention to the voices and needs of Black students (Stovall, 2016; Tillet, 2012).

Civics education, counter to common perception, is not a single course or separate from other social studies classes. In fact, civics education should be the backbone of the social studies, both a goal and context for students to apply content knowledge to their lives (Kissling, 2016). Based on my state’s social studies standards, beginning in kindergarten, students are supposed to learn key principles of the Constitution, the branches of government, and fundamentals of U.S. citizenship like voting and civil rights (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.-b). Unfortunately, elementary teachers often choose or are told to overlook social studies in favor of math and reading (Hauver, 2017; Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Whether civics instruction lacks rigor or seems to be an “afterthought” (Journell, 2014, p. 55), or whether it is proceduralist and mechanical, unable to inspire civic action or activism (Knight Abowitz & Mamlok, 2019), presenting civics concepts with insufficient contextualization inhibits real-world connections.

Black students are especially vulnerable to inadequate instruction on citizenship, the political process, or how structural racism and inequality have created barriers to full democratic participation (Clay & Rubin, 2020). Moreover, minoritized students' low-quality civics instruction can result in a higher level of distrust of political figures, a reduced likelihood of voting, and increased levels of political apathy (Journell, 2014; Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016). By the time they reach middle school, students often feel alienated from and uninformed about the political process, as well as unsure of their roles in a democracy they do not trust (Clay & Rubin, 2020).

The results of students' lack of exposure to both explicit civics content instruction and meaningful citizenship exploration are jarring. As I noted in Chapter 1, when only 24% of U.S. eighth-grade students who took a 2018 civics test scored at or above proficient, 31% of white students met the mark, while only 10% of Black students did (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.). The same data also indicate stagnant proficiency rates since 1998. Literature is rife with evidence of students and adults who cannot name the three branches of government, do not know who fought in the Revolutionary war, cannot pass the U.S. citizenship test, and ultimately do not participate in the political process (Journell, 2014; Kanter & Schneider, 2013; Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016).

Even as politicians and school leaders wring their hands over students' not knowing the significance of the Lincoln–Douglas debates or the branches of government, an equally—if not more—troubling trend persists in civics instruction (Journell, 2014). Beginning and ending with civics content knowledge precludes opportunities for students to make meaningful connections to their own lives or practice the underlying ideals of citizenship (Knight Abowitz & Mamlok, 2019). Studies indicate civics instruction in U.S.

schools largely focuses on content knowledge with few chances for students to engage with material in practical or critical ways (Blevins, 2016; Fleming, 2011). Students of color also tend to have fewer opportunities to engage in discussion about politics in civics classes, participate in out-of-classroom civics lessons, or learn about the importance of dissent as a civil right (Journell, 2016a; Stitzlein, 2015). Moreover, though exposure to civics content that includes practical applications and critical discussions makes students more likely to become engaged citizens, most states and districts have done little to try different approaches (Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016). Consequently, Black students are uniquely deprived of high-quality civics education in which the content and instructional practices support their particular cultural needs and encourage a critical examination of how race impacts civic participation and identity (Duncan, 2020).

Even as Black students receive substandard civics instruction, myriad teachers want to implement practices that support emancipatory outcomes for students but simply do not know how, pointing to a “gap between what [teachers] believe (or think they believe) and what they do (or are able to do)” (Aguilar, 2020, p. 5). Instructional coaching, which began as a tool to improve student outcomes by targeting teaching practices, has become common in schools across the United States, especially in the last 30 years (Knight, 2019). A growing body of evidence also suggests that coaching improves teacher self-reflection, self-efficacy, planning, and instructional delivery, all of which improves student learning (Aguilar, 2013; Robertson et al., 2020; Sailors & Price, 2015). Much of the literature surrounding coaching efficacy relates to instructional practices and student performance outcomes, but the coaching community has begun to embrace coaching’s potential for influencing systemic issues related to race, gender, and

language inequities that negatively impact diverse students (Aguilar, 2020; Teemant, 2014). Moreover, evidence suggests specific coaching in culturally responsive practices both improves teachers' implementation of CRP and results in positive student outcomes with diverse students (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Gladney et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Concepts of citizenship and civic participation have been complicated from the very inception of the United States, bound in questions of what constitutes a full citizen and upon whom the full rights and privileges of citizenship should be bestowed. These questions were mired in issues of property rights, gender, and race; of those, property and race played and continue to play a key role in how Black people are written in—and out—of the narrative of U.S. citizenship (Busey & Walker, 2017; Duncan, 2020). The fundamental foundational document of the United States, the Constitution, declared an enslaved person to be three-fifths of a human being; the same document ensured that only property owners had voting rights (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Despite substantial legal changes since 1787, the interconnectedness between ideas of exclusion and dominance persists in the U.S. democratic system and influences how Black students develop their own civic identities (Tillet, 2012).

Given my focus on Black students' experiences and perceptions, trying to understand their viewpoints without first recognizing racism's impact in education would be disingenuous. CRT in education facilitates analysis and critique of institutional racism, providing alternative ways to honor Black experiences and voices with tools such as narratives and counter-narratives (Ender, 2019). Incorporating ideas espoused in SIT, I examined how students formulate civic identities, especially in relation to their

experiences with racism, and explored how participants' civic identities intersect with and are influenced by race and their experiences with civic life, a culturally responsive civics curriculum, and their interactions with others.

CRT

CRT, which began as a legal theory to study racial inequality in the legal system, has become a popular tool for scholars to analyze and address the roles of race and racism in education. When Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) proposed applying CRT to education, they cited multicultural education's failure to theorize race; it was, they argued, "mired in liberal ideology that offers no radical change to the current order. Thus, CRT in education, like its antecedent in legal scholarship, is a radical critique of both the status quo and the purported reforms" (p. 62). In the decades since, CRT has continued to grow in popularity among education scholars, "no longer in its infancy. To the contrary, CRT has evolved into a type of revolutionary project. Such a project unapologetically centers race and examines how this key sociohistorical construct affects all facets of daily life" (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015, p. 218). In practice, CRT evaluates and critiques how curriculum, policy, and instruction reflect institutional racism (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015), which also manifests in racial biases among leadership, faculty, and students. To even attempt to understand the educational experiences of students of color and systemic educational inequity, race and racism must be central to any analysis.

In addition to the "intercentricity of race and racism," tenets of CRT also include a "challenge to the dominant ideology," "commitment to social justice," "centrality of experiential knowledge," and "interdisciplinary perspective" (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001, pp. 312–315). These beliefs manifest in CRT's reliance on narratives and

counter-narratives, which illustrate “alternative epistemologies” (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015, p. 209) and resist objectivity, objective truth, and universality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 2004). Because the accepted understandings of history, psychology, and education presented as objective “truths” are mired in racist beliefs, CRT offers alternative means of conceptualizing “facts” and disrupting dominant ideologies.

Social studies education presents unique challenges to “factual” representation; teaching history as objective truth whitewashes and normalizes racial dominance and oppression, precluding critical inquiry and counter-narratives (Duncan, 2020). Ladson-Billings (2003) described how the official curriculum, the exclusion of Black scholars and teachers, and social studies policies make racism invisible. Applying CRT to social studies is a way to confront the hidden curriculum and the absence of race in the field; by doing so with students, teachers can start to “address the disconnect between the artificial life of the classroom and [their] real lives” (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 10).

Scholars have built upon this groundwork by continuing to apply CRT to the field of social studies and civics education. Critical race scholarship in the social studies exposes and questions the master narrative of racial dominance, the doctrine of authoritarian patriotism, and the construction of Black citizenship (Busey & Walker, 2017; Ender, 2019; Pinkney, 2016). For example, a history of Black people that focuses on enslavement and subjugation pays scant attention to their contributions beyond forced labor (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Tillet, 2012). Positive portrayals, if any, highlight individual heroes and isolated movements, rather than tales of collective power or individual agency; this heroification of Black historical figures in a “messianic narrative” positions Black history as a series of tangential, individual occurrences rather than an integral part

of the national narrative (Busey & Walker, 2017; Woodson, 2016). These versions of history reify white supremacy and complicate Black students' understandings of their own place within the narrative and their conceptions of citizenship.

However, Duncan (2020) and others have employed CRT not just to examine and analyze inequity and injustice, but also to transform classrooms into emancipatory spaces for students to grapple with race and its interplay with citizenship and agency. This significant shift toward *critical race praxis* emerged in response to criticism that CRT highlights problems without providing solutions; critical race praxis, in essence, puts CRT into practice to effect actual change within schools and communities (Su, 2007). Stovall (2016) posited, “in most of the CRT in education scholarship, praxis is still implied more than it is addressed directly. Invoking the work of critical pedagogy, our actions must remain reflexive if we are ever to improve the current condition” (pp. 281–282). Further, many scholars have warned that invoking CRT to discuss or theorize race alone does not go far enough in producing emancipatory results or directly challenging real-world oppressive situations (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Stovall, 2013).

One of the most common forms of critical race praxis is CRP (Hayes & Juarez, 2012). Ladson-Billings (1995), who first discussed the application of CRT to education, envisioned CRP, originally culturally relevant pedagogy, as a framework for nurturing academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (see also Milner, 2014). CRP in social studies includes purposeful teaching about the links between race, subjugation, and inequity and manifests in challenging class discussions; investigation and creation of counter-narratives; critiques of accepted historical truths; and active

participation by students and teachers as school and community change agents (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Epstein et al., 2011; Epstein & Gist, 2015).

SIT

Based on Erikson's work in the 1950s, identity theory explains how a person's experiences shape their conception of self and how they interact with and view the world; various off-shoots have emerged, as well as challenges to Erikson's "goal-focused" ideas of identity formation (Schachter, 2005). One such off-shoot, SIT has the following characteristics:

Its core premise is that in many social situations people think of themselves and others as group members, rather than as unique individuals. The theory argues that social identity underpins intergroup behavior and sees this as qualitatively distinct from interpersonal behavior. It delineates the circumstances under which social identities are likely to become important, so that they become the primary determinant of social perceptions and social behaviors. The theory also specifies different strategies people employ to cope with a devalued social identity.

(Ellemers & Haslam, 2012, p. 379)

SIT explores the role of social interactions in individual identity formation. Erikson initially envisioned identity formation as an individual pursuit with an end goal, whereas more recent social identity theorists have described identity formation as social, non-static, and evolutionary (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020; Schachter, 2005).

Understanding how students' civic identities form and evolve requires considering their personal experiences and social interactions because civic identity essentially "refer[s] to the sense of self in civic life, which is a domain of personal

identity, and to the sense of membership, which is a component of social identity” (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018, p. 731). However, because civic identity is “a socially constructed process in which individuals become associated as a particular type of citizen created through social interactions in a given context” (Myers et al., 2015, p. 198), it can be a loaded term, with jingoistic connotations and idealized versions of what a “real American” should be. Black students’ civic identities are further complicated by racialized concepts of citizenship and belonging, resulting in a tendency to take on the perceived or actual attributes of their own social or cultural group’s identity (Hahn Tapper, 2013; Knight & Watson, 2014).

Suggesting a connection between a positive civic identity and civic action, engaging in civic activities, particularly when they are youth-identified and youth-led, can result in a sense of sociopolitical control and political efficacy (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2017). Sociopolitical control “describes personal beliefs relative to a person’s ability to generate political and community changes,” while political efficacy is “a person’s perceived ability to influence policy decisions in organizations or communities” (Martinez et al., 2017, p. 973). Studies also suggest that students exposed to critical race praxis have more critically developed civic identities and senses of agency (Epstein & Gist, 2015; Woodson, 2016).

Barriers to High-Quality Civics Instruction for Black Students

Barriers to high-quality, meaningful civics education are multi-layered and include not only what is taught, but what goes untaught—not only how citizenship is conceptualized, but how the traditional understanding of it goes unquestioned (Duncan, 2020; Woodson, 2016). Black students deserve a civics education that engenders

powerful citizenship rather than reinforcing warped notions of Black history and activism (Busey & Walker, 2017). What follows is an analysis of major obstacles to Black students' access to and engagement with such a civics education.

Curriculum

Attempts to revise the official social studies curriculum to be more inclusive of Black history have been trivial or whitewashed, further entrenching white supremacy and leaving Black students conflicted about their place as citizens in the U.S. historical narrative (Duncan, 2020). The “3C Framework” suggested by the National Council for the Social Studies ostensibly supports a focus on citizenship, critical thinking about cultural issues, and considering real-world applications of content and concepts, but has yet to provide clear guidance on how to implement these goals in ways that engage Black students or make efforts to deeply examine traditional notions of race and racism (Cummings, 2019; National Council for Social Studies, n.d.).

To the degree that social studies curriculum provides a foundation for students' understandings of history, its construction influences how students reconcile what they learn in school with what they experience and observe. Such construction is contentious, marked by longstanding debate on what is appropriate to include in or omit state standards, the accepted guidelines of what students should learn in each year or course (Heilig et al., 2012). The laser focus on standards, testing, and accountability in response to No Child Left Behind has created a shift toward compartmentalization and linear constructs, resulting in a litany of names, dates, and events that are easily digestible and testable; meanwhile, the words “race” or “racism” are notably absent or extremely rare in state standards (Busey & Walker, 2017; Heilig et al., 2012). Created in direct response to

state standards and testing requirements, textbooks rarely reflect the nuances of actual history; failing to provide depth or context, they also distort and silence Black people's roles in U.S. and world history (Cummings, 2019; King, 2015).

Emerging from curricular debates about Black history are representations that have “purposefully made Black children into a Racial Other or subtly promoted ideas about race that removed White people's culpability with issues of race and racism” (Brown & Brown, 2015, p. 109). What students learn about Black people, especially in U.S. history standards, largely encompasses three main time periods: Black enslavement in the antebellum South, Reconstruction, and the civil rights movements of the 1960s (Busey & Walker, 2017; Tillet, 2012). The curriculum surrounding Black enslavement and Reconstruction emphasizes physical bondage, victimhood, and a lack of agency while whitewashing the codified and systematic dominance perpetuated for centuries by white hands (Tillet, 2012). Portrayals of the civil rights era, on the other hand, focus on the works of individuals, especially Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, rather than emphasizing the sustained power of collective movements. Heilig et al. (2012) called the token incorporation of Black people in the history curriculum the “illusion of inclusion,” suggesting relatively minor mentions of Black history satisfy the demands for inclusion but reinforce its tangential status to the dominant narrative (p. 403).

The “messianic narrative” of a select few Black heroes highlights their rarity and impairs students' sense of their own civic agency (Woodson, 2016). Instead of focusing on the power and agency of ordinary Black people, the traditional curriculum acquaints students with figures whose status they may view as unattainable; they may see the election of President Obama, the first Black president, as the work of one man rather than

millions of Black voters and activists (Woodson, 2016). Further, messianic narratives often reduce heroes to stereotypes—upstanding members of society instead of radical, complex, and even flawed individuals (Brown & Brown, 2015). Myriad stories of everyday activists in the Black community, much less the histories of organizations like the Black Panthers or the Nation of Islam, are eschewed in favor of the elusive Black hero (Busey & Walker, 2017; Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Busey and Walker (2017) conducted a nationwide analysis of K–5 standards and found that, not only was the Black messianic narrative the predominant means by which students engaged with Black history across the country, but “authoritarian patriotism” was also prevalent in social studies curricula. Authoritarian patriotism exists in a curriculum that espouses U.S. exceptionalism, dogmatic love of country, and devotion to highlighting the heroic deeds of a few. According to the authors, the messianic narrative of Black history, in combination with authoritarian patriotism, diminishes the role of Black people in the national narrative and results in Black students’ linking the very ideas of citizenship to either blind allegiance or unattainable heroics (Busey & Walker, 2017).

Civic Estrangement

Du Bois (1903/2018) described the “double consciousness” of Black Americans as “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 9). Over a century later, this sense of double consciousness still pervades conceptions of Black citizenship and identity, manifesting in *civic estrangement*. As Tillet (2012) explained, Black people’s omission from civic myths and visual history (e.g., public monuments) results in a citizen/non-citizen duality and feelings of non-belonging and disillusionment. In other

words, while Black people have legal citizenship, the master narrative of citizenship excludes and marginalizes their contributions (Vickery, 2016).

Vickery (2017) distinguished between citizenship's "legal status that grants citizens certain rights, privileges, and freedoms that the government must protect" and its implications as "a social construct and discursive practice that has changed over time to exclude certain bodies from belonging and participating as legitimate members of the nation-state" (pp. 318–319). As such, the very idea of citizenship is rooted in belonging and exclusion, emphasizing Black people's historic disconnection from full citizenship and the socially constructed rights and privileges of the U.S. civic community. Naturally, Black students' civic identity development, which is intimately tied to both a sense of membership and racialized citizenship, is impacted by their estrangement from the master narrative and the resulting feelings of being both citizen insiders and outsiders (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018; Meyers et al., 2015).

Not only have Black students been asked to reconcile the rhetoric surrounding their ostensible citizenship with the rest of the history they have learned, but they must also attempt to locate themselves as citizens in a political space that is at worst hostile and at best uninviting toward their active participation (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Duncan, 2020). Despite witnessing rampant injustice, students encounter bland, whitewashed, social studies instruction that focuses on content knowledge without context or calls to action (Journell, 2016b). Dedication to avoiding controversy, couched in authoritarian patriotism, renders social studies curriculum all but irrelevant for Black students; as a result, they are disconnected from content, concepts, and the potential of active citizenship (Cummings, 2019; Kissling, 2016; Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016).

Students' negative interactions with and perceptions of political structures, in general, and the police, specifically, perpetuate "civic disjunction," which Clay and Rubin (2020) discussed as the disconnect between what Black students learn about the ideal of citizenship and their daily realities (p. 163). Whether termed "double consciousness," "civic estrangement," or "civic disjunction," Black students' irreconcilable classroom and lived experiences demand redress (Duncan, 2020).

Lack of Connection

Continuing to ignore Black students' needs, experiences, and skills related to citizenship fails to achieve the purported mission of civics education—to prepare all students to participate as active, engaged citizens (Duncan, 2020). From a whitewashed social studies curriculum that minimizes race and racism to the dedication to exclusionary models of citizenship to civics instruction that is substandard, Black students feel disconnected from the U.S. political system and the manners in which they typically encounter civics education in school (Busey & Walker, 2017; Heilig et al., 2012; Pinkney, 2016). Clay and Rubin (2020) noted, "students' daily experiences in a society marked by racial and socioeconomic inequalities become part of their evolving understandings of themselves as citizens—a lived, daily civics that is central to their civic learning and identity" (p. 163). By avoiding the realities of Black students' "lived, daily civics," traditional classroom-based civics instruction seems not only irrelevant, but factually inaccurate in the face of their own experiences (Clay & Rubin, 2020, p. 163).

Because the curriculum has omitted or removed race and racism, engaging in honest dialogue about them becomes inappropriate or controversial; the dedication to non-controversy and the avoidance of deep examination of injustice is one more reason

many Black students find civics and history irrelevant to their own lives (Cummings, 2019; Heilig et al., 2012). Moreover, approaching the concept of citizenship in ways that imply singularity or continue to highlight an obsolete version of an ideal citizen alienates Black students, whom the master narrative misrepresents (Vickery, 2017).

Racial Disparities in Instruction

Despite myriad options to expand, enhance, and critically examine the curriculum and help students explore the implications of racialized citizenship, evidence shows that Black students receive disproportionately poor civics education (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016; Pinkney, 2016). Pinkney's (2016) review of literature on efforts to educate Black students on citizenship, through the lens of CRT, found an inverse correlation between high-quality civics education for Black students and the presence of tracking, zero-tolerance discipline policies, a heavy focus on test scores to determine civic proficiency, funding disparities, and scant opportunity for students to enact civics knowledge. Echoing research on poor civics education's negative impact on Black civic identity and likely civic participation, Pinkney (2016) suggested, "students of color are less likely to receive in-class civics learning opportunities, yet they have the most to lose by continued failure to participate en masse" (p. 88).

Standardized test scores continue to indicate a racial "gap" in civics knowledge (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.), yet Clay and Rubin (2020) argued the more significant cause for concern is how poor-quality civics education impacts students' development of civic identity and agency. Even in schools serving majority Black populations, lower expectations for citizenship have resulted in students' "not learning to see themselves as part of the national discourse" (Pinkney, 2016, p. 89). In their quantitative study

comparing the experiences of white and non-white students' civics education experiences, Littenberg-Tobias and Cohen (2016) also eschewed the use of "gaps" to describe student achievement, knowledge, and opportunities. They attributed such racial disparities in civics education to the deficit model invoked to explain knowledge gaps, which fails to recognize the unique needs, experiences, and skills non-white students possess. In short, traditional approaches to civics education neither successfully impart civic knowledge nor inspire civic participation.

Opportunities for Emancipatory Civics Education and Outcomes

Removing all of Black students' barriers to high-quality civics education is not easy, yet existing scholarship suggests how to engage and inspire students toward civic participation and the development of positive civic identities. Further, teachers and students can take immediate action to encourage critical thinking about the existing curriculum despite its flaws. Academics and teachers alike have explored critical race praxis, especially CRP, as an approach to history and civics instruction (Epstein et al., 2011; Milner, 2014; Rodriguez, 2018; Stovall, 2013, 2016). Promising evidence also indicates that authentic class discussions about race and racism, counter-narratives, and opportunities for meaningful civic action can increase support for Black students (Busey & Walker, 2017; Ender, 2019; Epstein & Gist, 2015).

Critical Race Praxis

Putting CRT into classroom practice is not new. Purposefully challenging white supremacy and developing citizen-activists was an open goal of freedom schools, citizenship schools, the Highlander Center, and some all-Black schools during segregation (Pinkney, 2016). CRT, along with culturally relevant/responsive teaching,

simply gave a name to what many teachers, particularly teachers of color, had been doing for decades (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ever since, culturally responsive frameworks have guided teachers to encourage “sociopolitical consciousness” by challenging the master narrative of citizenship, forging relationships and community partnerships, affirming and cultivating student agency and identity, and intentionally disrupting and complicating racialized citizenship (Milner, 2014, p. 9; Vickery, 2016).

Student responses to culturally responsive history and civics education are promising: when teachers employ emancipatory methods, students are likely to gain “sociopolitical consciousness, become critical consumers of information, and develop a positive racial identity” (Duncan, 2020, p. 177). When students are exposed to instruction that encourages them to critically examine racist curriculum and problematize racialized citizenship, they are better prepared to navigate their own civic identities (Vickery, 2016). Purposefully incorporating Black students’ own cultures and experiences into instruction helps students understand how structural racism, agency, and identity influence one’s own place within the U.S. master narrative; it also centralizes student experiences as assets to learning, rather than framing their lack of civics knowledge as deficits (Epstein et al., 2011; Littenberg-Tobias and Cohen, 2016). By interrogating the traditional notions of citizenship and providing alternative conceptions of culturally diverse citizenship, teachers offer students a more appealing path to developing their own rich civic identities and senses of agency (Rodriguez, 2018).

Courageous Conversations

As Rodriguez (2018) and others have noted, “schools are an ideal site to nurture broader understandings of citizenship;” there is no place better suited than a social studies

classroom, where preparing students to become active citizens is an espoused goal (p. 549). One of the most powerful tools at the hands of emancipatory educators—open, honest, and often uncomfortable dialogue—enables teachers to address institutional racism, systemic injustice, and the power dynamics of racialized citizenship (Vickery, 2016). Engaging students in robust conversations that intentionally complicate race and citizenship, while making connections to students’ lives, increases students’ understanding of how to participate civically and aids in civic identity creation (Cummings, 2019; Duncan, 2020). Instead of avoiding controversy, social studies classrooms that incorporate and embrace controversy prepare students to engage in a “contentious democracy,” better equipped to recognize and respond to racism and injustice (Cummings, 2019, p. 291). Likewise, teachers have a responsibility to model their own positions on controversial topics by maintaining a stance of “committed impartiality,” which allows them to illustrate taking a stance while, at the same time, ensuring a safe space and encouraging all opinions (Journell, 2016a, p. 9).

Parkhouse (2018) discussed the striking potential of a space where students can come to terms with the idealized version of America in comparison to their own lived experiences: awareness of such a “disjuncture” can result in “empowered—as opposed to discouraged—civic identities if they are in classrooms with candid discussions of power” (p. 303). Further, Parkhouse added, this type of open discussion can demystify the master narrative and challenge the dynamics of institutionalized racial oppression and dominance. In other words, when teachers create spaces for Black students to engage with and critically examine issues that impact their daily lives, those students can develop and deepen their understandings of the world and their places in it.

Counter-Narratives

Amid traditional curriculum and instruction that normalizes and re-entrenches white supremacy, counter-narratives can complicate and disrupt common versions of both history and the present (Ender, 2019; Pinkney, 2016; Tillet, 2012). As seldom-told stories, especially of and by marginalized people, counter-narratives are a fundamental facet of CRT and vital to social justice-oriented education (Ender, 2019; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). Historical counter-narratives “contest the singularity of American civic myths to reconfigure a democratic aesthetic and praxis, and by extension write [African Americans] into the ultimate un-narrative of the United States” (Tillet, 2012, p. 10). Tillet (2012) further suggested that constructing counter-narratives can impact civic identity construction by challenging underlying assumptions about agency and power.

Because the master narrative has traditionally silenced Black voices, providing opportunities for students to read, discuss, and create alternative versions of what they have often been told is the whole story deepens and contextualizes their understandings of past, present, and their own future civic actions (Ender, 2019). Miller et al. (2020) suggested counter-narratives “document and share how race influences the educational experience of people of color, while countering the stories of the privileged that are considered normal and neutral” (p. 273). In this way, they re-story or repudiate traditional understandings of civics and citizenship. According to Duncan (2020), Black students’ counter-storytelling is itself a civic action, a form of active resistance that articulates the disjunction they feel between the master narrative of U.S. citizenship and their own lives.

Tillet’s (2012) exploration of counter-narratives included a call to embrace critical patriotism, characterized by “dissidence and dissent,” as opposed to “staunch allegiance

and an inflexible attachment to the country” (p. 11). Similarly, Busey and Walker (2017) contrasted authoritarian patriotism, which describes the dogmatic, blind loyalty to a flawed system, with democratic patriotism, which encourages dissent and questions even as it upholds the underlying principles and values of freedom, liberty, and civil rights. Moreover, Busey and Walker argued that Black critical patriotism has been an ever-present reality for Black Americans, even as the messianic narrative of Black history skews student perceptions of Black citizenship. Teaching students the historical contributions of Black intellectuals, freedom fighters, and ordinary citizens, as well as teaching them to critically interrogate and re-story the existing whitewashed curriculum, can transform their understandings of history and their own civic identities and activism (Busey & Walker, 2017; Woodson, 2016).

Civic Action Opportunities

One of the key racial disparities in civics education is the lack of opportunities to participate in civic action inside or outside the classroom (Pinkney, 2016). Research suggests that participation in civic action activities, particularly when combined with robust critical reflection and conversation, empowers youth as civic actors, contributes to a sense of belonging and purpose, and aids in the development of civic identity (Blevins et al., 2016; Moya, 2017; Schmidt, 2021). Blevins et al. (2016) outlined the steps for “actions civics”—examining one’s community, choosing issues, researching issues and setting goals, analyzing power, developing a plan of action, and enacting that plan—and argued that “effective civics instruction must value young people’s experiences, encourage students to use their voice and experiences in investigating community issues that are important to them, and provide appropriate scaffolding to help students to

understand how to make a difference” (p. 376). Educators who provide the necessary structures for students to consider issues important to them, develop plans for action, implement action plans, and reflect on the results help students make important connections between wanting to make a difference and taking action.

When exposed to critical civics instruction focused on social justice but devoid of opportunities to act, students of color more readily develop “aspirational” civic identities, characterized by the desire to make a difference in the future without the knowledge of how to impact change in the present (Moya, 2017, p. 468). As Moya (2017) found, “exposure to critical content was associated with students’ increased awareness of current injustice, but few opportunities to engage in important civic action limited students’ opportunities to adopt identities as individuals with the agency to address these social injustices” (p. 467). Instead, teachers can couple critical content with chances for students to practice civic participation, “foster[ing] critical civic identities marked by a robust sense of agency” (Moya, 2017, p. 472). If the goal, then, is to encourage students to envision themselves as informed and empowered agents of change, educators must provide opportunities for engagement with critical content and authentic civic action.

Schmidt (2021) emphasized civic experiences’ being rooted in collective critique and action, poised to “confront questions of injustice” and “resist neoliberal ideologies” (p. 164), a practice consistent with a critical race praxis as a means of accessing political and social power. When students work together to uncover, examine, critique, and take civic action around injustice, their collaboration influences their civic identity development. Consistent with SIT, Schmidt (2021) explained how working collectively

may uniquely impact the civic identity development of students of color and even countermand oppressive systems:

Civic identity development among [young people of color] is also a socially embedded process that can contradict the subjectification efforts of the state and involve self-making, a process that negotiates contested relations of belonging.... Engaging lived experiences, supporting critical thought, and facilitating informed action can honor unique cultural experiences, advance complex, hybrid identities, and support a growing sense of engagement and empowerment. (p. 165)

When students of color have opportunities to work collectively toward common goals they have identified as being unjust, they are not only finding their footing as empowered civic actors, they are resisting and even counteracting the insidious effects of the master narrative and authoritarian patriotism.

Related Research on High-Quality Civics Instruction

A combination of courageous conversations, counter-narratives, and authentic opportunities for civic participation in a classroom guided by a culturally responsive teacher can have a substantial impact on Black students' civic engagement, participation, and identities. Scholars have studied how these elements impact teachers and students. This section surveys examples most immediately relevant to my problem of practice.

Myers et al. (2015) illustrated how classroom discourse impacts civic identity. The interpretive study, based in social positioning theory, took place in three racially diverse classrooms at the same high school; all teacher participants were white. Myers et al. (2015) found that classroom discussions that purposefully complicated citizenship and patriotism, including what "being American" means for racially and linguistically diverse

people, directly impacted students' conception of their own civic identities (p. 201). The study supports the premise of SIT that identity stems from social interactions by pointing to student participants' envisioning their civic identities as fluid and constantly evolving after experiencing open class discussion about diverse perspectives on citizenship.

Similar studies with Black students and Black teachers connect the work to CRT and CRP. Two such studies by Vickery (2016, 2017) explored how Black teachers employed their own experiences to cultivate students' informed civic identities. The first, a qualitative multiple case study, found that the two female African American teacher participants' prior experiences shaped how they created their own conceptions of citizenship and how they conveyed them to their students. Black teachers, who possess their own intimate knowledge of injustice and racialized citizenship, can show students how to negotiate their conceptions of citizenship within the confines of a political structure that has historically excluded them. Both teachers in the study felt the "urgency" of conducting these types of discussion amid the political realities facing their students (Vickery, 2016, p. 729). Because those experiences had problematized citizenship for their students, Vickery further concluded that they sought to prepare students to navigate their own experiences with citizenship.

In a 3-year qualitative multiple case study, Vickery (2017) sought to understand how Black female teachers taught concepts of citizenship, as well as if and how they challenged the dominant concept to better align with their own experiences as citizens. Revealing how discussions about Black Lives Matter can help students see critical patriotism in action and how activism plays a role in cultivating civic identity and action, Vickery identified two main findings. First, the participants made a "striking case for the

necessity for a new construct of citizenship that is more inclusive” of Black women’s experiences (Vickery, 2017, p. 331). Second, each teacher created a space within their classroom, which Vickery (2017) called an “imagined community,” where citizenship could be reimagined, problematized, and made accessible (p. 331).

As part of a year-long narrative inquiry, Duncan (2020) built on the work of Vickery (2017) and others, studying culturally responsive Black teachers who intentionally complicate race and use their classrooms as spaces to challenge white supremacist ideology and encourage students to reflect on their own experiences and civic identities. Rejecting a “colorblind” approach to social studies curriculum and instruction, Duncan’s teacher participant used racialized current events discussion to center students’ experiences and enrich student understanding of the racism inherent in governmental and educational structures. Duncan’s (2020) call to teachers is as follows:

If social studies educators are serious about helping students become citizens in a diverse democracy, we must begin by helping our students see the ways that racism permeates structures and institutions, including the United States government, and turning our classrooms into spaces of fugitivity. (p. 187)

Duncan made the case that Black teachers who intentionally challenge traditional civics instructional practices and curriculum can transform their classrooms into emancipatory spaces for students to interrogate and explore their civic experiences and identities.

A study by Woodson (2016), focusing less on civic identity and more on Black civic agency, deepened my understanding of how the social studies curriculum distorts Black citizenship and civic participation. Through a 3-year critical race ethnography, Woodson collected data from nine participants aged 16–21 in a work readiness program

who had been identified as having behavioral or mental health diagnoses. Woodson concluded that master narratives, told to legitimize [white] power and position, and, more specifically, messianic master narratives, inhibit Black youth from developing their own sense of civic agency. Further, the participants viewed civil rights leaders as heroes but associated their actions as high-risk, dangerous, and deadly, citing assassination, gruesome deaths, and “righteous blood.” Some of Woodson’s participants viewed civic action as “not worth it” based on what they had been taught about how activists were treated. To the students, the term “civil rights activist” had been elevated to the point of being unattainable: after attending a local rally, they did not associate the term with any of the speakers. Woodson ultimately advocated for including diverse narratives and in-class interrogation of how the traditional view of what constitutes a civil rights leader has been historically created and manipulated to exclude most Black activists.

Also exploring how to challenge the messianic narrative, Ender (2019) explained how alternative interpretations of history and Black experiences may help students reconcile what they have learned with the realities of their communities and personal experiences. Using qualitative critical ethnography to study two teachers of color who worked in communities of color, Ender found that their intentional inclusion of counter-narratives in the social studies classroom effectively disrupted the accepted master narrative of heroism in history and cultivated a safe space in which students of color could openly discuss issues of race, racism, and class. Further, making connections to the community helped teachers and students contextualize and deepen understanding of historical themes that often marginalize or silence people of color.

The themes of community and personal experiences appeared in another study, which highlighted both the dangers of low-quality civics education and the great potential for critical civics. Clay and Rubin (2020) revisited three studies in which they had used a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach to develop their grounded theory of critically relevant civics. Echoing Woodson (2016), Clay and Rubin (2020) charged that poor-quality civics education uniquely harms non-white students and inhibits their active civic participation or positive civic identity development. The YPAR studies indicated first, that student participants of color were acutely aware of the injustice and racism in their communities and institutions; second, that students found a disjunction between their lived experiences and what they had learned about citizenship and history; and third, that students were eager, with guidance and opportunity, to take political action based on self-guided inquiry and robust classroom conversations. In two of the three YPAR studies, Rubin identified as a white woman. Because most studies on civics education for marginalized students come from scholars of color who enlisted teachers of color as participants (Duncan, 2020; Ender, 2019; Vickery, 2016, 2017; Woodson, 2016), Rubin's discussion of her positionality exemplified how to practice constant reflexivity while working with participants of color. As a white woman who taught predominantly Black students, I tried to practice this reflexivity; now, as a white woman who coaches many white women who teach predominantly Black students, I must model how to recognize, examine, and reflect on one's biases.

Transformational Coaching: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice

As the outstanding teachers in the existing studies illustrate, powerful civics instruction can improve how students envision themselves as citizens and how they take

part in critical discussions and civic action. In reality, however, few teachers may read and attempt to apply academic studies. Teachers who seek emancipatory outcomes for their students may receive some whole-group professional development (PD) on CRP, but likely without in-class coaching that supports enactment (Gladney et al., 2021). Instructional coaching is becoming more readily available, but is often limited to specific content areas, especially math and literacy, and focuses on content skills or “fixing” a struggling teacher’s practices (Sweeney & Harris, 2020). However, schools and programs can tailor coaching to the specific needs of marginalized students. Programs like the Project Inspire Teacher Residency, for example, practice transformational coaching for equity, with the goal of disrupting inequities and preparing teachers to engage in social justice education (Exum, 2019; Mangrum, 2021). Shifting the focus from “fixing” teachers to helping them understand students’ unique needs can support teachers toward designing and implementing high-quality civics instruction. What follows is an analysis of traditional PD’s inadequacies, a review of coaching approaches that incorporate culturally responsive practices, and an overview of transformational coaching.

Traditional Professional Development

Traditional PD, characterized by “direct instruction emphasizing fidelity of implementation,” has been teachers’ bane for decades (Knight, 2019, p. 101). Mounting evidence suggests traditional PD fails to improve practice, support leadership, or develop critical skills (Aguilar, 2013). Moreover, teachers often see state- or district-mandated training as administrators’ simply “checking the box,” with no real expectation of success and no consideration for their perceived and actual needs (Schwartz, 2019, p. 3).

One such need, especially for teachers of marginalized students, is more information on augmenting their instruction with culturally responsive practices (Cavendish et al., 2021). More widespread interest in culturally responsive and anti-racist teaching has also brought a corresponding increase in PD offerings geared toward districts, schools, and teachers who want to implement those practices. Despite the proliferation of CRP and anti-racist PD, however, studies suggest that, without in-classroom support, the results in terms of student outcomes are, at best, minimal (Cavendish et al., 2021; Gladney et al., 2021).

Effectiveness of CRP-informed Coaching

In-classroom support in the form of instructional coaching emerged partially as a response to ineffective teacher PD (Knight, 2019). According to Aguilar (2013):

Coaching is an essential component of an effective professional development program. Coaching can build will, skill, knowledge, and capacity because it can go where no other professional development has gone before: into the intellect, behaviors, practices, beliefs, values, and feelings of an educator.... A coach can foster conditions in which deep reflection and learning can take place, where a teacher can take risks to change her practice, where powerful conversations can take place and where growth is recognized and celebrated. (p. 8)

Coaching that includes training in culturally responsive practices and is based on the unique needs of diverse learners helps both students and teachers (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Carlson, 2020; Ramkellawan & Bell, 2017; Teemant et al., 2011). Teemant et al. (2011) examined whether coaching following a PD workshop had a positive impact on teachers of diverse learners. The quantitative study, grounded in the Five Standards Instructional

Model, concluded that a collaborative coaching relationship supported the application of key instructional practices like student agency in goal setting, connecting content to students' lived experiences, and cooperative learning. The study also found that teachers had the most difficulty enacting Standard 3: "connect teaching and the curriculum to experiences and skills of students' home and community" (Teemant et al., 2011, p. 684). In other words, the teacher participants needed the most coaching support in one of the key components of CRP—cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In a follow-up study that included qualitative data, the teacher participants overwhelmingly expressed that in-classroom coaching transformed how they implemented instruction, interacted with students, and engaged with the curriculum in ways that reflected a greater understanding of and respect for their diverse students' needs (Teemant, 2014).

Teachers continue to clamor for more training in culturally responsive practices, but they regularly encounter too much theory and not enough practical application. According to Gladney et al. (2021), just because pre-service teacher preparation programs and teacher PD sessions include exposure to CRP, teachers may not have a vision for how to include those practices in their instruction. Their study, which targeted racial disproportionality in school discipline, investigated how schoolwide PD followed by in-classroom coaching positively impacted student behavior and teacher reactions. The study concluded that teachers who received explicit coaching on embedding CRP into daily instruction implemented new practices with fidelity and high degrees of confidence; Black students exposed to these new practices also benefited, with fewer reports of behavior infractions and higher levels of classroom engagement.

A Bradshaw et al. (2018) study, which also targeted disproportionality in discipline, described how augmenting a traditional coaching model with explicit coaching in culturally responsive practices impacted teacher attitudes, implementation of CRP, and disciplinary referral rates. The 12 schools in the study implemented the Double Check system, which includes group PD on behavioral interventions, CRP training, and individual classroom coaching. Bradshaw et al. (2018) concluded that the system improved teachers' "beliefs, efficacy, and self-assessment of culturally responsive behavior management as well as [reducing] stress," while individual coaching had the most impact on teachers' use of CRP and resultant student behaviors (p. 130).

Individual coaching can impact classroom behavior beyond discipline. Carlson (2020) described a program focused on positive interactions and relationship building between students and teachers, prioritizing student voices, and connecting content with students' lived experiences. By analyzing classroom instruction alongside coaches, teachers learned to intentionally plan for greater student participation in collaborative work and discourse designed to engage them in higher-level thinking. Emphasizing how coaching can help teachers learn to listen to students, resulting in the authentic relationships necessary for conversations about racism and social justice, Carlson (2020) wrote, "when we keep student voice at the center of our practice, we prioritize equity and we ensure that we don't miss out on what the kids have to say" (p. 31).

To be truly transformative, coaching must include discussions with teachers that delve into underlying belief systems and implicit biases that may negatively impact students (Ramkellawan & Bell, 2017). As Ramkellawan and Bell showed, direct—even uncomfortable—conversations about mindset can yield powerful results. They also

illustrated how examining student data is a tangible way of drawing connections between transformed instructional practices and positive student outcomes:

The rationale for being direct within the context of schools and coaching educators is that students' lives are invaluable. Students do not have the luxury of 'do-overs' in their formative educational years, and it is ultimately the adults' responsibility to ensure educational equity. (Ramkellawan & Bell, 2017, p. 388)

If teachers and administrators feel the same sense of urgency to incorporate CRP, explicit coaching—especially transformative coaching—can help them realize their goals.

Transformational Coaching

According to Aguilar (2013), instructional coaching, in addition to being transformative for students and teachers, can also affect broader education and social institutions. Grounded in systems theory, transformational coaching considers individual teachers and students, the schools in which they operate, and broader education as social systems. Instead of working to "fix teachers," transformational coaching relies on trusting relationships to challenge behaviors and beliefs and encourage growth in all parties involved—including the coach. As collaborators, teachers and coaches can "identify high-leverage entry points that could result in transformational changes for children" (Aguilar, 2013, p. 27). Analyzing classroom scenarios together, through a systems lens, reveals the factors involved and illuminates next steps that may have the greatest impact on student outcomes, school change, and even systems-level transformation.

Aguilar (2020) built on the transformational coaching model by adding an explicit focus on combatting inequities and white supremacy within schools and systems. Existing scholarship and PD on the topic of creating more equitable schools

notwithstanding, Aguilar cited a large gap between what individual teachers and others want to do and what they have the ability to do. To address the discrepancy, Aguilar (2020) proposed a coaching framework called “Mind the Gap” that identifies six categories—“skill gaps, knowledge gaps, capacity gaps, will gaps, cultural competence gaps, and emotional intelligence gaps”—as potential areas for growth (p. 130). Cultural competence is especially vital to diverse settings, requiring more than “a one-day training” (Aguilar, 2020, p. 130). Indeed, Aguilar discouraged simply tacking equity onto a traditional coaching framework; rather, an equity lens should inform every element of transformational coaching. All coaching conversations, observations, and suggestions offer equal opportunities for addressing systemic oppression.

Summary

This chapter identified flaws in civics curriculum and instruction that uniquely harm Black students and contribute to negative attitudes toward and propensity for civic participation, as well as conflicted civic identities. The very idea of U.S. citizenship, mired in white supremacy, exclusion, and non-membership, contributes to Black students’ civic estrangement born from the disjunction between their lived experiences and the dominant narrative. CRT and SIT illuminated the interconnectedness of racialized citizenship and social identity creation and pointed to practical resolution. Empirical research, in turn, demonstrated how CRP in social studies classrooms, especially with in-classroom instructional coaching, can improve students’ perceptions of their own civic identities and political agency. The next chapter describes my plan to apply these insights.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Herr and Anderson (2015) used the analogy of designing a plane while flying it to describe action research, and my study was a prime example of the tendency to encounter unforeseen complexities. I proposed a 6-week study in a seventh-grade social studies classroom, intending to collect data from Black students. After securing approval from the university's institutional review board, I submitted my proposal to the school district, which unceremoniously rejected it, citing a new state law. The legislation in question resembles others across the country that threaten districts, schools, and teachers with legal and/or financial consequences for discussing race and systemic racism (Allison, 2021). Despite my appeals, the district staff responsible for approval maintained that my proposal as written was too risky for the district. I was, however, able to submit a new proposal with sanitized language and specific ties to approved curriculum; that proposal was eventually approved. I fundamentally disagreed with the initial decision, believing strongly that the study violated neither the spirit nor letter of the law, but I was willing to take necessary steps to continue what I believe is important work. In truth, I have close ties to the district, the school, the teacher, and the students who were to be involved and did not want them to be targeted for legal action or media attention based on this study.

With the core of the proposal intact, I noted two necessary augmentations. First, I had to tie the unit to specific state standards and an approved lesson. Unfortunately, the state-approved seventh-grade lesson—which I wrote—occurs in the fall, so I switched to

a sixth-grade lesson and class to collect data in the spring, in accordance with my research timeline. This seemingly small change actually had significant consequences. Because of the hyper-focus on math and reading in elementary grades, sixth-grade students are typically encountering daily social studies instruction for the first time and are thus less used to open discussions, historical thinking, and exposure to current events than their seventh-grade counterparts (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Moreover, before the start of the study and in anticipation of working with Ms. Jackson's seventh graders, she and I had focused our coaching sessions around those students. I had spent significant time with them, including as a teacher during the prior year, but not with the sixth-grade students who became my participants. As a result, Ms. Jackson and I opted to slow down, and the proposed 6-week study spanned over 4 months.

The second major change was that, instead of collecting data from an expected 5–8 Black students, the district preferred that I collect data from all students in the class. Though the sheer volume of data was daunting at first, as I will explain, this alteration to the original proposal enriched my data analysis in unexpected ways. Even as Black students' perceptions, experiences, and voices remained central to the data collection and analysis processes, documenting the other students' experiences was illuminating and provided unexpected, but not unwelcome, nuance.

Study Design

The study investigated how a civics curriculum that celebrates student voice and disrupts traditional messages of citizenship impacted Black middle school social studies students; it also explored how explicit coaching in CRP could help a teacher who was attempting to engage in emancipatory education more effectively implement that type of

curriculum. After witnessing the positive student outcomes resulting from intentionally applying elements of critical race praxis in my own classroom, I wanted to formalize those findings by engaging in a collaborative coaching cycle, rooted in transformational coaching, with a Project Inspire graduate now teaching social studies in a Chattanooga high-needs school. Together, we designed a unit that included a civics action activity and participation in open classroom discussions on civics-related topics.

Traditional educational research relies on a top-down approach to disseminating findings, conveying generalized knowledge from an academic researcher to educator-consumers (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Conversely, action research involves a cycle wherein an educator formulates questions, gathers information, and feeds that information back into the process to generate more questions. The purposes of action research “transcend mere knowledge generation to include personal and professional growth, and organizational and community empowerment” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 1).

Action research was the appropriate tool for conducting my study for several reasons. First, given the cyclical nature of action research, the reported results of my study, rather than being a stopping point, have catalyzed even more questions for further research. Even as I coached Ms. Jackson in the implementation of high-quality civics instruction that is responsive to students’ unique needs, action research allowed me to consider ways to continue exploring the topic beyond the study. The action research cycle also aligns with the phases of transformational coaching: surface, recognize, explore, and create new practices (Aguilar, 2020). Second, action research provides space for subjectivity instead of the assumed objectivity of traditional research; relationships between participants and researcher are assets instead of hindrances. As Efron and Ravid

(2013) noted, “understanding of students’ social and historical circumstances and knowing their past and present successes and failures, fears, and dreams enable the practitioners to gain insight into their students’ worlds” (p. 4). Among the key tenets of transformational coaching, building relationships and exploring emotions demand a level of subjectivity and vulnerability generally absent in traditional research (Aguilar, 2020). Finally, action research “is about improving the quality of human life, acquiring knowledge to become better practitioners and developing strategies to address problems” (Beaulieu, 2013, p. 33). The goals of the study were to improve my practice as a coach, influence the practice of the teacher participant, and ultimately impact students’ quality of life as they continue to develop positive civic identities.

As Chapter 1 explained, my purpose was twofold: (a) to recognize how the unique experiences of Black middle school students influence their perceptions of civic engagement and participation in order to encourage students to engage with civics-related content and participate in civic action that fosters the development of positive, empowered civic identities and (b) to analyze how explicit coaching informed by a critical race praxis impacts one social studies teacher’s implementation of high-quality civics instruction. In short, I wanted to explore Black middle school students’ unique perceptions of and experiences with civics-related content and concepts and investigate how my coaching may influence civics instruction. Thus, I conducted emancipatory PAR that combined elements of critical ethnography and critical narrative inquiry. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “the factor that unites all forms of ethnography is its focus on human society and culture” (p. 29). I studied how the shared culture of Black middle school students influenced their perceptions of and experiences with civic life.

My study incorporated individual and collective student narratives as illustrations of how culture influences their stories and experiences. A central feature of CRT, narrative inquiry, or the use of stories as data, helped me both elevate student voices and understand student experiences throughout data collection and analysis. As Byrne (2017) explained, narrative inquiry, a multifaceted methodology,

becomes the spaces between which researchers move during data collection, analysis and representation. [Researchers] are always in relation to the various narratives and the participants as they are in relation to each other, place and time.

This narrative view of experience and of research activity permeates all levels of the process and is at once a unifying force and a challenge to maintain. (p. 38)

Critical narrative inquiry provided a means to explicitly examine narratives for themes of knowledge construction, power, and reflexivity (Hickson, 2016). I committed not only to recording, but also to engaging with, the experiences and narratives students constructed. Pino Gavidia and Adu (2020) explained, “when engaged with narrative inquiry, we become co-participants to co-construct the knowledge alongside the participants across particular places and time” (p. 1). I had to remain cognizant throughout the process of the responsibility I had of representing the students and Ms. Jackson, while also being transparent about how I reconstructed stories based on my own experiences.

Exploring the impacts of both coach and teacher on how students experienced and engaged with high-quality civics content justified my PAR design, especially in combination with critical ethnography. To Hemment (2007), the two approaches are “uniquely compatible,” given how PAR is “concerned with global/structural inequality” as well as “attentive to the power relations inherent within the research encounter” (p.

301). PAR's emphasis on collaboration extends traditional ethnography in a critical direction. Collaborating with my teacher participant provided rich data on the study's impact on students, the teacher, the class community, and me. Action research in general "challeng[es] traditional notions of change and change agency that bring in outside experts to solve local problems. PAR tempers this expert knowledge with the expertise of locals about their own problems and solutions" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 11). I brought a certain level of expertise both in content and transformational coaching strategies, while Ms. Jackson brought invaluable knowledge of her students and their needs.

As I indicated in Chapter 1, my qualitative research design lent itself to authentic representation of Black voices, experiences, and agency, allowing an open-ended examination of how the meaning of student experiences influenced their civic identities. Qualitative methods facilitate studies of "school situations and events as they unfold naturally. The focus of the investigation is on the meaning of these experiences for the individuals and groups in these settings" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 40). Additionally, my study incorporated critical qualitative research, which can "expose repression, domination, and inequities and bring about social change" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 42). Because my study incorporated a critical race praxis in express pursuit of emancipatory outcomes, as well as a critique of institutional racism in education, I chose a critical qualitative research approach to provide space for openly subjective analysis.

Although I did consider a mixed-methods approach (i.e., including a quantitative pre- and post-intervention survey to measure attitudes and perceptions of civic life), upon reflection, I decided reducing student perceptions and emotions to quantifiable data diminishes the complexities of their experiences. Qualitative methods identify trends and

patterns (Efron & Ravid, 2013), conducive to respecting both the participants in my study and the spirit of a CRT-driven approach—and appropriate for my research questions:

1. What contributes to Black middle school students' perceptions of citizenship?
2. How does high-quality civics instruction impact civic engagement, civic participation, and civic identity among Black middle school students?
3. How does ongoing instructional coaching in culturally responsive practices support teachers in implementing high-quality civics instruction?

Through Question 1, I acknowledged that minoritized students are uniquely deprived of high-quality civics instruction (Journell, 2014; Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016) and attempted to understand the negative attitudes Black students often display toward civic participation. Instead of assuming all students feel the same way for the same reasons, Question 1 was open to students' explaining their attitudes in their own words. Unlike traditional educational research, which may view students as “essentially similar,” action research allows room to recognize and explore the “uniqueness of each student and the particular historical, social, economic, and cultural context of each setting” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 3). As I studied how high-quality civics curriculum might impact Black students, I attempted to understand the complex, underlying issues that affect student attitudes. Reliance on and respect for student voices inspired this study, so Question 1 focused on student narratives and counter-narratives, central tenets of CRT.

Question 2 informed and was informed by Question 1, investigating how open dialogue, self-reflection, and participation in civic action may influence students' civic identities. Students were the study's driving force, shaping the direction of discussions and the nature of the civic action activity. Including students in the research cycle was

purposeful because “action research is about doing research *with* others, not doing research *on* others” (Beaulieu, 2013, p. 33). The fluid and sometimes overlapping stages of this study resulted in students’ interacting with a civics curriculum that extended beyond the simple transferal of civics knowledge. In some ways, by answering Question 2, I looped back to define what “high-quality civics instruction” looked like in a class that values student experiences and fosters emancipatory outcomes.

Knowing that identity is an ever-evolving construct, as in SIT, I posed Question 2 to probe how the study’s various elements impacted students’ understanding of their identities in relation to a wider civic community (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020; Schachter, 2005). Civic identity, more than the action of civic participation alone, encompasses how people perceive themselves in relation to the world and sits at the intersection of the political and personal. Civic identity develops within a political, social, and economic context and involves cultivating community, responsibility, and empathy (Knefelcamp, 2008). As I attempted to answer Question 2, I tried to trace students’ evolving civic identities as they interacted with an augmented civics curriculum.

Despite teachers’ desire for emancipatory student outcomes, limited PD on CRP can impede a high-quality civics curriculum (Gladney et al., 2021; Milner, 2014; Vickery, 2016). Thus, with Question 3, I explored how ongoing classroom support based on the principles of transformational coaching influenced a teacher’s conception, preparation, and implementation of high-quality—meaning emancipatory—civics instruction (Aguilar, 2020). As a Project Inspire coach, I help residents and graduates apply culturally responsive practices in their classrooms. For social studies teachers, in particular, this coaching encourages elements of CRP—critical conversations, critiques of

accepted historical truths, and active participation by students and teachers as school and community change agents (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Epstein et al., 2011; Epstein & Gist, 2015). Answering Question 3 required working closely with the teacher participant to evaluate students and plan for next steps based on what we learned from Questions 1 and 2. This co-construction of the study during its implementation aligned with both PAR and critical ethnography. Operating in the participatory strand of critical ethnography, I took the stance of a “researcher activist,” warranting a “focus on three crucial aspects: trust when developing relationships with the community, intervention as the researcher and the researched co-create opportunities for social change, and the sustainability of such change” (Palmer & Caldas, 2017, p. 386). Throughout the study, I attempted to cultivate and nurture a trusting relationship with the teacher participant to authentically collaborate and co-create opportunities for student voices to shine.

Setting and Participants

Chattanooga, Tennessee’s third-largest city, has approximately 190,000 residents and lies within Hamilton County, with an estimated population of 368,000 as of 2019 (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Hamilton County Schools includes all public schools in the city and the surrounding county, serving an estimated 45,000 students, of whom approximately 31% are Black (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.-a). Not including charter schools, 35 of 79 schools in the district accept Title I funds (Hamilton County Schools, n.d.). Within this broader context, I used purposeful sampling to select a school, a teacher participant, and student participants. I chose Oak Crest Middle School³ (OCMS) for two primary reasons: I worked there for 4 years as a social studies teacher

³ A pseudonym.

and instructional coach, and Ms. Jackson worked there at the time of the study. Located in downtown Chattanooga, OCMS had a 2021–2022 student population of 413, 85% of whom were Black, 12% of whom were Hispanic, and over 83% of whom were economically disadvantaged (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.-b). The state designated OCMS a “Priority/Comprehensive Support and Improvement School” because of low performance indicators (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.-b). Despite low achievement in math and reading, OCMS students had shown consistent growth and improved proficiency in social studies (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.-b).

I invited Ms. Jackson to participate because she taught social studies at OCMS and, as a Project Inspire graduate, received voluntary coaching from me. My study warranted a teacher participant who was both a current social studies teacher in a high-needs school (i.e., Title I) and a graduate of Project Inspire whom I regularly coached. Three teachers met these criteria: two who had been residents in my classroom and one with whom I had worked extensively both during and after her residency. They all received voluntary post-residency support during the 2021–2022 school year; they also each expressed a desire to explore culturally responsive teaching practices more deeply. However, I reached out to Ms. Jackson first because she worked at the school where I worked for 4 years and where we worked together during her year of residency. She taught sixth- and seventh-grade social studies, which, in hindsight, made the grade-level switch to accommodate district approval easier. Choosing Oak Crest and Ms. Jackson was ideal for my study because of our existing relationship, the continuity of the student population, and my familiarity with school-based expectations and policies.

My purposeful student sample included students in one section of Ms. Jackson's sixth-grade social studies class. Of the 23 students on the initial roster, 15 were Black, 7 were Hispanic, and 1 was white, but the white student transferred to the district's virtual school during the study. Honoring the district's request, I collected data from all students. Black students' experiences with citizenship and identity remained central to the study, but including all students in some capacity made this action research more impactful—for the student participants, the teacher participant, and me.

Nevertheless, I identified 10 primary participants whose data will predominate Chapter 4. Nine emerged early during recursive data analysis, which characterizes action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015), because (a) they were consistently present for class discussions and activities, (b) I was more involved with their self-selected activity groups, and (c) they actively participated in class discussions. The other student became a primary participant because of his teacher-imposed isolation from group activities, providing insight into how and whether social identity influenced or was influenced by his participation or lack of it. All primary participants were Black, whereas none of the seven ELLs—6 girls and 1 boy—happened to emerge as primary participants. The six girls self-selected into two project groups, and the boy wanted to work alone. Because Ms. Jackson had a richer understanding of their layered language needs, she concentrated on working with their groups while I worked with the others, which limited my opportunities to collect narrative and observational data from them.

Data Collection

The study consisted of several moving parts that simultaneously informed and were informed by each other, reflecting “an action research spiral in which each cycle

increases the researchers' knowledge of the original question, puzzle, or problem" en route to solutions (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 5). Figure 3.1 illustrates the interplay and overlap among three major elements: teacher-led classroom discussions, a civics action activity, and a transformational coaching cycle. The first element, teacher-facilitated open discussions, aligned with the civic engagement portion of Question 1, given that dialogue is key to engagement (Journell, 2014). Ms. Jackson and I had, in coaching sessions prior to the study, reviewed strategies and techniques that encourage productive student discourse like accountable talk and structured talk; in fact, the district regularly sent teachers to Ms. Jackson's classroom to observe high-level discourse strategies in action. Distinct from the open discussions to which students were already accustomed, however, the discussions in this study focused intentionally on the benefits of civic participation. Ms. Jackson and I co-planned each discussion in advance during coaching sessions, considering how to elevate students' voices, include all students, and provide opportunities for students to connect civics concepts to their own lived experiences.

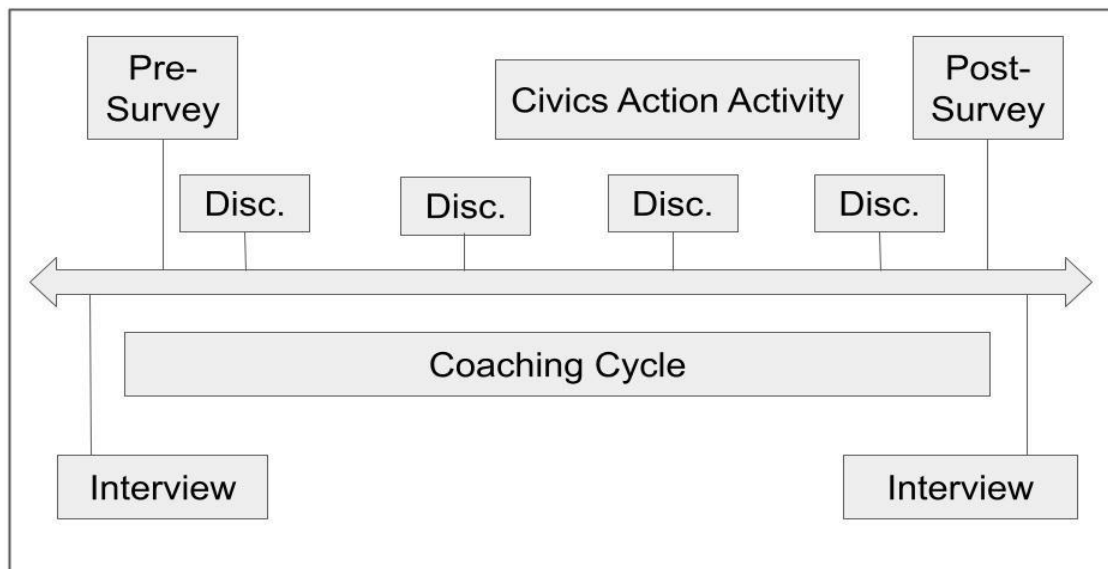


Figure 3.1 *Study Elements*

For the second element, students chose their own activity; with whom, if anyone, they wanted to work; and whether their activity would continue beyond the study. As is common in action research, this structure included overlap. Discussions appeared to influence the activities, and as students developed and implemented their activities, additional discussions emerged, while ongoing coaching influenced the other elements.

The coaching cycle with the teacher participant, rooted in transformational coaching (Aguilar, 2020), was the third element. Coaching cycles mirror action research cycles: practitioners identify a student-based goal, choose a practice to address that goal, implement the practice, gather evidence, evaluate results, and determine next steps (Herr & Anderson, 2015). I no longer work in the district, so the coaching was voluntary on the part of the teacher participant and, unlike district- or school-based coaches, I was largely a collaborator and thinking partner, rather than an evaluator. However, as a researcher invested in all three elements of the study, I collected four types of qualitative data: observation, student coursework, interviews, and coaching cycle documents (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 *Data Collection*

Data source	Collected	RQ(s)
Observation (unstructured)	During open class discussions	1 & 3
Observation (semi-structured)	During the action activity	2 & 3
Student coursework (surveys)	1 week before open discussion (pre-activity) & 1 week after the action activity (post-activity)	1 & 2
Student coursework (discussion)	During open class discussions	1 & 2
Student coursework (action activity)	During the action activity	2
Teacher interviews	1 week before & after the coaching cycle	3
Coaching cycle documents	During the coaching cycle	3

Observation

I observed two specific scenarios. The first, which was unstructured, was a teacher-facilitated open discussion about civics-related topics. Students participated in three of these open-discussion sessions before they began the action activity. Open discussions also coincided with the action activity. My unstructured approach enabled me to “look at what is taking place in the classroom setting before deciding what is significant” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 87). In planning discussions, Ms. Jackson and I attempted to ensure student discourse about current events and civics topics could develop organically; we also, based on student input and our own observations, determined which scaffolds would enhance student engagement and understanding.

I recorded condensed, handwritten field notes, which I transferred to an expanded digital format within hours of discussions, seeking to capture my recollections as quickly and precisely as possible (Spradley, 1980). I made an exerted effort to capture key terms verbatim to retain participants’ voices and meanings and invited the students and Ms. Jackson to review these notes for accuracy. These field notes were especially important for answering Question 1 because I recorded and reflected on student engagement with and perception of civics. Observing the teacher’s facilitation of the open discussion helped me answer Question 3. I also kept a fieldwork journal “to document ongoing thinking, decisions, and actions” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 91); the journal was critical for capturing my reflections on the study’s various moving parts, the participants, and my positionality. Spradley (1980) compared a fieldwork journal to a diary, “a record of experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems...[that] represents the personal side of fieldwork; it includes reactions to informants and the

feelings [a researcher can] sense from others” (p. 71). In this way, the journal helped me make meaning throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

The second type of observation was semi-structured and occurred as students planned and implemented their activities. Working alongside the teacher participant and independently to lead small groups, I recorded and reflected on levels of student engagement and general attitudes about civic participation. I also observed Ms. Jackson’s interactions with students for evidence of strategies we discussed in coaching sessions. To structure my field notes, I looked for indicators of student engagement and participation and the application of specific culturally responsive practices (Appendix A). My descriptive notes “zoomed in” to factual details of classroom life, and my reflective notes made meaning of the classroom activity and examined my positionality (Efron & Ravid, 2013). This approach helped me answer Question 2 by collecting data about student civic identities as they engaged with a high-quality civics curriculum. Data related to the teacher’s use of culturally responsive practices informed Question 3.

Student Coursework

I administered unstructured, open-ended, pre- and post-activity surveys to students about race and civic participation to address Questions 1 and 2 (Appendix B; Appendix C). The pre-activity survey, administered 1 week before the first discussion, informed Question 1, providing details about whether students have negative perceptions of civic participation and, if so, from where the perceptions may stem. The post-activity survey, administered 1 week after the completion of the action activity, enriched my understanding of Question 1 by indicating whether/how students’ perceptions changed.

The post-activity survey helped me answer Question 2 by providing data on whether the civics curriculum produced any positive results and, if so, how.

I collected artifacts before, during, and after class discussions in the form of “do nows,” “exit tickets,” and reflections, which informed Questions 1 and 2. For example, we asked students to write a short reflection during a discussion about the characteristics of a “good citizen;” their responses informed Question 1 by shedding light on their thoughts about what constitutes proper civic behavior. I also collected data throughout the activities students decided to pursue based on their interactions with the curriculum in the form of their action plans, their written justifications, and their reflections on their actions. In response to Question 2, these artifacts illustrated the civics curriculum’s impact on students’ desire to participate in civic life and their civic identities.

The activity was part of a unit Ms. Jackson and I co-planned based on the Tennessee state standards for social studies, but students determined the exact details, beyond including some sort of narrative and a tangible action step. Students proposed everything from anti-bullying posters to hosting a guest speaker to planting trees, and all wrote reflections based on their experiences, including with the class discussions.

Interviews

I conducted two semi-structured interviews with the teacher participant, posing open-ended and follow-up questions (Appendix D; Appendix E). One occurred after school 1 week before the coaching cycle. The second took place 1 week after the cycle. The interviews informed Question 3, as Ms. Jackson discussed her experiences working with Black middle school students, civics content, and to what extent her Project Inspire residency prepared her to implement culturally relevant practices.

Coaching Cycle Documents

During the coaching cycle, we produced what Efron and Ravid (2013) termed “episodic” artifacts, which detailed the focus of the cycle, steps taken throughout the cycle, unit planning documents, and an augmented final analysis and next steps document based on Aguilar’s (2020) Equity Rubric. As I suggested earlier, my action research cycle overlaid the coaching cycle, so some data—pre- and post-activity surveys, observations, and student coursework—were also a part of the coaching cycle. The coaching cycle documents informed Question 3, providing valuable insight into how transformational coaching may impact the teacher participant’s understanding of and capacity to implement high-quality, culturally responsive civics instruction. Coaching documents included a session document—such as the one in Appendix F—with four sections in which I captured the Equity Rubric indicator on which the session focused, our reflections, our discussion, and our planning for next steps. I also included separate reflections after each session in my research journal.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis “bring[s] meaning and order to the mass of collected data by looking for recurring themes, categories, and patterns” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 166). Throughout data collection, I also engaged in analysis. Because action research necessitates constant evaluation and adjustments, “questions [can] continue to evolve and change over time in relation to emerging data, student interactions, or shifting events” (Klehr, 2012, p. 123). As I tried to be “consistent, reliable, and systematic” so I could honor the students’ stories (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 176), capturing participants’ words and beginning to connect emerging themes in individual and collective narratives were

imperative. Huber et al. (2013) described narrative inquiry as “attending to and acting on experience by co-inquiring with people who interact in and with classrooms, schools, or in other contexts into living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience” (p. 213). By centering participants’ experiences—in their own words—I noticed common themes, and delving deeper with individual students, student groups, and Ms. Jackson based on those themes yielded layers of nuance within and about the evolving stories.

I consulted Spradley’s (1980) model of ethnographic inquiry as “a process of question discovery. Instead of coming into the field with specific questions, the ethnographer analyzes the field data compiled from participant observation to discover questions” (p. 33). I thus coded emerging data into domains and taxonomies for subsequent comparison and connection. The first step involved defining each cultural domain, “a category of cultural meaning that includes other smaller categories” (Spradley, 1980, p. 88). A second pass yielded taxonomies, subcategories within domains that facilitated comparison. In keeping with SIT, I analyzed how students co-constructed meaning. Comparing taxonomies surfaced connections between participants and other themes. The construction of domains and taxonomies began inductively, gradually shifting to a more deductive process as more data emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the following sections explain, each data source merited specific considerations.

Observation

The first unstructured observations occurred during the class discussions. I had individual pre-activity survey data, but these observations, my first chance to observe participants’ social engagement with civics concepts, enabled me to begin documenting emerging domains. Spradley (1980) identified three types of domains: (a) folk domains,

which are composed of terms that emerge directly from participants; (b) mixed domains, which are composed of a mix of participant and researcher terms; and (c) analytic domains, which are wholly derived from researcher terms. To recognize domains, I looked for patterns and relationships within my descriptive field notes; Spradley (1980) advised, “the cultural domains will not jump out at you from your fieldnotes. *They are embedded* in what you have already recorded” (p. 91). I was able to construct structural questions based on the cultural domains, which then guided more focused observations:

- What kinds of connections do students have to civics concepts?
- What meaning(s) do students ascribe to the words “civics” and “citizenship?”
- How do students conceive of themselves as change agents?
- When do students feel the most connected to and engaged with civics concepts?
- How are coaching foci appearing in classroom instruction?
- How are coaching conversations impacting the teacher participant’s perceptions of herself as a liberatory educator?

By the time the action activity began, I could conduct focused semi-structured observations guided by the structural questions. I then constructed taxonomies to illustrate connections between domain terms, which were instrumental in narrowing my scope. Appendix G includes examples of a domain worksheet and taxonomy.

Student Coursework

As with the observations, I coded students’ coursework as they produced it, using domains and taxonomies to inform continued cycles of collection and analysis. Student responses on the pre-activity survey, in combination with the first three discussions, guided the first folk and mixed domains. Some artifacts (e.g., “do nows,” “exit tickets,”

and reflections) directly correlated to the structured questions; for example, an exit ticket for one discussion read, “What does the term ‘civics’ mean to you?” I included student responses and ideas in domain analysis and taxonomies alongside observation data.

Interviews

The individual interview data shed light on Ms. Jackson’s feelings about whether and how to implement a high-quality civics curriculum, her ability to influence students’ conceptions of civic identity and participation, the connections between race and citizenship, and her positionality in relation to her students and me. Because the interviews occurred before and after the coaching cycle, the data informed how the study impacted the teacher’s practice and her perceptions or attitudes related to CRP and/or implementation of civics content. Comparing interview data to data from the coaching cycle generated connections between what specific steps may have helped or hindered the teacher’s practice. Narrative inquiry guided my thematic analysis. I sorted data into domains and taxonomies to compare and connect themes alongside observation data.

Coaching Cycle Documents

I organized coaching cycle artifacts by domains and taxonomies, too. Some I pre-determined using the Equity Rubric, but others emerged based on ongoing conversations, student interactions, and joint observations of student needs. Consistent with both qualitative PAR and transformational coaching, Ms. Jackson and I analyzed data throughout the cycle together to make decisions about next steps.

Quality Control

Achieving consistency and reliability required ensuring the study results were trustworthy and credible, which I tried to achieve with triangulation, peer review,

transparency, and thick description. I employed triangulation in two ways: by including multiple student perspectives to avoid “viewing events in a simplistic or self-serving way” and by using multiple sources of data (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 68). As I looked for emerging themes, I ensured that various sources—observation, student coursework, teacher interviews, and coaching documents—corroborated each other.

During multiple stages of data collection and reporting, I enlisted local colleagues and other critical friends to review my work, enhancing dialogic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2015) and reinforcing “the credibility of [my] interpretation and the accuracy of [my] findings (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 71). Throughout the study, I took pains to be as transparent as possible with participants. I incorporated member checking to provide opportunities for them to review and discuss my process and findings (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The teacher participant was invaluable for ensuring my recollection and interpretation of events were accurate and trustworthy. Students, too, were eager to help me review notes; one student began asking to “check my book” every time I visited.

In keeping with CRT, I wanted student voices to be central to the story. Therefore, thick description, “a detailed and rich account of the research context and a presentation of the participants’ perspectives in their own words” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 71), was essential to accurately represent the data, illustrate my interpretation, and ensure my study’s trustworthiness.

Ethical Considerations

As a former teacher and member of the education community, I sensed a high ethical bar for my interaction with students; as a researcher with student participants, I had an additional layer of ethical requirements to ensure their protection. Herr and

Anderson (2015) noted that “in the research we undertake, our decisions are constrained by understandings that are partial, the limits of our experience, and our interface with the research academy” (p. 148). Placing participant safety and welfare at the forefront, I was transparent about how my own lived experiences might impact the study.

Positionality

Even though I acknowledged my positionality in Chapter 1, I was cognizant of the need to examine and reexamine how my own experiences before, during, and after the study might have impacted the participants or the outcome. I was diligent in my awareness of and reflection on my own position in relation to the study and participants at every stage, “taking into account the potential impact of [my] values, worldview, and life experience” on my actions and decisions (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 57). I recorded my ongoing reflexivity, which evolved based on what I learned from students and Ms. Jackson, in my fieldwork journal. My position as an adult (i.e., authority figure) with whom the student participants interacted regularly inevitably had some impact on how they participated (and how *I* participated) in the study. I was aware that my position as a coach and former mentor for the teacher participant may have had an undercurrent of implied power imbalance. As the study progressed, and probably because it took longer than expected, the trust among students, Ms. Jackson, and me deepened and we were able to openly discuss our mindsets with honesty and vulnerability.

Recruitment and Consent

Before the study began, I secured permission from my university and the local school district. Ms. Jackson and I had a brief explanatory conversation with students before I invited all students in the class to participate in the study, and I explained that

those who did not wish for their data to be included would not incur any negative consequences. I made every effort to inform parental guardians and participants that I would use pseudonyms for students and the school, that participation was completely optional and could cease at any stage of the study, and that all study data and reporting related to individual students would be available for review by that student or their parents/guardians at any time. I informed parents and guardians about the study by sending a letter home 1 week before the first open discussion (Appendix H).

The teacher participant, Ms. Jackson, elected to join the study after being fully informed about my purpose and procedures in advance so she could decide if the emotional and time commitments were worthwhile. Just as Project Inspire graduate coaching and support is voluntary, I emphasized that study participation was also completely voluntary, and she was free to end participation at any time.

Summary

Through the lens of CRT and SIT, I investigated how Black middle school students perceived citizenship and how high-quality civics education may encourage more positive experiences with civic life. I also examined how instructional coaching grounded in CRP may enhance the implementation of a civics curriculum. Using critical narrative inquiry and critical ethnography in this PAR study yielded collection and analysis of data that centered the stories and experiences of the participants, both to expose and reclaim systems of power. As the systematic plan in this chapter demonstrated, I intended the study to be emancipatory in nature, having an immediate and long-term positive impact on the lives of the student participants, the teacher participant, and me. Chapter 4 presents the results of that plan.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study explored two distinct but interrelated phenomena: (a) how Black students in a middle school classroom interacted with and were impacted by a high-quality civics curriculum and (b) how instructional coaching in culturally responsive practices influenced the implementation of that curriculum. This research questions were:

1. What contributes to Black middle school students' perceptions of citizenship?
2. How does high-quality civics instruction impact civic engagement, civic participation, and civic identity among Black middle school students?
3. How does ongoing instructional coaching in culturally responsive practices support teachers in implementing high-quality civics instruction?

Although I had an idea of what I might uncover, what unfolded was a refreshingly unique experience with a community of learners as we all sought to make a difference. Students welcomed me into their classroom and their lives even though I showed up as an outsider. On my third visit, one asked, "Why do you keep coming here?" On the same visit, I got my first hug. My solid relationship with Ms. Jackson certainly expedited students' acceptance. Even though I had not planned for the study to last almost an entire semester, the extra time did more than provide rich data; it fostered the levels of trust necessary to be vulnerable, share authentic stories, and understand each other's experiences. It also helped me delve more deeply into some of the transformational coaching elements with Ms. Jackson an abbreviated study would have prevented. In alignment with critical

ethnography and critical narrative inquiry, as a “research activist” (Palmer & Caldas, 2017, p. 386), I worked alongside students to develop opportunities for them to engage in social change, work with community members, and co-develop a new counter-narrative of Black citizenship based on their own understandings and experiences (Ender, 2019).

After introducing my primary participants, this chapter details the interplay among the study’s three central elements: classroom discussion, a civics action activity, and a transformational coaching cycle. Then, by presenting my findings chronologically, I will tell the story of how Black students created a counter-narrative of citizenship that included them as full members and change agents in their communities.

Introduction to the Participants

Although I collected data from all 22–23 students, Chapter 3 explained how and why I focused more extensively on 10 Black students with distinctive voices. After describing Ms. Jackson, I introduce these students within their self-selected action activity groups and using the pseudonyms they chose on the first survey (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 *Primary Student Participants*

Name	Group	Topic	Race	Gender
Monique	A	Deforestation	Black	Female
Ocean	A	Deforestation	Black	Female
Niyah	B	Racism	Black	Female
Blossom	B	Racism	Black	Female
Symone	B	Racism	Black	Female
Ra’Niyah	C	Ocean pollution (awareness)	Black	Female
Lia	C	Ocean pollution (awareness)	Black	Female
Jared	D	Ocean pollution (cleanup)	Black	Male
DJ	D	Ocean pollution (cleanup)	Black	Male
Kevin	E	Homelessness	Black	Male

Ms. Jackson

Bridgette Jackson had spent her career at OCMS—2 years as a social studies teacher after 1 year as a resident in my classroom. During her residency, I was impressed with her quick grasp of social studies content and overall pedagogy. Her ability to connect with students and help them connect to content was commendable; she was vulnerable, authentic, charismatic, and compassionate, and she pushed me, as her mentor, to grow. We had a lot in common: we were both white, gay, relatively privileged, and committed to social justice. As her instructional coach during her first year as a teacher, I watched her distinguish herself among both students and staff as someone who stood up for students while demanding excellence. She soon emerged as a district leader with a model social studies classroom. Viewing this study as a chance to grow professionally while offering her students something different, she was eager to participate.

Group A: Deforestation

The two young women in this group worked well together, focused and committed from the start. Monique, who was active in class discussions and displayed an early interest in environmental issues, was a natural leader and warmed up to me easily, asking many questions and eager to learn. Ocean was more reticent during whole-class discussions but opened up and seemed to thrive in a small-group setting. She was instrumental in narrowing the group's focus to deforestation and clearly took notice of what others were saying.

Group B: Racism

This group of three was egalitarian, with each young woman offering unique talents and perspectives. Blossom was full of confidence, but in a way that was inviting

to others. She guided her group through difficult conversations about race, insisting on civility and calling out misinformation. Niyah was a necessary provocateur. As this group explicitly tackled racism, she would ask probing questions without fear of showing emotions. Blossom and Niyah seldom participated in whole-class discussions, but both came alive in their group. Symone, who was absent from several classes because of behavior-related consequences, battled with her shyness to participate in discussions and group planning sessions. At one point she told me, “I can’t be quiet about this stuff anymore.” Her bravery was on display during the implementation of their action activity, when she served as the host and class spokesperson for their invited guest speaker.

Group C: Ocean Pollution (Awareness Posters)

Ra’Niyah was the clear leader of this group, prone to effusive dialogue and prone to tangents. She enthusiastically participated in class discussions, sometimes to the point of distracting others. Somewhat scattered in her approach at times, Ra’Niyah was passionate about the group’s focus on ocean pollution, and her excitement was infectious. She always made me feel like part of the class, whereas her partner, Lia, was quiet but thoughtful. Though she did not engage during classroom discussions, Lia was a grounding presence for Ra’Niyah, targeting their efforts toward feasible civic actions.

Group D: Ocean Pollution (Campus Cleanup Outreach)

This group worked in tandem throughout the study; the two young men were close friends with similar personalities—fun-loving, easy-going, and social. Both Jared and DJ participated often in classroom discussions and used their time in small-group planning sessions to research and refine their topic and action activity. Jared came up

with big ideas and quickly made connections between global and local issues. DJ was extremely organized and helped communicate and enact their vision for change.

Group E: Homelessness

Kevin always seemed to be in trouble, missing many classes and, when present, usually isolated from other students. He participated in discussions, but typically in disruptive ways. Kevin made an early impression on me when, in a discussion about protest, he yelled, “All the presidents suck except Obama!” I made a point to get to know Kevin and, through a series of conversations, learned how passionate he was about many social issues, especially homelessness. Kevin started in the group with DJ and Jared, but Ms. Jackson removed him because he was distracting them from their action activity.

Intervention

The two elements of high-quality civics education with which students were involved were open classroom discussions and a civics action activity. Through the first, Ms. Jackson and I aimed to provide a safe and affirming space for students to engage with civics-related topics ranging from defining “citizenship” to the power of protest to specific local, national, and global issues. The second element was student-driven, enabling participants to identify a problem harming their community and take concrete steps to address it. As originally conceived, the study would have included two open discussions prior to a 2-week activity, one discussion during the activity, and a final discussion after the activity, coincident with five formal coaching sessions (Figure 3.1), but Ms. Jackson and I realized almost immediately that the initial timeframe was unrealistic. Because action research accommodates adjustments, Table 4.2 shows the timeline of students’ actual involvement with the study.

Table 4.2 *Student Involvement*

Date	Element	Description
1/14	Introduction	Introduced myself and the study, distributed parent letters, & administered Student Survey 1
1/21	Discussion (D)	Introduced courageous conversations & asked “If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?”
2/4	D	Discussed characterizing citizens and citizenship & the value of protest
2/11	Action Activity (AA)	Introduced AA and facilitated choosing groups and topics
2/18	D + AA	Established connections to social studies standard (Greece/democracy) + highlighted “action” element of activity
2/22	D	Discussed young people as civic actors (with video on Parkland student actions against gun violence)
2/23	AA	Reviewed activity expectations & observed small-group work on planning sheet
3/8	D + AA	Reframed action as “care” & asked “How do you get started on something you care a/b?” + small-group work w/ guiding Qs
3/11	D + AA	Modeled backwards planning (big problem → focused action) + small-group research and completion of action plan
3/17	D + AA	Discussed value of “helpers” in the community + small-group planning sessions with helpers
3/31	AA	Small-group work: communicating with “helpers,” poster-making tutorial, goal setting
4/4	AA	Small-group check-ins
4/26	D + AA	Re-oriented toward project and group sharing + whole-group assignment (Qs for guest speaker) & small-group check-ins
4/27	AA	Small-group check-ins
4/28	AA + D	Hosted guest speaker (Group B), who led whole-group discussion on racism and law enforcement
4/29	AA	Planted trees (Group A) and picked up trash on campus (Groups C and D)
5/3	D	Facilitated class debrief on civic participation
5/10	Surveys	Administered Student Survey 2
5/13	Farewell	Distributed gift bags with candy and thank-you notes

Parallel to the student involvement, the coaching cycle combined in-class guidance and more formal meetings driven by the Equity Rubric (Table 4.3). It allowed Ms. Jackson and me to respond to students’ initial reluctance to participate in discussions, confusion around basic definitions of *citizen* and *citizenship*, and need for intensive support when planning their activities. By extending the timeline, we could ensure they understood—and actually enjoyed—the activity. Once students were comfortable with me and each other—and some took longer than others—we could broach uncomfortable topics, express frustration even as we searched for solutions, and laugh. We laughed a lot.

Table 4.3 *Transitional Coaching Cycle Sessions*

Date	Coaching focus	Indicator
1/20	Creating intentional opportunities for student discourse	E1: Emphasizes higher-order thinking skills, an inquiry approach, and student ownership of learning.
2/3	Helping students make direct connections between the real world and lesson content	E4: Uses students’ lived experiences to help them connect with and make meaning of in-school learning.
2/9	Constructing inquiry-based and choice-rich projects	E2: Facilitates learning by guiding students toward discovery, providing content expertise and creative structures for student-directed learning.
2/17	Explicitly examining and reflecting on how bias manifests in classroom contexts	I.3: Is aware of their implicit bias and how it influences their teaching and is committed to not acting from it.
3/3	Normalizing mistakes and providing safe space for exploration of misconceptions	II.7 Creates an environment that is intellectually and socially safe for learning.
3/16	Incorporating family and community members into classroom	VII.12 Connects new content to culturally relevant examples and metaphors from students’ communities and everyday lives.
3/29	Exploring options for all students to feel a “part of” classroom activities	V.1 Every child is engaged with their learning, and is participating at all times.
4/7	Cultivating relationships with students that are mutually respectful	II.4 Consistently makes efforts to get to know all students and to surface and highlight each student’s strengths, skills, and unique contributions.
5/2	Explicitly praising and encouraging student contributions, perseverance, and dedication to goals	II.8 Creates a space for student agency, autonomy, and voice.

Presentation of Findings

To present my findings chronologically, I divided student-centered insights into four sections, bookended by reflections on the coaching cycle. However, the various actors and elements were so entangled that I could not isolate them without de-contextualizing important conversations, events, and shifting sentiments. The student sections focus less on *what* I did with participants and more on *how* and *with what feelings* we explored citizenship together. The tone of our work also changed as the study progressed, with ebbs and flows of excitement, disappointment, frustration, and gratification. Indeed, action research is often “messy” and fluid (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 90). As students engaged with civics content during discussions and actively participated in civic action, they were making meaning of their experiences and discovering how they might fit into a version of citizenship they were co-creating.

I also liberally and intentionally sprinkled thick description with student and teacher dialogue to capture participants’ experiences in their own words. This is, after all, their story of citizenship; my version of events would be incomplete without their voices.

Week 0: Establishing Coaching Goals

Images like Figure 4.1 are intended to orient readers throughout the chapter, beginning with the coaching cycle’s kickoff. Because Ms. Jackson and I had worked together for years, we had a close professional relationship and easy rapport. Prior to data collection, we had talked about logistical items, such as having to switch from a seventh- to a sixth-grade classroom. The study officially began, though, when I interviewed Ms. Jackson—the Monday before students took their pre-activity survey on a Friday. I sought

to explore Ms. Jackson’s commitment to emancipatory teaching, her impression of her Black students’ experiences with civics education, and her expectations for the study.

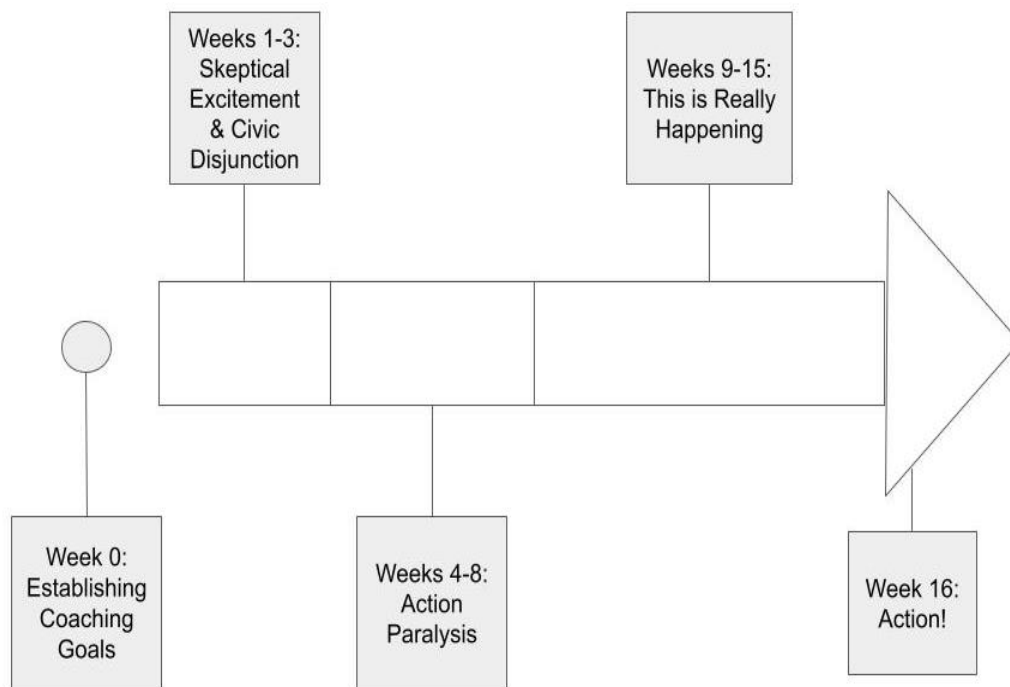


Figure 4.1 *Study Progression: Week 0*

Emancipatory Teaching

My first question for Ms. Jackson was similar to one Project Inspire asks potential residents: “What made you want to work with marginalized students?” Among other reasons, she said, “I wanted to be in a place where I was needed...where [students] just don’t have the resources and the people who are willing to really step up and help them and do what it takes to see them grow.” Regarding more affluent schools where she might have worked, she commented, “those kids will be fine whether I’m their teacher or not. My kids need me here. This is where I’m supposed to be.” She also connected her decision to pursue residency to her desire to work with marginalized students, noting the program fostered “cultural awareness.” Because Project Inspire residents are specifically trained in high-needs schools, they learn from a veteran teacher how to serve those

student populations. Ms. Jackson welcomed the “chance to make mistakes with someone there to step in instead of just trying to learn everything on the fly or even causing harm.”

When asked to define “emancipatory teaching,” Ms. Jackson, after admitting she had “never heard of that,” posited:

I feel like it’s one of those things I do anyway, but I don’t know that I’m doing it...it’s rewriting the narrative of ‘you have a place.’ It’s not always going to be what’s written in a book because we have to think about who’s writing the book and who they’re leaving out. And so focusing on who they’re leaving out versus ‘here’s all these dead white men.’ Focusing more on ‘hey, that’s not all there is.’ I noted our coaching cycle could explore *how* we teach versus *what* we teach, broaching the topic of CRP, which Ms. Jackson connected to emancipatory teaching:

I think it’s just stuff that happens every day. I think it’s something that, as a white educator, I have to kind of come in and leave it at the door—all of my biases—understanding that my reactions may be coming from a place of privilege...[CRP] is just validating [students], their experiences, their culture, and then finding a way to embed that into what we are doing.

We discussed how the cycle would intentionally center CRP and emancipatory teaching, surfacing bias and privilege as we addressed classroom practice. Although teachers are often uncomfortable, especially at first, with examining their own bias and privilege (Aguilar, 2020); Ms. Jackson was not just willing but eager to engage in the work.

Impressions of Student Civic Understanding

When asked how she incorporated civics in world history, Ms. Jackson cited “spotty” entry points when content standards encompassed the politics and governments

of particular civilizations. As for her impression of how students experienced civics in her classroom, she said, “They don’t know what that looks like. And if they do, they don’t know how to compartmentalize it—where to put it in their brain.” When we shifted to how students experience civics in their lives, particularly their experiences with government, Ms. Jackson became more animated. She said, “if anything, their only context would be to relate it to the police...and of course they have a very negative view and a very negative experience. At least most of them do.” Asked to expound, she said,

A lot of them haven’t had positive interactions because their neighborhoods are over-policed and they are constantly over-watched...maybe the only time they’ve seen a police car is when maybe one of their family members may be getting arrested or coming to barge into their house. And I think that turns into ‘I’m not going to have any positive interactions with the government.’

I wondered aloud about the basis of this assumption, and she cited direct and overheard conversations with students. Asked to elaborate, she echoed her descriptions of CRP:

I think it’s validating their experiences as being 100% real and 100% valid and saying, ‘OK, that’s your experience. I hear you. I’m listening to you.’ I have a different experience, but I’m not going to project my experiences onto them. I’m going to let them feel what they feel and maybe facilitate a productive conversation rather than just ‘let’s crap on the police for a little bit.’

Curiously, Ms. Jackson had been facilitating such conversations as they arose but did not consider them as a means of incorporating civics in her classroom.

When asked for her impression of Black students’ conception of their citizenship, Ms. Jackson first noted the “loaded question,” suggesting,

I don't think they fully think they have a voice. I don't think they can see themselves. When I'm looking at representation, it's not there for them. It's a bunch of white men or white women. I don't think they see themselves as having a place.

I wondered aloud if teachers could help students find that place. She said, "I hope so!"

Study Expectations

Our expectations for the study largely aligned, with Ms. Jackson elaborating on students' finding "a place" and "a voice" and hoping they would

connect civics, yes historically, but also asking 'what does this mean for me?'

This is what it looks like when I am in the government. I want them to walk away with the knowledge that they have a spot in the government. Well not necessarily the government. That they have a place in civics. That their voices matter.

In terms of what she wanted for herself as a participant, Ms. Jackson hoped to find better ways to incorporate ideas of citizenship into her teaching. She explained, "I want to be able to teach better for them. And have it be something that sticks with them."

The interview shaped my approach to the coaching cycle. Ms. Jackson's willingness to delve into issues of bias and privilege was encouraging, though not surprising, but I wanted to probe her underlying assumptions about students' civic experiences, particularly the implied connection to government. I also wanted to highlight what she was doing with students already—unknowingly—in terms of exposure to civics concepts during class discussions. I prioritized naming culturally responsive practices and planning structured, intentional discussions on civics and citizenship.

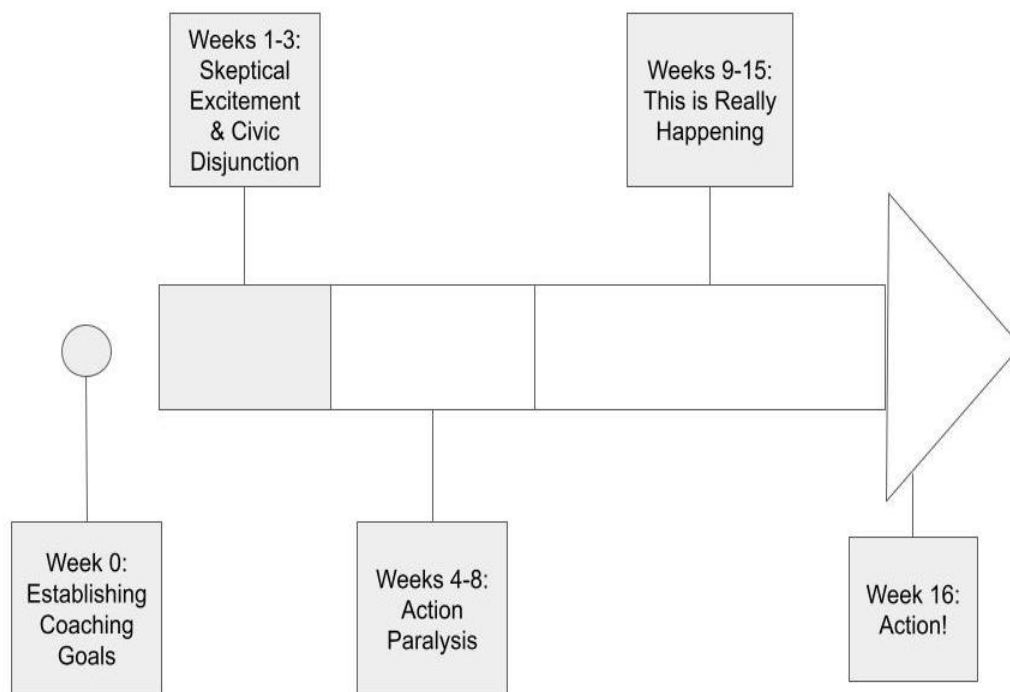


Figure 4.2 *Study Progression: Weeks 1–3*

Weeks 1–3: Skeptical Excitement and Civic Disjunction

As Figure 4.2 indicates, my introduction to Ms. Jackson’s class was lukewarm. When I described the study, I noticed many blank stares and more than one set of eyes rolling, but the questions that arose as students completed the pre-activity survey were more distressing. Students asked what *citizen* and *citizenship* meant. I did not want to unduly influence their responses, nor did I want students to feel defeated before we even began, so I told them a citizen is someone who is actively involved with the world and participates in activities to try to make the world a better place, giving the examples of voting or going to a school board meeting. Frankly, I think my answer did influence some responses, as evident in Table 4.4, but the fact remains: prior to the intervention, students indicated a lack of connection to even the most basic civics content and concepts.

Table 4.4 *Primary Participant Responses to Pre-Activity Survey (Citizenship)*

Student	Group	Definition/responsibilities of citizenship	Exercising rights as adults
Monique	A	Be kind and respectful when I can, maybe help the ocean when I'm older? Like pick up trash on the beach, or in the park where animals live!	I'm not really sure I'm being honest
Ocean	A	Really idk pls don't grade this	I will be a great adult and work hard
Niyah	B	Like being good or something like that	I don't know
Blossom	B	I don't really know	I don't get this one
Ra'niyah	C	I can go to meetings that make the world a better place	I can help poor people or try to find a better way to use things without polluting the air
Jared	D	Taking responsibilities	Doing the right thing
DJ	D	Citizenship is good and it is important to me be nice to people	I will go places and vote and do citizenship
Kevin	E	I don't no	Don't no

Note. Symone and Lia were absent for the pre-activity survey.

Discussion Day 1: How would you change the world?

As I began to consider how and if the words *citizen* and *citizenship* were important to civic identity, Ms. Jackson and I reviewed the survey data during our first coaching session. She suggested, “maybe privilege exposed us as white women to understandings of civics because of the rhetoric we heard at home,” and we thought together about how to problematize citizenship with students. Our coaching focus was Indicator VIII.1, “the curriculum—or at the very least instruction—emphasizes higher-order thinking skills, an inquiry approach, and student ownership over learning.” To emphasize higher-order thinking skills, we sought intentional opportunities for student discourse when planning how to frame our first discussion, settling on a “big ideas” approach to encourage students to talk with us and each other about meaningful civic issues and how they saw themselves as civic actors. We decided to review norms before

each discussion and display “The Four Agreements of Courageous Conversation,” which advise to “stay engaged,” “speak your truth,” “experience discomfort,” and “expect and accept non-closure” (Singleton, 2015, p. 31). Students who engage in healthy conversations about controversial topics can recognize and critique racism and injustice (Cummings, 2019), so rather than avoiding controversy, Ms. Jackson and I opted to embrace it, beginning with an exploration of students’ exposure, non-exposure, and reactions to both traditional and non-traditional versions of citizenship.

We started the next class with a bell-ringer activity: “If you could change one thing about the world right now, what would it be?” Students answered independently on notecards, and we compiled responses on the board: animals, ocean pollution, disease, COVID-19, bullying, homelessness, hospitals, and trash. We posed a follow-up question: “What can YOU do about it?” They discussed in small groups based on the seating chart.

Ra’Niyah, Ocean, and DJ seemed to have the most ideas about how to solve a problem of interest—in their case, ocean pollution. They proposed producing more electric vehicles, banning plastic, having cleanup boats, and companies’ making less trash. I asked, “What is something *you* could do right now?” Ra’Niyah said, “Right now, nothing. Maybe when I’m grown I could invent something to help.” Another group, discussing homelessness, proposed giving homeless people money, food, and houses. I asked the same probing question: “What can *you* do right now?” When one student said, “I could give them something to eat,” Jared said, “that would be dangerous. I can’t just go up to people on the street.”

After listening around the room, Ms. Jackson asked the class, “How many of you believe *you* can do anything right now about the problems you have identified?” Only DJ

and Symone raised their hands. This first discussion seemed to confirm two important speculations: first, students are paying attention to big problems in their world, and second, they have trouble seeing themselves as active civic participants.

Discussion Day 2: “That is not me.”

Prior to the second discussion, Ms. Jackson and I spent a coaching session focused on helping students connect content to their own lived experiences, as evident in the following excerpt of our conversation:

Me: What are we trying to show the kids?

Jackson: That there is more than one way to be a citizen.

Me: How can we help them connect the content in Greece to their own lives?

Jackson: Citizenship grade in elementary—what you have to do to be a citizen in Greece and in the U.S. Is citizenship regulation fair?

Me: When do you think kids are first exposed to civics content?

Jackson: Elementary? Probably during presidential election, at least in terms of voting.

Me: There is limited exposure in elementary. Of the elementary-age students who get it, which ones...?

Jackson: Not ours.

Me: Why?

Jackson: Because they are so hyper-focused on math and literacy. Other kids are also exposed to it at home or in pre-K.

Me: What type of instruction in civics do you think other kids are getting?

Jackson: Hyper-patriotic, pro-government when it aligns with ideals, political talk at home, gun rights...

Me: How do you think our kids react to “hyper-patriotic” content?

Jackson: Disconnected, people that don’t look like them, friction, feelings of not belonging.

Me: What can we do to help kids connect?

Jackson: What we’re doing right now: teaching Reconstruction differently, using “enslaved” vs. “slaves,” 95 theses lesson—question authority.

After the session, I reflected in my fieldwork journal:

As always, Bridgette is such an eager planning partner. She is open to try new things and do what’s best for students. She is also open to examining underlying issues and personal bias. I want to push towards further examination of our assumptions about what kids know about civics. Is it that they don’t know anything or is it that they don’t use the same vocabulary to express it?

When planning discussions, Ms. Jackson and I attempted to frame them as brave spaces to disrupt and demystify the master narrative of citizenship; we wanted students to reimagine what “good citizenship” looked like, including manners traditional notions of civic participation exclude, dismiss, or ignore (Duncan, 2020; Vickery, 2016). Knowing many students were not familiar with the words *citizen* and *citizenship*, we wanted to remain open to and make space for students to explore the *meaning* of the words. Hauver (2017) explained, “listening carefully to children’s sense making about the civic spaces they already inhabit—taking seriously the local and lived dimensions of children’s civic learning—can help us develop more intentional and inclusive civic education practices”

(p. 379). As a researcher, I attempted to approach observations and conversations—with the class, with small groups, and with individual students—as a careful listener with an ear toward how students grounded their own civic identities in lived experience.

We had hoped to use students’ existing understandings of civics concepts to spark conversations on race and injustice, yet students clearly needed additional scaffolding. Considering the survey results and the lackluster first discussion, Ms. Jackson and I created slideshows for subsequent discussions to probe students’ ideas of citizenship and reactions to traditional civics concepts. To facilitate connections, we incorporated guiding questions, images, and videos. Images that contradict and problematize the master narrative can help students of color reclaim and reconstruct their civic identities (Berson et al., 2019), and the visual stimuli had a noticeable impact on student engagement.

We anchored our first conversation about citizenship to a state standard: “examine the concept of the polis in Greek city-states, including the ideas of citizenship, civic participation, and the rule of law” (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.-b). The class had already started this topic, so Ms. Jackson had exposed them to basic vocabulary and Greek history, and we reviewed their understanding of key words at the beginning of class. We then asked students to conduct an internet image search for the word “citizenship” as we did the same on the teacher computer projected for the class. The search yielded traditional patriotic images like the Statue of Liberty, voting booths, flags, and passports. We asked, “What do you notice?” and “what does this make you think of?” Though reticent to speak, students wrote responses on notecards, including:

- The government
- I think about my country because it’s my state flag

- What it takes to be a citizen
- Pledge of allegiance
- Voting box
- Important people
- Equal Rights

We then asked, “What connections do you personally have with these images?” Some students began writing on their notecards, but more looked confused or frustrated. One said, “I got no connection to this. That’s not me. Nothing up there [on the screen] has anything to do with me.” We polled the room: “How many of you feel a connection to these images?” There were two hands, but neither student wanted to verbalize their connections. When asked, “How many of you feel no connection to these images?,” eight of the 14 students raised their hands. Ra’Niyah explained, “We can’t do any of that! We’re just kids!” Jared said, “They’re just pictures; they don’t mean anything.”

After giving students a chance to discuss their responses with each other, we moved to a slide we had populated with images of people of color voting, speaking at public meetings, and engaged in community service. I asked, “Do you think these are good citizens?” Overwhelmingly, the class answered, “YES.” Ms. Jackson asked, “Can you see yourself doing these things?” Again, many answered, “YES.” I asked, “What makes them good citizens?” Suddenly more willing to verbalize, students responded:

- Good sportsmanship
- Helping the community
- Team players
- Paying taxes

- Helping neighbors
- Helping the president

When I pushed back and asked, “Does being a good citizen mean you have to help the president?,” Kevin, who had been brooding and non-participatory at the back of room, yelled, “All the presidents suck except Obama!” The following exchange ensued:

Me: ALL the presidents?

Kevin: Well, all of them except the first ones.

Me: So all the ones in your lifetime?

Kevin: Yeah.

Me (to class; moving toward Kevin): So he’s back here criticizing the president—the HEAD of our government. Does that make him a good citizen?

Class: NO

Kevin (to me under his breath): You better stop talking to me.

Me (to class): Has anyone heard of the first amendment—one of the very first BIG rules ever made in our country? The right to free speech?

Class: (some yeses)

Me: It’s one of the MAIN rules that says people have the right to say how they feel about things, even when they don’t agree with people in power like the president. Kevin is back here doing just that! He’s voicing his opinion, even though it goes against leaders of our country! Does that make him a good citizen?

Class: YES.

For me, this exchange was pivotal. First, it showed me the class was ready to begin thinking about citizenship in different ways and could get excited. Second, it showed me

the students knew more than they might have thought about civics concepts, but that they were at least somewhat rooted in authoritarian patriotism—characterized, in part, by blind allegiance to those in power and the heroification of the country’s founders (Busey & Walker, 2017; Ender, 2019; Pinkney, 2016). The eagerness to find Kevin a “bad citizen” for criticizing the president and Kevin’s excusing “the first [presidents]” from his critique suggested these students had internalized critical pieces of the master narrative.

Third, this exchange reminded me of my outsider position, as I later wrote in my journal:

When Kevin told me to stop talking to him today I was reminded that I am not the teacher in that room. It felt so good to be leading a class again that I forgot. He does not know me. This is where having a relationship prior would have made a big difference—he would have known I supported him! Of course his reaction to me was hostile. The whole class is going to need time to accept and trust me in their room. I need to reemphasize to Kevin next time how great it was to have him in the conversation.

I did circle back before the class ended and told Kevin I appreciated how he helped me make a great point. He gave me a chin nod—a move in the right direction.

Unwittingly, Kevin had set up the next phase of the discussion—on the value of protest. Ms. Jackson and I had a slide with images of Trump campaign rallies, Black Lives Matter protests, March for Our Lives protests, and 1960s civil rights marches. I included an image of me at a Chattanooga March for Our Lives event organized by students. I asked, “Are all of these people good citizens?” The class said, “yes.” Ms. Jackson commented that she “wouldn’t be caught dead” at some places in the images but

those people were still good citizens for standing up for what they thought was right.

When a student guessed, “Trump, right?,” Ms. Jackson laughed and said, “You know it!”

Students all seemed familiar with the concept of protest, especially in terms of civil rights and Black Lives Matter. Niyah asked about the image of a Black Lives Matter protest in Chattanooga, realizing, “I went to that one. It was fun. There was a lot of singing.” Noting we might have run into each other because I was there, too, I asked, “When Niyah and I were downtown at this protest, what did we want?” Ra’Niyah said, “equal rights,” and I added, “We wanted *change*. When you protest, you are demanding that something change. Who did we want it from?” Students offered answers like “the government,” “the president,” and “the country,” while Jared voiced concern that “protests turn into riots.” I validated his answer and clarified that riots are not covered by free speech, unlike peaceful protests, which he likened to “Martin Luther King.”

In the margins of my condensed notes I wrote, “WHAT A CLASS. This is why I miss teaching.” It was one of the few days we had a full period set aside for discussion, yet we ran out of time. Students who began disengaged and even skeptical became, if not verbally engaged, at least alert, and many others were eager and visibly excited, a departure from their lack of connection to patriotic imagery or the terms *citizen* and *citizenship*. The conversation changed when the images changed. They could see themselves performing the actions of the “good citizens” in the second set of images, which they described most often as “helping.” As we began to complicate *citizen* and *citizenship* with students, they became willing to co-construct meaning. Elevating protest as an action taken by a “good citizen,” we were problematizing the authoritarian patriotism that had theretofore colored students’ impressions (Busey & Walker, 2017).

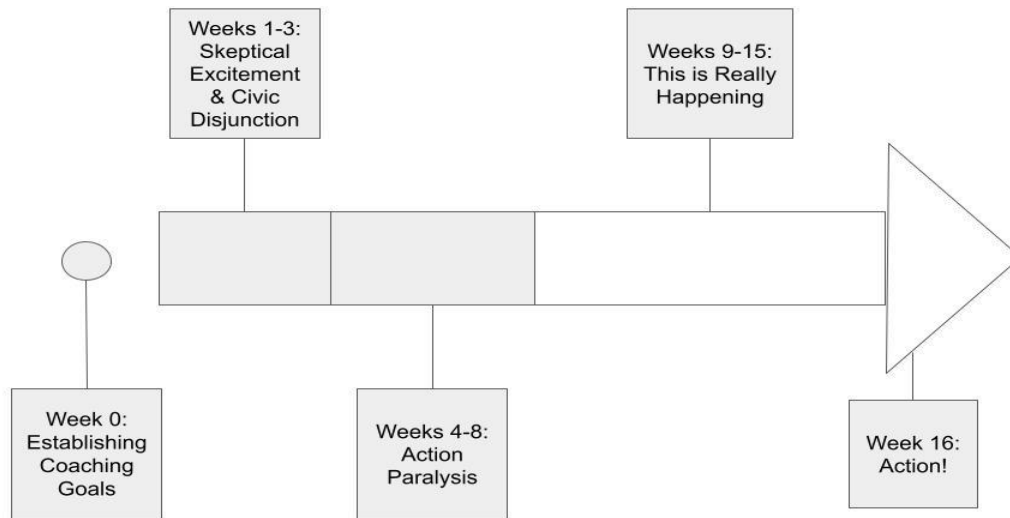


Figure 4.3 *Study Progression: Weeks 4–8*

Weeks 4–8: Action Paralysis

As Figure 4.3 indicates, the study entered a new phase in Week 4, marked by significant overlap of discussions and the action activity. Based on observation and student responses to the pre-activity survey (Table 4.5), Ms. Jackson and I grounded discussion of civics concepts with opportunities to participate in civic action to help students conceptualize how they might fit into the traditional narrative of citizenship. Though the very act of engaging in courageous conversations that interrogate power and injustice can be emancipatory for Black students (Duncan, 2020), pairing discussion with action is necessary to foster students' civic identities, moving beyond “the technical skills of critical thinking” in favor of “opportunities to act thoughtfully and reflectively toward social change” (Schmidt, 2021, p. 162). Topics that emerged during the first discussion became foci of several action activities, and two groups incorporated topics that arose during our second conversation. In turn, once students began their activities, discussions often revolved around what they were doing, their frustrations and successes, and how their civic identities were evolving based on participating in the activity.

Table 4.5 *Primary Participant Responses to Pre-Activity Survey (Civic Action)*

Student	Group	Q3: Do you believe everyone is treated equally in the U.S.?	Q4: As a young person, what can you do to change something you think is not right/unfair?	Q5: If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be & how would you start?
Monique	A	Yes I believe that	Probably post on socials tbh? There's not MUCH you can do, but you can write about it I suppose	Pollution with the ocean! I'd pick up trash around the beaches and local areas where the animals live
Ocean	A	Yes because we never get treated wrong like in stores that's why I say thank you	I just wish I could get everything I want so I could be positive and happy and do good in Ms. Jackson's class	I wish everyone could fly
Niyah	B	Some people are treated equally but some are not	I think what's not right is people being racist to each other	To not have corona and people not dying no more
Blossom	B	No, because there are still a lot of people that are toxic	There is a lot of evil here and in the world	I don't know
Ra'niyah	C	I don't believe everyone is treated equally because people with a lot of money is treated better but people who are poor don't get treated the same	I don't find anything unfair	I would change that everything in the world is free
Jared	D	No, because some people get kicked out of places because of their color	Ask them why it is like this	It would be Covid. Put everyone in jail who started it.
DJ	D	No, because there is a lot of bullied people because of the way they look	I would change not being able to do things alone without a bigger person	Food supply. First I would hire more people and pay them more money so it is done faster
Kevin	E	No	Nothing	Poor people with food, house, money

Note. Symone and Lia were absent for the pre-activity survey.

Planning and Introducing the Activity

The pre-activity coaching session focused on Indicator VII.1, “the teacher is a facilitator of learning, guiding students toward discovery, providing content expertise at times, and creating structures that facilitate student-directed learning.” I had a vision for the activity, but as a coach, I sought to model how to plan it with the explicit goals of centering student voice, collaboration, and agency. Ms. Jackson was concerned about whether students could “handle” working in groups, saying, “I don’t trust this class anymore.” When I asked why, she cited “little things” like off-task behavior, students’ being “disrespectful,” and incomplete assignments. I pushed back gently, mentioning the importance of community and cooperation in civic action. We compromised, with Ms. Jackson offering, “They can start in groups, but they will have to work independently if they are being unproductive.” I wrote later that day in my fieldwork journal:

I was a little taken aback by Bridgette’s resistance to having students work in groups, but appreciated that she was willing to let them try. The reasons she gave for “not trusting” the class also gave me pause [...and] did not seem to rise to the level of distrust she expressed and seemed somewhat ambiguous. Honestly, I think she had a hard day and was frustrated. I know she believes in these kids. I noted this day as “the first time I felt like I pushed hard for the way I thought the project should go” and thus “examine[d] my motives,” asking, “is working in groups truly what is best for the students?” Deciding “it’s fundamental to student growth,” I wrote, “I am comfortable with the push.”

We designed the action activity to deepen students’ understandings of themselves as change agents, bridging civic engagement and civic participation. Discussing students

of color, Schmidt (2021) contended civic action activities, centered on students' lived experiences, can be "antidotes to feelings of powerlessness" and contribute to positive civic identities (p. 165). Ms. Jackson and I co-constructed the action activity to maximize student choice and agency, as well as to promote authentic civic action. We also decided, based on student surveys, students' engagement in discussions, and Ms. Jackson's own knowledge of student pacing, to extend the activity to 5 weeks.

We presented the assignment to the class and distributed a project description, complete with a breakdown of deadlines, and an action plan (Appendix I). Students had the choice to work in self-selected groups or independently; several expressed surprise and excitement at this aspect, their faces lighting up as they made eye contact with friends across the room. They started research on the first day and determined the big-picture problems they wanted to address. Most groups were able to complete the first sections of their plan by the end of class, having identified their problem. Others were still researching. Ocean and Monique, for example, were interested in climate change, but upon conducting internet searches, found many options for addressing it. Another group of secondary participants was debating whether to focus on racism or homelessness.

I observed Group B's conversation about why they wanted to focus on racism, in line with one of our guiding questions, and joined the following exchange:

Niyah: People are being treated bad just because they're Black. They're being bullied and hurt.

Blossom: It's not fair just because you're Black you're treated different.

Niyah: Or violence. Getting killed by policemen.

Blossom: That's true, too. Like that man where that policeman was on his neck.

Me: George Floyd?

Blossom: That's him. That policeman killed him for being Black. That's not fair.

Me: That policeman was arrested and found guilty. He went to jail for that. So there are laws against police violence.

Symone scoffed, "That don't do nothing. They're gonna keep killing." The group shared this tone of disgust and resignation, perhaps reflecting their lived experiences, lack of opportunity to engage with high-quality civics instruction, or both (Schmidt, 2021).

Notably, the day Ms. Jackson and I introduced the activity was the last for many weeks when we could devote the entire class to this work. Due to pressure she faced to cover state standards for an upcoming district benchmark exam, scheduling conflicts related to testing schedules, and my own job responsibilities, we had to be creative to keep the groups on track and make time for coaching and planning. We prioritized full coaching sessions, incorporating targeted planning for shorter visits. I also leaned into the self-examination piece of transformational coaching to shift away from my assumed role as discussion leader (Aguilar, 2020). I wrote in my fieldwork journal about "need[ing] to change my approach," specifically by "centering bias." I also vowed to "step out of the spotlight during discussions," noting, "This is not about me leading kids in critical conversations, it is about coaching B. to lead kids in critical conversations."

"We Have to Listen to Learn:" Examining Assumptions and Biases

During the next coaching session, I shared my aim to shift gears and ensured Ms. Jackson was on board with our focus on Indicator I.2, "the teacher is aware of their implicit bias and how it influences their teaching and is committed to not acting from it." I began, "looking back at discussions, I noticed some assumptions we make about

students and the experiences they have at home. Can we discuss what assumptions we are making and why?” The conversation was illuminating for me as a researcher and an educator. We attributed our assumptions that students lack exposure to conversations about civics-related topics at home to students’ not using “our” civics vocabulary. I expressed the irony of our assumptions juxtaposed with an activity about students’ understanding citizenship in different ways. I asked, “where do you think our students might recognize citizenship in their own lives?” Ms. Jackson gave an example of a student inviting her to a BBQ fundraiser a parent organized to support a neighbor; I gave the example of OCMS being a community school with a food pantry and access to social services. We discussed students’ descriptions of the images from the second discussion—“helpers” and “helping,” which prompted the following exchange:

Me: Are we forcing our vocabulary about citizenship on students with the expectation that they make connections to their own experiences? Are we trying to break through a wall that doesn’t exist?

Jackson: I’m so used to constantly breaking things down (names, countries, religions) that I assume they have no knowledge.

Me: How do we change it? What are we doing to learn their vocabulary?

Jackson: Listen. Learn from students. We have to really listen to learn and ask questions.

Me: Right. Let’s really try to listen during our small-group work with them, not to guide their thinking, but to understand their thinking and learn from them.

I also brought up my concern that I was taking the lead role too often in conversation, and Ms. Jackson agreed. She mentioned that she felt somewhat uncomfortable leading the

conversations, which surprised me because I had seen her facilitate difficult, even contentious, conversations with poise and enthusiasm. She explained, “I’m great when the conversations are impromptu. Students are more authentic and interested. I don’t feel comfortable crafting conversations about things that are this important.” This information was revelatory, and I appreciated her candor and vulnerability. We agreed to rely more heavily on the district’s Framework for Courageous Conversations in the planning stages. At one point, Ms. Jackson commented, “I think I have been doing a lot of hand-holding, giving them less agency.” We thus agreed to give students space in their groups to problem-solve, along with more open-ended discussions.

Our approach had mixed results. Progress on the action activity was, with minor exceptions, frustrating to students who had trouble with the “action steps” element. On the other hand, student engagement with class discussions showed marked improvement. Once students became used to the types and format of the conversations we were having, they gradually opened up to us and each other. As students became comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings, the discussions became more animated and even, at times, heated. I was encouraged to see them begin to feel confident in their voices, and Ms. Jackson and I found ourselves talking less and less. Ocean asked me during our fourth discussion why I wrote down so much while they, the students, were talking. I told her I thought young people often have different perspectives on important things and I wanted to know what they thought. She said, “You’re right about that! We got a lot of good ideas, but nobody ever wants to listen.” I said, “Well, we’re listening now!” Listening to and centering Black student voices is a key element of a critical race praxis because it

runs counter to the silencing of Black voices and experiences in traditional civics education (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Stovall, 2016; Tillet, 2012).

Ocean made the comment during a discussion Ms. Jackson and I co-planned, which focused on Parkland High School students' activism in the March for Our Lives movement. We agreed that she would take the lead while I observed her and the students. After a video of the march in Washington, D.C., Ms. Jackson asked, "What do you notice?" Students were quick to note that the speakers were young. Jaden was wowed that "they were just in high school" yet "did all that." Students also identified the activists' goal—safer schools and an end to gun violence, but a follow-up question threw them: "Who did they want it from?" Responses like "The government?" "The president?" "The country?" suggested students had either not yet encountered or not internalized instruction on the branches and responsibilities of government, but they did associate governing with decision-making. Ms. Jackson then showed a newspaper headline, "50 Gun Laws Passed Since Parkland," to illustrate how young people can impact real issues.

Ms. Jackson used the Parkland students' activism as an example of students' identifying a problem, designing an action plan, and executing it. Talking them through a mock action plan projected for the class, she emphasized how the Parkland students had to determine their steps and find adult helpers to put their plan into action. The purpose of the discussion was twofold: to engage students in a courageous conversation about a contentious issue and to show students how young people could affect real change.

"Wait. We actually Have to DO this?": Confusion, Frustration, and Paralysis

Later in the week, students had about 20 minutes with their groups at the end of a period, and Ms. Jackson and I expected they could make the leap from hypothesizing

actions for others to including themselves as agents of change. Instead, students seemed paralyzed by the idea that they would be responsible for putting their plans into action. Based on the action plan, students were supposed to identify specific steps to address their problem. As I circulated and observed the different groups, I realized students were unclear on the expectations for the action element of the activity. We stopped to clarify that the action steps should be something they could accomplish over the next 3 weeks. We also emphasized that they would, indeed, be taking those steps. Immediately, several students exclaimed some distressed iteration of “We actually have to do this ourselves?!”

Students’ feelings of frustration manifested in different ways—unrealistic plans, panic, and shutting down. Ocean and Monique’s plan to solve global warming involved planting a new forest; when I asked them how they would accomplish that aim in a few weeks, Monique urged, “Have you seen how serious this is? Have you heard of deforestation? We have to do something now!” I nudged them to research Chattanooga-area efforts to combat deforestation, in search of potential partners. Elsewhere, Ra’Niyah and Lia planned to address ocean pollution by cleaning up beaches. I questioned the logistics of their plan and was met with silliness, followed by a refusal to continue work. Ra’Niyah angrily asked, “Why do y’all make us come up with something knowing we couldn’t even do it anyway? Y’all setting us up.” I tried to redirect the conversation to a more local approach, but we ran out of time.

In addition to more time, students needed more confidence in their abilities as civic actors, consistent with Blevins et al.’s (2016) suggestions. I wrote in my fieldwork journal, “big revelation today (not really a revelation; more of a confirmation). Students

can isolate a problem and even come up with potential solutions for others to enact, but have trouble seeing themselves as realistic change-agents.”

“I know I want to do it, but I don’t think I can.”: The Need to Narrow the Focus

Ms. Jackson and I, during the next coaching session, reflected on students’ frustrations and brainstormed ways to help. After reviewing student work and realizing almost no groups had written any action steps, we theorized that our efforts to allow room for discovery and agency may have backfired, leaving students stranded and rudderless. Ms. Jackson said, “They don’t know where to start. It feels like the opposite of empowerment; I think they feel powerless” and I agreed.

We framed our session with Indicator II.7, “the teacher creates an environment that is intellectually and socially safe for learning,” and determined to start normalizing mistakes, making our own missteps visible to students. We strategized:

Me: What are our goals for students?

Jackson: Having students feel confident actively doing something to impact change.

Me: How can we do it? Can we work backwards?

Jackson: Yes, but it’s probably going to mean giving them some options. Giving them a goal.

Me: I think they would benefit from talking through their difficulties. How do we find out from them why this is so hard?

Jackson: I think we ask them. We can put our “whys” all over them, but that’s getting us nowhere.

Me: Want to start with that?

Jackson: Absolutely. Then we need to find something that can help them see their big picture problems in local settings. Something they can touch and feel to start to envision action steps.

Me: Students also need to know how to access power, even if it's the power of adults in the community or even in the building who can help them get things done.

Ms. Jackson suggested we contact Mrs. Breedlove, the OCMS Parent Volunteer Coordinator for help. Conscientious of Ms. Jackson's time, I mentioned we might need to extend the study duration to give students time to feel comfortable sharing. She agreed. When I asked how much time she could spare, I was encouraged to hear her respond, "honestly, as long as it takes. This is important and I want to get it right."

We reviewed the Framework for Courageous Conversations in anticipation of Ms. Jackson's leading the next discussion, and I sensed her taking more ownership of the activity, spurred by her own disappointment in its pace and results. She seemed eager to get through to students and for them to succeed. I wrote in my fieldwork journal:

Bridgette seemed kind of defeated by the project and wanted to reset, which I get. The kids' frustrations seemed to be transferring to her. ...reviewing the framework was helpful and helped us think through the discussion together. B. felt the best way for students to feel empowered was to ask them, which I love. Instead of us trying to determine what the problem is, let them tell us. Why do we always feel like we have the answers instead of letting students tell us/each other? I feel like having coaching conversations that have explicitly pushed back on equity and agency are helping to uncover bias and power imbalances...I really

tried to step back and give B. space to share her solutions, pushing back on equity and access at the end by grounding questions in the CC framework. She was open. Buoyed by the session, we hoped to turn a corner with students the next day.

We welcomed students with a bell-ringer question: “On a scale of 1–10, how confident do you feel about your action activity right now? Explain.” Students were encouraged to talk with their neighbors—based on seating rather than activity groups—and learn what other people were experiencing. Before opening the whole-group discussion, Ms. Jackson admitted to the class that we had overcomplicated the activity and understood many students felt uncomfortable or confused. She asked if anyone wanted to voice their feelings, and Ra’Niyah offered, “I know I want to do it, but I don’t think I can.” Many heads nodded, and a quick poll of agreement resulted in 12 of 17 students’ raising their hands. Symone said, “I really just don’t know where to start.” Ms. Jackson took a deep, visible breath and said, “Let’s talk about where to start, then. Sound good?” The tension in the room seemed to dissipate as students felt heard and validated.

Ms. Jackson, as planned in our coaching session, continued by helping students connect with someone they knew. She asked, “When you need something at school, like you spill something on your pants and you need new pants or you forgot your deodorant, who do you go to?” Several students eagerly named Mrs. Breedlove, the OCMS Parent Volunteer Coordinator who keeps a “care closet” stocked with uniforms, socks, winter coats, and toiletries. Ms. Jackson asked, “Where do you think she gets all those things?” Students were unsure. Mrs. Jackson explained that community members wanted to help students and gave her those things. She asked for other examples of people engaged in community service, and several had personal stories of their families’ being helped when

someone died, neighbors' cutting each other's lawns, and giving money to charity.

Symone cited an uncle who was "always cleaning up the neighborhood so it looks nice."

Ms. Jackson asked what the examples had in common, and students responded, "they are generous," "they give things," and "they give time." Ms. Jackson said:

They all care. So, as you are thinking about what you want to do about your problem, make sure it is something you actually care about. If it is, then think about what you can actually do about it. Where does your problem show up here, in Chattanooga, in your community, in your life? Start there. You don't have to solve the whole problem, but, if you care, you can make a dent.

Students were semi-engaged with the discussion and seemed to feel better about moving forward. We moved them into their groups, handed out new action plans, and prompted them to work backward—envisioning the end result and determining how to get there.

Ms. Jackson and I circulated to provide scaffolding. Some groups were quite focused and made significant progress on their plans. Monique and Ocean, working on deforestation, decided they wanted to plant trees and were considering locations. DJ and Jared linked ocean pollution to river pollution and were thinking of ways they could reduce pollution in the Tennessee River, which runs through Chattanooga. DJ, after calling me over, asked, "We're actually going to be able to do this, right?" I assured him we were and was encouraged by signs of excitement, rather than frustration.

Other groups needed more guidance and, as Ms. Jackson suggested in our coaching session, we led them toward options for their activities. For example, I spoke with Niyah, Blossom, and Symone about their passion for combatting racism:

Me: Who does it hurt?

Blossom: Black people.

Me: How?

Niyah: Killings. People killing black people.

Me: Who is killing black people?

Blossom: White people.

Niyah: Police.

Me: So is that something specific you want to address about racism?

Niyah: Yes, violence by police.

Me: OK, that's a great starting place.

I reminded them Chattanooga had recently appointed a new police chief—a Black woman—and prompted them to consider her role:

Me: Does she just drive around in a police car looking for people speeding?

Symone: No, she's in charge.

Me: In charge of who?

Symone: Other police.

Me: So do you think she could do anything about police violence?

Blossom: She could talk to the white cops about it. Make them stop doing it.

I left the group to continue thinking along those lines.

Ra'Niyah and Lia were also having trouble with their action plan, but of a different sort. They wrote multiple ways to address ocean pollution, but none within a reasonable scope. I tried to help them narrow their focus:

Me: Why do you care about ocean pollution?

Ra'Niyah: Because I want to live!

Lia: All that trash hurts the animals.

Me: How does the trash get into the ocean?

Ra’Niyah: People throw it into the ocean.

Me: So it’s just people at beaches who are the problem?

Lia: No, we saw a video that everybody throwing trash down hurts the oceans.

Me: So, even if you are not next to the ocean, you might affect ocean pollution?

Lia: Yes. It eventually goes to the ocean.

To confirm, we looked at a map, located the oceans, and I asked them about the “lines,” which Ra’Niyah identified as “other water like lakes and rivers.” I probed:

Me: When you go downtown with all the bridges, what are the bridges for?

Lia: It goes over the water.

Me: What water?

Ra’Niyah: The river. The Tennessee river.

Me: Do you think there’s any trash in there?

Lia: Yes.

Me: And where does it end up?

Both: The OCEAN.

Me: So, do you think the two of you, even though you are far away from the ocean, could still do something about ocean pollution by working here in town?

Both (nodding): Yes, maybe with the river.

As with Group B, I asked Group C to think about local solutions and suggested they reach out to people in Chattanooga who are already addressing water pollution.

As students were packing up for their next class, Ms. Jackson was all smiles, seemingly re-energized. She said, “I have renewed faith in these kids. I’m glad we took the time to start over. I feel like they get it now.” I agreed. The day was a turning point for students and Ms. Jackson, as I wrote in my fieldwork journal later that evening:

I think they’re finally starting to see themselves in the work—that local action is a starting place for them to make a difference. It is great to see Bridgette excited; it is just as important for her to feel like she can pull something like this off.

I continued by attributing this outcome to “tak[ing] the pressure of time off the table.” The decision to slow down and let students show us, even if they could not necessarily verbalize, when they were ready to move on was critical in letting them fully develop and implement their visions of change.

To say the entire class had moved past frustration to confident excitement would be disingenuous. Again, I am concentrating on my observations of primary participants—the ones who were consistently present, the most engaged, and those with whom I worked most consistently. Ms. Jackson focused a lot on other groups, supporting ELLs and providing make-up work to students who were often absent. One such student, Kevin, was not allowed to work in a group because Ms. Jackson deemed him too disruptive. Frustrated with his behavior, she even apologized to me on his behalf. I had been cultivating a rapport with Kevin, making a point to speak to him when he was in class, and strove to involve him in the activity. I wrote in my fieldwork journal, “We have to find a way for Kevin to participate, even if it’s not in a group. He’s bored, not malicious; I think he wants to be involved.” Unfortunately, I had to wait a few weeks to act on this aim because Kevin was absent.

My next classroom visit was a 15-minute check-in at the beginning of a class. As I walked in, Ocean rushed to tell me about a group she found in Chattanooga who planted trees—“like, that’s all they do! They plant trees to try to help the environment!” As I echoed her excitement, another student came in for a hug and Lia wanted to show me her new bracelet. By the end of the check-in, almost all groups had an action plan. Ms. Jackson had also helped them research potential community “helpers.” We were moving.

Weeks 9–15: “This is Really Happening!”

This section describes a new phase, when students’ preparation advanced and perceptions of themselves as civic actors evolved while Ms. Jackson and I sought to build on their momentum (Figure 4.4). Despite Spring Break and state testing, students worked with Ms. Jackson and me, volunteers and organizations, and each other to transform their visions of change into concrete actions, expressing newfound belonging and agency.

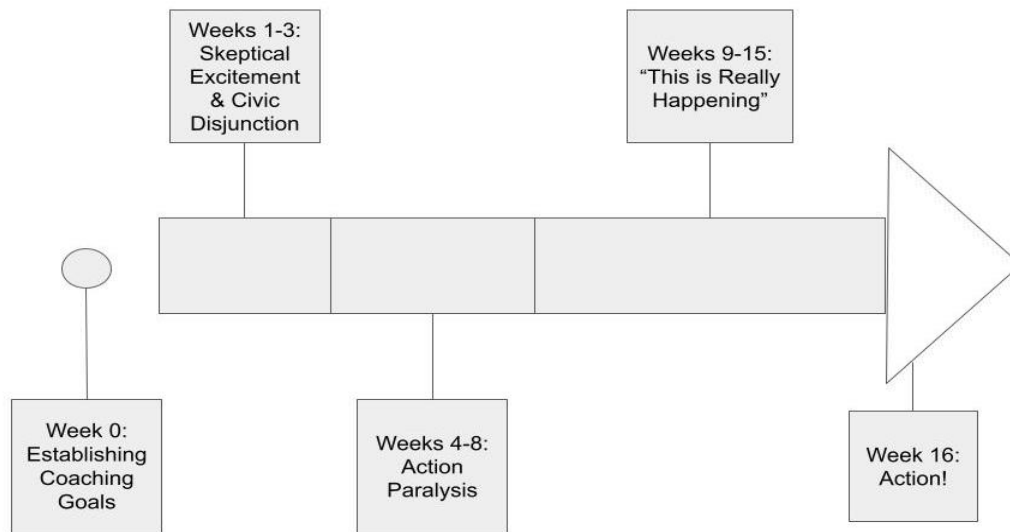


Figure 4.4 *Study Progression: Weeks 9–15*

Helping Hands

The next coaching session focused on Indicator VII.12, “the teacher connects new content to culturally relevant examples and metaphors from students’ communities and

everyday lives.” Ms. Jackson and I hoped to connect students with community members who could ground their action plans with an understanding of available resources. We had arranged for Mrs. Breedlove to attend class the next day, along with Ms. Burke, a school-based liaison for Chattanooga’s Community Forward initiative, which serves high-needs schools (Maggiore, 2021). Both were interested in helping students identify potential partners and troubleshooting logistical questions. Ms. Jackson and I were hopeful, but she admitted feeling “nervous about execution,” even though “reframing the discussion about action to ‘caring’ helped change students’ perspectives.” We also discussed students’ ongoing misconceptions about the activity, which Ms. Jackson identified as “thinking it doesn’t matter, thinking they can’t do it, and logistics.” In response, we agreed to continue pairing brief whole-group conversations, including real-world, community-based images of “citizenship,” with time devoted to their action plans.

The next day, while Ms. Jackson conducted a review activity for an upcoming assessment, I sat with Mrs. Breedlove and Ms. Burke in their makeshift office at the back of the room. They called each group to explain their action plan, and students took notes on their suggestions. Group A volunteered to go first, voicing their goal to plant trees in front of the school to help with deforestation. Mrs. Breedlove asked several clarifying questions (e.g., Are you planting these trees or someone else? Do you have permission? Have you thought about the community garden space?) She and Ms. Burke pulled out their cell phones and helped Monique and Ocean develop a list of contacts, beginning with the assistant principal who could grant permission. Ms. Burke also raised the topic of pollinators’ needing habitat, which excited Monique and Ocean. Both helpers expressed repeatedly how impressed they were with the group’s idea, noting, “This is

what kids need to be doing. They learn so much this way!” When the girls left the table, Monique literally jumped up and down.

Group C, vacillating on how to target ocean pollution, went next. Ra’Niyah and Lia had narrowed their focus to the Tennessee River, and I reminded them of our conversation the week before about preventing trash from getting into the river. When Mrs. Breedlove asked whether “people are throwing trash in the river or is it blowing in there,” the following exchange ensued:

Lia: It’s probably blowing in there. All water is connected. All over the world.

Breedlove: Have you ever seen any trash around here? Around town?

Ra’Niyah: Yes!! In the streets. Then the trash goes into the drains, then into the water!

Breedlove: That’s true. What could you do about that?

Ra’Niyah: We could invent some kind of screen for the drains. Then we could put the screens on them so it catches the trash!

I laughed, suggesting Ra’Niyah was not the type for such an undertaking, and she laughed, too, in agreement. Ms. Burke joined our laughter, adding, “And the city is definitely not going to let you roam around down there!”

Mrs. Breedlove then steered the girls toward a more down-to-earth plan, prompting them to consider the “trash built up along the fence” on the perimeter of the school, which Lia hypothesized is “going to end up in the river.” The group thus decided on a campus cleanup day, making a list of supplies like trash bags, gloves, and recycle bins. The girls also wanted to create anti-littering posters to hang around school. I mentioned Group D was considering a similar activity and asked if they were interested

in a joint effort, which they were. We summoned DJ and Jared to discuss next steps. I asked Ms. Burke, “Is it common for two organizations to work together on the same goal?” She responded, “Sure, it’s called collaboration.” She asked the students, “Have you ever heard the phrase, ‘work smarter, not harder?’ Well, that’s what collaboration gets you.” Heeding the advice, the students divided responsibilities: Lia and Ra’Niyah would design posters while DJ and Jared secured permission and supplies. Mrs. Breedlove told the girls she would print their posters and referred the boys to a community partner who might donate supplies. Mrs. Breedlove and Ms. Burke complemented the groups’ thinking and motivation, and all four students left chattering.

Group B came next, ready to discuss their plan. Niyah, Blossom, and Symone explained their aim to interview the new female police chief about ending racism. Ms. Burke noted her connection to the city and sparked the following conversation:

Burke: So how did you come up with this idea?

Niyah: We want to try to stop racism. See less police killing. So we want to talk to the new chief, especially because she’s a Black woman. She’s the first one in Chattanooga.

Burke: I can tell you she’s really big on community engagement. They like her strategies for involving the community in policing. The problem is the police department is disconnected from the community, right?

Blossom: I see the police a lot.

Burke: What [the new police chief] would like to see is more police in communities being helpful for people. Not just getting people in trouble.

When Ms. Burke recommended reaching out to Greg Williams, the Deputy Police Chief, Mrs. Breedlove added, “He’s a community partner with OCMS. I have his number and his email.” I observed, “Sometimes you just have to find people who can help you find other people!” Ms. Burke concurred:

It’s important to gain trust by getting an insider’s bridge between people. Like when you go to the mall with someone new. You introduce them and it’s more likely your friends will like your new friend because you like them. Start with Greg and then maybe he can introduce you to the new chief.

The girls embraced this plan, and I asked them to draft an email asking Deputy Chief Williams about inviting the new chief to class that Ms. Jackson or I could review.

Later that day, Blossom spotted me in the hallway and eagerly presented her school laptop, saying, “Mrs. Kelley, Mrs. Kelley! He wrote us back!” Deputy Chief Williams had responded that the new chief was unavailable, but Blossom pointed out, “he’s going to come to our class HIMSELF. He said he’s excited! I can’t believe he wrote us back!” As we hugged, I told her how proud I was and to think about how they wanted his visit to go. Over the next few days, the other groups also received responses. Ocean and Monique got permission from the assistant principal to plant pollinating shrubs, and DJ and Jared received a promise of supplies for their campus cleanup.

“This is taking too long”: Engagement Ebbs and Flows

From that point, working with students on their action plans became haphazard. We were nearing the end of March, anticipating Spring Break and a nearly 3-week state testing window in April, which warranted intensive review. To maintain momentum, I visited occasionally for brief check-ins with the groups. Ocean and Monique, amid an

email conversation with a local non-profit organization about donating trees, expressed some apathy and impatience. Monique said, “This is taking too long. I don’t want to keep doing this.” I asked, “Do you still care about deforestation and helping the environment?” She said, “Yes, but this is hard.” I said, “I know, but sometimes making a difference takes time.” I told them both how proud I was of them and assured them they would reach their goal: “Look how far you’ve come! You are getting it done!” They perked up some, but I sensed interest waning throughout the class.

Ms. Jackson and I addressed the students’ engagement level in our next coaching session, focused on Indicator V.1, “evidence that every child is engaged with their learning, and is participating at all times.” I told her about my conversation with Monique and Ocean, and she cited similar sentiments from other students. We, too, felt the weight of how long the activity was taking:

Jackson: It feels disconnected. They’ll be excited, then they’ll forget about it.

Me: Do you think we could have condensed this any further?

Jackson: I don’t think we could have based on where they started—not really understanding citizenship or how to start on any type of active project. We had to give them time to make connections. Plus, scheduling has been impossible.

Me: I agree. I know my schedule hasn’t helped matters either.

Despite these reflections, Ms. Jackson readily envisioned repeating the project next year. I asked, “What would you differently?” She replied, “Set it up better as one solid project. Instead of working on it once or twice a week, I would do it as a full unit after testing so they could have time to solely focus on that.” I later wrote in my fieldwork journal:

I am thrilled to hear B wants to do this again next year; it makes me feel like she sees the value in it. And I completely agree with her analysis of the set up; I would have done the same thing if I were the teacher, but I could not have made it work this year. STILL, I need to be sensitive to the timing of this and remember it is her classroom, not mine. I remember the pressure on testing and this study has to come secondary for her right now.

As much as I wanted to speed the activity along, I had to let the activity unfold as time allowed; Ms. Jackson and I were both trying to maintain students' interest, even as the realities of testing and timing pulled them in a different direction.

I also used the coaching session to ask about students like Kevin who lacked opportunities to participate. Ms. Jackson reiterated that he “could not handle” group work and cited his refusal of multiple chances to complete an action plan for an individual activity. I wondered aloud what such students were gaining, and Ms. Jackson suggested being “participation adjacent” was beneficial, clarifying, “I think they are seeing their peers doing things—taking civic action—even if they are not. I think that, in itself, changes perspectives.” I said, “One thing we have to consider is that some of their minds won’t change. They may have an experience which makes them feel further disenfranchised. That’s something we definitely want to avoid.” I suggested we find an alternative activity for these students and committed to working with Kevin the next day.

While the groups conferred about their remaining tasks, Kevin was roaming around the room, distracting them. I asked him to join me in the hall. He said, “I’m not doing anything!” I said, “I promise you’re not in trouble; I just want to follow up with you on something.” Feet shuffling, he assented, and we had an illuminating conversation

about where Kevin pictured himself in relation to the study and civic life, in general. I followed up with him on the comment he made—“all the presidents suck except Obama”—asking him why he felt that way. Kevin told me he knew President Trump was bad because his father talked about him all the time when he was in office. I asked him what he thought a good president would do and he listed staying out of conflicts, opening homeless shelters, and helping people. He said, “I just want for once to hear a president say something about the homeless. It’s like they don’t care.” I wondered aloud whether he might become president. He laughed and said, “I thought about it. It would never happen though.” I remembered his admiration for President Obama and we continued:

Me: Earlier you said you admired President Obama. Why is that?

Kevin: He cared about people. He showed us what we could be.

Me: Do you think people told President Obama he could be president when he was your age?

Kevin (after a long pause): Probably not.

Me: Why not?

Kevin: Because of the color of his skin.

Me: But he showed them, didn’t he?

Kevin smiled, and I prompted him to consider how to become president. He suggested, “I’d have to get people to like me.” I nudged, “How do you do that?” He continued, “I would have to show them I do good things.” Seeing an opportunity to connect to the action activity, I proposed, “Want to start now? Why don’t you write down what you would do about homelessness if you were president?” He laughed but agreed with a hug, and I assured him, “I think you would make a great president.” That evening, I wrote:

This kid is paying attention, but feels helpless. He is exactly the reason we need to give students opportunities to talk and take civic action. Need to talk to B. about using Kevin's passion for the homeless to help him get involved.

I resolved to help Kevin and others feel connected, even as they stood out from class.

“It is really coming together”: The Dates are Set

Ms. Jackson and I had one last coaching session before Spring Break and state testing, and before we turned to logistics of completing the project, I mentioned my encouraging conversation with Kevin and reiterated relationships' centrality to CRP. Given our focus on Indicator II.4, “the teacher consistently makes efforts to get to know all students and to surface and highlight each student's strengths, skills, and unique contributions,” I reiterated that we should try to include everyone, even those who need different entry points. Ms. Jackson mentioned that Kevin had been somewhat more attentive, and I wondered aloud whether being “participation adjacent” was enough. She was open to helping him find an individual activity, so I suggested connecting to Obama.

As we discussed logistics for the deputy chief's visit on April 28, we thought about how to involve the whole class. We also selected the next day, April 29 for the outdoor activities—planting trees and cleaning up trash—and were excited about the possibility of back-to-back days of civic action. Ms. Jackson commented that even students who did not complete their plans would be able to participate.

The following day, our last meeting with students before break, necessitated clear expectations. We presented our 2-days-of-action idea, and students were excited to “finally do something.” Ms. Jackson conducted a whole-class digital poster tutorial as I prepared for check-ins at the back of the room. Before I could call a group, Kevin begged

to go first and was delighted when I agreed, even more so when I asked him to review my field notes from our last conversation, insisting, “What you have to say is very important.” Citing my interest in his desire to address homelessness, I probed:

Me: Can you tell me why you care so much about it?

Kevin: I don’t know. I just see them all over the place and I feel bad. Like, how do you sleep there?

Me: What can you do about it?

Kevin: I mean, I would give them money or something. But sometimes you don’t know what they would do with it.

I nudged Kevin to consider whether such outcomes matter, keeping the conversation focused on his potential for civic action. We continued:

Kevin: I want to do something, but I don’t have anything myself. How do you help if you don’t have anything yourself?

Me: I think you have A LOT to give. You can give your energy, your passion, and your voice! Do you know how President Obama started his career?

Kevin: In the government?

Me: Nope. He started out in communities, using his voice to help people that didn’t have much.

His interest piqued, Kevin agreed to research Obama’s years as a community organizer before my next visit. In his own way, he was eager to participate in what the class was doing: the check-in was important, even with nothing tangible to check, suggesting he needed to feel like part of the class community.

I later met with Groups C and D, who had coordinated their efforts around ocean pollution—the former, Ra’Niyah and Lia, working on a poster, and the latter, DJ and Jared, securing supplies for the cleanup day. Jared had received confirmation emails from a community partner willing to provide supplies, and Ra’Niyah was spearheading the poster design. She told me, “I don’t think kids know when they throw trash down it ends up in the ocean. That’s what our poster is about.” Ms. Jackson and I later concurred that dividing responsibilities between the groups was helpful and aligned with our coaching focus—surfacing and highlighting each student’s strengths, skills, and unique contributions. DJ and Jared tended toward writing and organizing, and they ably crafted emails, considered logistics, and communicated with school and community partners, whereas Ra’Niyah and Lia thrived when being creative and conceptual.

Meanwhile, Group A had successfully secured a community partner, a local organization specializing in conservation. Ocean was in the process of responding to their request for more information, asking for a small donation of pollinating shrubs and volunteers to help plant them. Ocean and Monique worried about missing a response over break, so I promised to monitor email for them, and Monique was optimistic, saying, “I think they will want to help us.” I asked about their preparation, and they recited their list: plants, volunteers, tools, and dirt. Both verbally and with big smiles on their faces, they confirmed their confidence and excitement. As I noted in my fieldwork journal, “I was concerned they were losing interest because it was taking so long. I think they are seeing the fruits of their labors paying off and they’re feeling accomplished.”

Over Spring Break, I answered a clarifying question on Group A’s behalf about size and quantity of plants and conducted some behind-the-scenes planning with school

personnel. To cultivate and celebrate student agency, I wanted to ensure students felt responsible for their activities, but to determine where and when, for example, they could plant and pick-up trash, I surveyed outdoor spaces at OCMS and consulted with administrators. Mr. Carmichael, an assistant principal, told me several students had told him about their projects. He expressed pride in their ability to speak about their problems and articulate their proposed solutions. He said, “They are really pumped up! It’s awesome to see them getting a chance to do something and make a difference.”

The Buildup

Even without a whole-group meeting for almost 3 weeks, the students remained enthusiastic whenever I checked in or saw them in the halls, and we spent the 2 days prior to our days of action on more formal preparation. On my first day back, Ms. Jackson asked the whole class to generate questions for Group B’s visitor, Deputy Chief Williams, noting, “You have a rare opportunity to ask a member of law enforcement anything you want, so go for it!” I worked with Blossom, Niyah, and Symone to research his background so they could introduce him to the class and prepare their own questions about police violence. Niyah and Symone shared disappointing news: they were going to miss class the day of the visit because of medical appointments. I told them how integral their work had been in getting him to come in the first place and emphasized their responsibility to ensure Blossom was prepared to speak in their absence. I asked Blossom if she felt comfortable taking the lead role, and she told me she was.

Group A needed clarification about whether the organization providing shrubs was bringing them, along with volunteers, so I helped Ocean and Monique send an email and assured them we would have helpers either way, as I had two friends who were

interested in being part of their project. Monique asked, “What do you mean your friends want to help?” I told her, “I have been talking with my friends about how impressed I am with what you are doing. They are amazing gardeners and would love to help out.” Ocean and Monique looked at each other and shrugged. Ocean said, “I’m fine with it! They will like us; we’re fun. We’ll make sure they have fun. We’ll be nice.”

After I worked with the groups, Kevin reminded me of our promise to talk about Obama, but he had yet to look into Obama’s community activism. We found and watched a short video, and he kept wanting to replay it, but after the third time, I showed him how to save the link to watch it on his own and steered us toward the following conversation:

Kevin: So this is what he did to change things?

Me: Yes, he worked with community members to make where they lived safer.

Kevin: This is what he did before he was president?

Me: This is one of the things. After this, he went to Harvard and then he was a lawyer, then a senator, then president.

Kevin was awed, and I asked him about Obama’s rationale for serving the community in Chicago. Kevin suggested, “He cared about them.” We continued:

Me: Do you think you could do something like that?

Kevin: Maybe. At least I could do something.

Me. Can you think about what that might look like? Can we talk about it tomorrow?

He agreed, and I wrote in my fieldwork journal that evening, “I wonder how to ground what I’ve been doing with Kevin in some type of action activity he can take some ownership of. I want him to feel fully a part of what we’re doing as a class.”

The following day, the day before Deputy Chief Williams was scheduled to visit, Ms. Jackson and I facilitated a quick whole-group discussion about expectations for the action days. On Thursday, students would have an opportunity to talk with a member of law enforcement; we expected they would participate and feel comfortable asking him questions. On Friday, we expected everyone would either plant trees with Group A or participate in the cleanup with Groups C and D. A few students put finishing touches on their posters and others wrote additional questions for Deputy Chief Williams.

I worked with Group B to vet their peers' questions and edit their biographical statement, which Blossom practiced reading out loud. The girls were very giggly, almost giddy, as we discussed what would happen the next day. Even though Niyah and Symone would be absent, they were clearly proud of what they had done and extremely encouraging and supportive as they helped Blossom prepare.

Eagerness was also on display in Group A, as I confirmed with Ocean and Monique that I would pick up the shrubs and my friends would be there to help us plant them. I also noticed the community partner working with Groups C and D had dropped off supplies for the cleanup. I pointed at the resources and said to DJ, "Did you see this? Y'all made this happen!" He grinned and gave me a thumbs-up.

I also talked to Kevin and suggested he "make an action plan—but a different kind of plan." I elaborated, "write me a plan for how you might become president if you ever decide you want that. Then tell me what you would do to help people as president. Can you do that?" He seemed reluctant, but when I assured, "Ms. Jackson and I will have an action plan from you just like all the other groups," he agreed and worked diligently for most of the class. His action plan read:

So I think some things I can do is I can sign up to be a comedian and then when I'm on stage I can talk about how I can help the community. I know you are probably wondering why am I becoming a comedian and not telling jokes? It is because I want to trick them into listening to me and then tell them I am running for president. How I would help the community: First as y'all know, help the homeless, help families, try to get people to stop polluting and to start picking up trash. I would get people to work together and not against each other.

After I read it, I hugged him, told him it was a great plan, and asked, "Do you think you have to trick people into listening to you?" He reiterated his rationale: "People think I'm funny, but then I could switch to the serious stuff once they're there." I agreed the plan was clever and praised his creativity. I also reminded him that he would be able to get involved with some of the other groups' activities over the next 2 days.

As students packed up, Ms. Jackson and I spoke about their progress and recalled our earlier doubts. She said, "I am so proud of them," and observed, "It is really coming together!" We talked about how focused Kevin had been all class, and I voiced the need to include him in the others' activities. In my fieldwork journal that evening, I wrote:

I am really looking forward to the next couple of days with these kids! The energy in the room today was palpable; I could tell they aren't just looking forward to this being over; they are looking forward to getting their hands dirty! They are looking forward to DOING something. I can't wait to see how it makes them feel to make a difference, especially with something they planned by themselves. This is where the agency comes in. I think this is where civic participation is going to meet civic identity.

Even before the action-packed days, students—not to mention Ms. Jackson—clearly felt accomplished. They could see their efforts yielding solid results as they found their footing as civic actors. Although each group worked on a separate goal, the overall dynamic of class camaraderie and united purpose evinced the intersecting development of their civic and social identities.

Week 16: ACTION!

As Figure 4.5 illustrates, Week 16 was the long-awaited action phase, when students’ semester-long efforts finally come to fruition. Ms. Jackson and I strove to ensure everyone felt included in the days’ events, even though the activities originated with particular groups. Exceeding our expectations, the students genuinely seemed to thrill in working together and learning from one another.

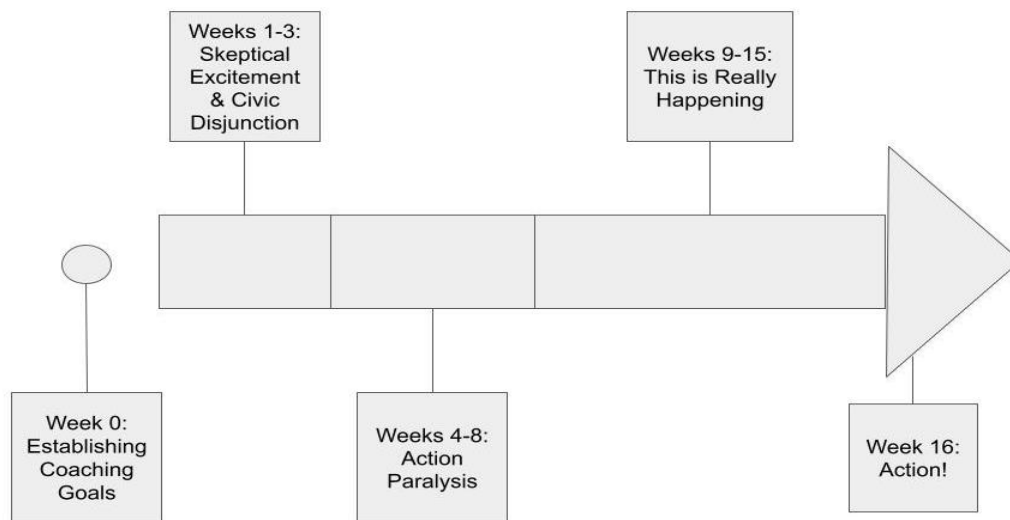


Figure 4.5 *Study Progression: Week 16*

Interrogating Racism with the Deputy Chief

Thursday began with a plot twist: Blossom was absent, but Niyah and Symone were not, having convinced their parents to change their appointments so they could, as Niyah put it, “do what we worked for all this time.” Despite feeling anxious, Symone

volunteered for Blossom's job as host, and she and Niyah practiced in the hall. They beamed with joy and pride throughout the deputy chief's visit. I told them, "You did this!" Niyah said, "I know! I can't believe it!"

Some of their classmates were visibly nervous. Deputy Chief Williams, sitting in the front of the class as students entered, was in full uniform, complete with weapons. Once he began talking, however, students relaxed, and he had their undivided attention while he discussed his decision to be a police officer, being treated differently by the Black community because of his decision, running for a state Senate seat, being shot, and what his daily life was like. He talked at length about the importance of community and service and offered a candid indictment of "bad cops" like those who killed George Floyd: "What they did was wrong. Full stop. No excuses."

Clay and Rubin (2020) attributed Black students' negative perceptions of political structures, especially law enforcement, to negative personal interactions; the "civic disjunction" they feel is the result of these negative interactions' running counter to the reigning civic narrative of equality and justice (p. 176). The deputy chief's visit was thus an ideal blend of the courageous conversations and action activity we had envisioned. Without knowing about my study, he accepted Group B's invitation, facilitated an honest dialogue about racism and power, and called for community action. As a Black man, a police officer, and a community leader, Williams challenged students to interrogate their assumptions about citizenship and encouraged civic involvement. Noting that the people who protested Floyd's murder were right to do so, he said, "My job was to protect those people who were protesting, not stop them. They were doing the right thing by standing

up against something wrong.” Symone led her peers in a Q and A, then the students clamored for selfies with Deputy Chief Williams, and I took a group picture.

All students engaged with Deputy Chief Williams, but the three students in Group B likely benefited the most. Independent of the conversation during his visit, the planning and execution of their action activity complicated their feelings of civic estrangement when they exercised their agency and made things happen. They isolated a problem, took action steps to solve it, and saw their plan materialize.

Getting Dirty and Making a Difference

On Friday, the mood was electric. Everyone, including Ms. Jackson, was excited to begin our outside activities. She divided the class in two: she supervised those cleaning up trash, led by DJ and Jared, and I supervised those planting shrubs, led by Monique and Ocean. Kevin was originally in my group but opted to join the cleanup group. He had “been listening to what they had been saying about pollution” and wanted to help.

I took my group to the OCMS courtyard, where we had permission to plant and where my friends had unloaded the shrubs, tools, and soil. I introduced “Miss Daisy” and “Miss Laura” and asked Group A to explain their activity. Monique said, “We wanted to plant trees for the environment. For deforestation.” Daisy asked, “What is deforestation?” Ocean answered, “It’s when people cut down too many trees and it hurts the air because we don’t have enough oxygen. It leads to global warming.” Laura and Daisy provided a brief tutorial on the names and properties of each shrub, and I shared pictures of what they would look like fully grown. All students were attentive and eager to start digging.

Ocean and Monique ran the show, yet every student was active the entire time, asking questions of Laura and Daisy, digging, and playing. They were allowed to have

their phones, so they took pictures of themselves planting and selfies with Laura, Daisy, and me. About 10 minutes before the end of class, the cleanup crew joined to spread mulch and gather tools. After a class photo with Daisy and Laura, Ms. Jackson and I escorted the students back inside. She said, “This went so well! They loved it!” Several students also told us how much fun they had. In Monique’s words, “It felt good! I think we did good!” Blossom delighted, “I feel very dirty!”

After the students left, Ms. Jackson shared that her group was “non-stop” and that everyone pitched in. They quickly finished the designated area and readily continued working. She was thrilled by their enthusiasm, and I later wrote in my fieldwork journal:

Watching these kids play in the dirt today was amazing. I could tell they all felt so accomplished, not just the group leaders. Seeing them interact as a community of learners on a mission was really something special. It seemed like they not only had a good time, but they felt like they were a part of something bigger than themselves. All aspects of this evolving concept of citizenship they seem to be developing were present today—helpers, community, purpose. I am so glad they all got to do something active together.

I was, after sharing this experience with the students, eager to learn what impact, if any, it had on them and their conceptions of citizenship and their own agency as citizens.

The Debrief

The final coaching session enabled Ms. Jackson and me to reflect on the activities and plan one last discussion. Guided by Indicator II.8, “the teacher creates a space for student agency, autonomy, and voice,” we sought to celebrate students’ efforts and invite reflection on their experiences—and the concept of citizenship in light thereof. After a

collective sigh of satisfaction about how the activities had gone, I shared my joy that the whole class worked as a team, and Ms. Jackson agreed. She reiterated how enthusiastic the cleanup team was and noted how involved Kevin had been, a “true leader, running around and picking up everything he could get his hands on.” I reminded her that Kevin’s action plan mentioned pollution, so working on something about which he was passionate was probably meaningful. She said, “That tracks. I’m glad I let him switch when he asked.” Ms. Jackson noticed how Kevin’s behavior was less disruptive when he felt like he was a part of the classroom community and making a difference.

Considering how to frame the culminating discussion with students, I suggested Ms. Jackson should facilitate. I expected the discussion to be fairly innocuous, lacking controversy, and wondered if the Framework for Courageous Conversations was necessary, but I was pleased when she called it “helpful for *any* big conversation.” It illuminated what to do before, during, and after the discussion. We created a slideshow with traditional images of citizenship juxtaposed with images of community action and activism and continued our ongoing conversation about the word *citizenship*:

Me: Is the WORD “citizenship” important?

Jackson: Yes, because they will hear it. And it applies to them. It doesn’t just mean ‘I was born here so I am a citizen.’ It’s more than that. And can even be different than that.

Me: So when they continue to hear the word—in school and in the world—we want them to own that?

Jackson: Absolutely yes. It felt alien to them and it shouldn’t. They are a part of it and should know that.

Me: So we need to help them make connections to the word, not just the actions.

Which is more important?

Jackson: The actions. But the word matters, too.

Ms. Jackson crafted questions to help students express how what they experienced might have influenced their civic identities. She reserved a whole class period to facilitate the debrief, though we agreed not to force the conversation if student interest waned.

I was at the door with Ms. Jackson when students arrived the next day and observed that I had become part of the classroom community. We had been together long enough to learn each other's personalities. Ra'Niyah made a dramatic entrance, loudly spitting out her gum with a sly smile because "Y'all know Mrs. Kelley hates gum smacking." Ocean asked if Miss Daisy and Miss Laura had fun, and I shared, "so much fun and they want to come back!" She said, "They can come back next year, because I'm going to keep up with those trees and make sure they make it. I've got to make sure somebody keeps water on them. They can help if they want." I pulled Kevin aside to whisper, "Ms. Jackson told me you were a real leader last Friday. I am so proud of you!" He said, "Yeah, I was. It was really easy. There was a lot to do."

I sat with Kevin for most of the discussion, and he provided valuable under-his-breath comic relief for the duration. Students began with a bell-ringer activity: reviewing a set of images—of a student protest, a young person voting, people picking up trash, a group building a community garden, a young girl planting a tree, and a group of young people with police officers—and answering the question, "What do these images have in common?" Ms. Jackson opened the discussion, inviting students to share their answers,

which included “They’re all doing something,” “voting, picking the right people,” “helping the community,” and “talking about racism.”

Echoing one of our first conversations, Ms. Jackson then asked students to conduct an image search for the word *citizenship*. The same images popped up again—flags, passports, people voting, Statue of Liberty. Ms. Jackson asked, “Are these images the only things that have to do with citizenship? Have we learned anything different?” Several students offered iterations of, “It means helping the community,” “It’s helping the world,” and “What we did Friday was citizenship.” Ms. Jackson pressed, “So what do you believe citizenship is?” DJ said, “It’s people going to make a change.” Jared added, “It’s actually doing something. Like when we picked up trash so it doesn’t go in the river.” Lia said, “really it’s just being nice.” Others in the class were nodding. I said, “even though we kind of made everybody go outside and do something Friday?” Niyah corrected, “No, we WANTED to do it!” Almost all students were active in the classroom discussion and seemed like they wanted to continue talking about what they had done.

Ms. Jackson then moved to more specific questions about each group’s activity, beginning with Group B. She asked, “How did it feel to have the Deputy Chief in the room talking to you?” Symone mentioned she was interested to learn of efforts to make the police force more diverse. Ocean said, “It’s not every day you get to talk to the police about real things.” Another student added, “It was great to talk to one when we didn’t do anything wrong first,” a response that resonated with most students. Kevin told me,

I’m going to be honest. I did not want to be in here with a policeman, but he was cool. He was alright. I was surprised because he was not a good kid when he was my age. I still don’t trust the police, but I do trust him. I would call him.

Ms. Jackson asked if the experience changed anyone's view of law enforcement. Ocean said, "Now I know if a policeman tells me someone is a bad influence I should take their advice." Jared said, "My view has changed from negative to positive. Like I would feel more comfortable reaching out to police now." Of the experience planning the visit, Niyah said, "It was very exciting when he wrote us back so fast. I didn't think anyone would answer us." Symone added, "I was scared to talk at first when he got here, but he was nice and told me not to be nervous so I did it." Ms. Jackson flipped the question: "Do you think visiting with you changed him?" Niyah said, "most definitely. He was impressed with us. He was impressed that young people wanted to know about the world and talk about racism with him."

Ms. Jackson invited discussion about the outside activities by asking the students if they had made a difference. So many eager "yeses" resounded, she had to quiet the room. A student who was usually absent but had been there for planting contributed, "We were able to plant trees for the environment because they're cutting too many down." Lia said, "I feel like it was not just us doing it. Like, other kids were watching us and I know they were saying to themselves, 'I wish I was picking up trash to help the environment, too.'" I asked, "So you were leading by example?" and she said, "Oh yes. 100%."

Probing students' feelings about the process of planning and executing activities, Ms. Jackson asked about "the most difficult or surprising" aspect. Ocean said, "I still can't believe those ladies came all the way over here and helped us plant trees, not even knowing us. That meant a lot to me." Blossom cited the fact that the deputy chief responded "so quick and actually wanted to come here." Similarly, Jared said, "Mr. Brown didn't just write us back. He wrote us back in 14 minutes!" While Monique noted

her community partner “said yes and then actually gave us free trees,” Ocean conceded the difficulty of “waiting for all the answers. We had to write a lot of emails back and forth,” although she admitted the wait was worthwhile.

Ms. Jackson asked one final question: “Could you do something like this again by yourself?” Students looked at each other, some shaking their heads and others nodding. Jared vowed he “could do the trash pick-up again,” but Lia expressed a need for “help from the community.” I asked, “Do you feel better about reaching out for help now?” She responded, “I think so,” while Symone said, “I definitely do. You just got to ask.”

Conversation waned, and we asked students to write a reflection on their experiences with the action activity (Table 4.6). As students wrote, Ms. Jackson and I noted the cross-pollination from the discussion. Students who had focused on racism talked about fighting deforestation; students interested in homelessness felt empowered picking up trash; and students who had focused on ocean pollution voiced the impact Deputy Chief Williams had on them. Blossom, absent for his visit, wrote, “I was happy he talked to us about racism in the police. He listened to us and also wanted to stop racism in the police.” She internalized her classmates’ experience based on their stories of that day. The post-activity survey data would also reveal students’ seeing themselves as civic actors and listening to and learning from their peers. They were developing a shared conception of citizenship that revolved around caring, helping, open dialogue, cooperation, making a difference, and community. They had not wholly rejected the dominant narrative of citizenship, but they had created a counter-narrative that included themselves as informed civic agents, elevated actions over rhetoric, and prized cooperation and care.

Table 4.6 *Excerpts from Primary Participant Written Reflections*

Student	Group	Excerpt
Monique	A	After we got done talking I made a difference of us outside planting because I love OCMS and the environment.
Ocean	A	It made a difference that made me feel good. I was nervous about writing emails for the people who donated trees. I love but also dislike civics projects when I have to speak publicly. It's the worst! But I really enjoyed this project. It was fun and gave us a better understanding of helping others.
Blossom	B	When Chief Williams responded to the gmail it was surprising and felt good to be responded to. When I was planting trees I was happy that I'm changing the world and I think I made a difference when I was planning about racism and I was proud of myself doing it...I was happy he talked to us about racism in the police. He listened to us and also wanted to stop racism in the police.
Niyah	B	This changed my thoughts because we can and actually should stop people from just throwing things on the ground. We can actually help the community by doing things like we did. I would love to do that again!!
Symone	B	This made me more confident to talk in front of the class and I would do it again...In the beginning when we first started I was scared that he wasn't going to reply and wasn't going to have time to talk to us but when he did it made me take this more serious because I knew we was going to have to talk to him and ask questions about him and how he felt being a police officer. This made me feel like I can do more in my community because it was easy really to send an email and he was easy to talk to and we learned from him about how to help the community.
Lia	C	Reflecting on the experiences we had last week with Deputy Chief Williams, the campus clean up and the tree planting, these things made me feel happy that I could help my community even if what I did was small. I think I made a difference with planting trees and helping deforestation.
Jared	D	I felt like going out and doing something like picking up trash and cleaning up or just talking to the police was about being a good citizen. I would not have a problem reaching out to community members because we did that.
DJ	D	It made me feel more comfortable talking to people and helping the community and it made me realize I can make a change in the community and I would do it again.
Kevin	E	It felt good helping with pollution. There was a lot of trash that was going to go to the water we got to first and helped pick it up.

Note. Ra'niyah was absent.

When I left, I reflected on the sheer joy I had felt over the last several weeks—joy the students clearly shared. I wrote in my fieldwork journal after reading their reflections:

Watching Bridgette's face during the discussion was priceless; I could tell she was as proud of these kids as they were and they were SO PROUD of themselves.

I have never seen some of them so animated and so eager to talk. Seeing them share their passions with each other and then get excited together was really special.

Throughout the study, I asked Ms. Jackson and her students to grapple with unfamiliar, sometimes uncomfortable, topics and tasks, but they tackled them with tenacity and grace. In retrospect, the struggles they experienced seemed to make their accomplishments even sweeter.

Wrapping Up

My data collection concluded with the post-activity survey and a final interview with Ms. Jackson. This section details those results before I present cross-cutting analysis.

Post-Activity Student Surveys

Before I administered the post-activity survey, I asked students to be honest about their experiences and as specific as possible. Their complete answers are in Appendix J, but I will highlight several responses, beginning with Question 1, "What does citizenship mean to you?," and 2, "When you are an adult, how do you see yourself engaging as a citizen?," which echoed the pre-activity survey. Unlike "I don't know," which punctuated the preliminary data, all of the respondents supplied answers on the second survey, including multiple mentions of "community" and "helping." Ocean answered Question 1 with "being a part of a community, doing things to help others, actively participating in things going on," and DJ responded, "to be a citizen of the world and help the country

and the community.” Answers to Question 2 included references to “voting,” “protesting,” “not being racist,” and “helping the community.” The vocabulary students had adopted to describe citizenship in our discussions was clearly on display.

Every primary participant answered the third question—“Do you feel like you, personally, can take action to change what you find wrong or unjust?”—in the affirmative. Symone explained, “if I see something wrong I can try to stop it.” Ra’Niyah answered, “I can take action personally. Giving speeches on how our world needs to change.” Kevin responded, “I can try to get other people to do stuff but mostly do my part,” with Jared adding, “it’s not that hard to do something good.” Students who were initially frustrated and disheartened by the prospect of putting plans into action now resoundingly indicated they could personally engage in civic action.

Question 4, “How did participation in classroom discussions change or inform your feelings about your role as a citizen?,” and Question 5, “How did participation in your civics action activity change or inform your feelings about your role as a citizen?” assessed the study elements’ influence on students’ civic identities. They had “changed,” were “helped,” and “learned.” To Question 4, Ocean responded, “it helped me understand what is really going on in our community,” and Symone shared, “it made me learn about little things that can make a big difference.” Lia evoked collaboration, writing, “I worked with my classmates to discuss citizenship. It made me feel like we should work in groups to find the answer quicker.” Answers to Question 5 referred more specifically to actions, as Symone wrote, “It changed me because now I know I can do projects like the ones I did and I’m not shy anymore to talk in front of a big crowd.” Also hinting at the activity’s lasting impact, Niyah wrote, “It makes me want to put in more action than just picking up

trash around my school,” and DJ answered, “It made me want to do more things for the community.” Kevin recalled, “It felt good not littering as much as I used to like just helping out the community,” and Jared made a direct connection to citizenship, responding, “Helped me feel like I was being a good citizen.”

Question 6 mirrored the first survey and one of our discussion starters: “If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be and how would you start?” Many students pointed to our familiar issues and, as in the final class discussion, demonstrated cross-pollination. Kevin, initially interested in homelessness, identified pollution. DJ, who had focused on ocean pollution and trash pick-up, identified racism. Symone, from the group focused on racism, identified recycling and trash cleanup. Their responses exhibit how collective discussion and action influenced these students. They were listening to, learning from, and working alongside one another as a community.

The survey data thus provided a powerful glimpse of the study’s impact, especially combined with the written reflections and final class discussion. Compared to the first survey, laden with “I don’t know” responses, students’ understandings of citizenship had clearly grown, and their civic identities exuded agency and voice. Seeing, in their own words, that they felt confident in the ability to take action and passionate about issues affecting their lives and their communities was encouraging.

Second Teacher Interview

I conducted the second interview with Ms. Jackson that afternoon. Guided by the protocol (Appendix E), we discussed the study’s impact on the students and her practice. She said she would definitely conduct something similar in future classes but noted she would condense it and implement it on consecutive days to maximize student interest and

momentum. I asked how she thought the different elements of the study—classroom discussion and action activity—impacted students. She said the discussions enabled them to “hear what other people had to say and have a space to really talk to one another. Even those who didn’t talk much, it was good for them to just listen to others.” I asked whether she thought students benefited from the action activity, and she answered

Absolutely. I think actually being able to do something made it real for them.

Because some of them didn’t understand or really have a grasp of what we were doing before actually picking up trash or making contact with community members or planting trees or getting a speaker in. I think it was the actual doing that made it meaningful to them.

Ms. Jackson’s observations mirror Blevins et al.’s (2016) assertion:

To strengthen democratic participation, we cannot simply teach students more civic knowledge. Instead we must help students engage in discussions and decision-making processes that create opportunities for open-ended political discussions and actions in which students are exposed to a variety of viewpoints like those they encounter in action civics experiences. (p. 348)

In other words, combining robust civics discussions with *doing* civics opens the doors to experiencing the promises of citizenship.

Ms. Jackson elaborated on the connection between discussion and action, and when I asked whether students’ experiences with civics, racism, and identity had changed, she identified the visit from Deputy Chief Williams as a turning point because hearing “a member of law enforcement to talk openly about racism . . . changed how they saw themselves in relation to the community and law enforcement.” She then pivoted:

For their identities? It was the doing. Actually being able to do something. Even if it wasn't their project, just the fact of 'I can do something right here right now and it's making a difference.' That was really cool.

As more evidence, she shared that when she asked students how the outside activities made them feel, they said things like "I really feel like I made a difference" and "I feel great about it." We also discussed specific student outcomes, like Symone's impressive leadership during the deputy chief's visit and how Kevin enjoyed the group cleanup.

Turning to her practice, I asked her impression of the transformational coaching cycle, which she found "normal. Just like we usually are." I noted a key difference: the intentional focus on CRP paired with interrogation of bias and privilege. She reflected, "I think a lot of it was work I'm doing personally. It was kind of shifting the personal to the professional in terms of how I relate to kids...Unpacking that bias will be really important." I asked how her understanding of CRP had changed, and she said:

It has to do with what I assume about kids. My brain keeps coming back to Williams. Like, I kind of assumed they were all going to be anxious. Like, that's how I always thought and that's really biased. Some of them weren't. Shedding that from myself—not every kid, not every Black kid, has this kind of negative experience.

I commended her on this revelation, and we discussed culturally responsive practices we implanted throughout the study, like centering student voices, giving students autonomy and choice, and helping students find and celebrate their strengths. I asked her what elements of the cycle were most helpful and she said, "bias for sure," adding,

the Framework for Courageous Conversations, especially the misconceptions part. I need to work on assuming that students have something or don't have something. Making sure everyone is included in the conversations and activities. I have a habit of turning discussions into a A–B conversation between me and another student when it should be an 'us' conversation.

As we concluded the interview, I reiterated that I could not have asked for a better collaborator and valued the opportunity to work with her amazing students. We also agreed to continue our partnership the next school year.

Analysis

With an overwhelming amount of data, I endeavored to lean on my research questions. As elsewhere, though, I sensed significant, but not unexpected, overlap.

RQ 1: What contributes to Black middle school students' perceptions of citizenship?

From the beginning, I realized many Black students in the class had either distorted images of or disconnections from citizenship—at least the term. The pre-activity survey yielded many “I don't know” and several vague references to being “good” and “nice.” As Ms. Jackson and I probed their understandings during discussion, especially while viewing traditional images of citizenship, the majority of students indicated no connection; one even remarked, “That's not me.” Tillet (2012) described this type of disconnection and feeling of non-belonging as “civic estrangement,” arguing the exclusion of Black people and their contributions from the common civic myths and narratives has resulted in disillusionment and, at times, hostility (p. 8).

Possible reasons for Black students' lack of connections to civics content and concepts include a white-washed social studies curriculum that excludes the realities of

racism, lack of exposure to high-quality (or any) civics instruction in early education, and a master narrative of citizenship focused on the ideals of freedom and justice that run counter to their lived experiences (Busey & Walker, 2017; Clay & Rubin, 2020; Hauver, 2017; Heilig et al., 2012; Pinkney, 2016). Ms. Jackson's students lacked traditional civic content knowledge, but even without that vocabulary, had learned the master narrative. Kevin's excusing "the first [presidents]," students' calling Kevin's criticism of the president "bad" citizenship, and Jared's characterization of protest as leading to "riots" all suggest internalization of authoritarian patriotism (Busey & Walker, 2017). What traditional civic knowledge students had absorbed, either from exposure in school or from outside sources, remained cloaked in exclusionary systems.

As we complicated and interrogated traditional versions of citizenship and presented alternative images that included Black people voting, acts of community service, and protesting, students slowly began to make connections. Calling the alternative images and ideas "good citizenship," Ms. Jackson and I helped students see how the terms *citizen* and *citizenship* might apply to them. By the second survey, students could define citizenship using words like "community" and "helping" and articulate specific actions they could take related to the action activities. My observations also captured how they had created a more inclusive version of citizenship.

RQ 2: How does high-quality civics instruction impact civic engagement, civic participation, and civic identity among Black middle school students?

From Day 1, I saw how students' experience with and understanding of citizenship, in general, and their own citizenship, specifically, were confused, conflicted, and disconnected. They had little confidence in themselves as civic actors and, despite

caring deeply about problems facing their communities and the world, saw little opportunity to do anything about them. Answering RQ 2 required an understanding of if and how the activities Ms. Jackson and I planned facilitated students' engaging with civics-related concepts, provided opportunities for students to participate in civic action, and/or influenced how students' civic identities evolved.

To engage students, Ms. Jackson and I sought accessible concepts of citizenship. To promote agency, we revised the nature of our discussions to focus on what young people can accomplish, incorporating video from March for Our Lives, in which students fought for stricter gun control measure; images of students' helping others during the COVID-19 pandemic; video of Chattanooga students' participating in Black Lives Matter protests; and the example of local high school students' walkout to demand much-needed school funding and repairs. Relaxing the timeline, we enlisted community outreach specialists to help students find resources; led workshops on letter writing, email construction, and poster making; and helped students communicate with school administrators to secure permission for their activities. Students also found community partners to make their action plans reality. Over many months, students organized and executed 2 days of rewarding civic action in their community.

The pre- and post-activity surveys, as well as students' written reflections, pointed to a shift in their civic identities due to high-quality civics instruction. On the post-survey, students credited discussions with helping them "understand what is really happening in our community" and inspiring confidence in "do[ing] something for the community." Likewise, their willingness and ability to engage in courageous conversations improved over time, especially when discussions began to overlap with

action activities. Even as many students expressed frustration with getting started, they grew more confident in whole- and small-group conversations. Ra’Niyah’s comment, “I know I want to do it, but I don’t think I can,” illustrated both a high level of vulnerability and a continued, even heightened, commitment to what she felt was needed change. Arguably, the very act of expressing their frustrations demonstrated how engaging in courageous conversations increased students’ trust in us and one another, as well as their desire to make an impact in their communities.

Each student reflection cited enjoyment and/or confidence, and eight primary participants responded affirmatively on the post-activity survey to the question, “Do you feel like you, personally, can take action to change what you find wrong or unjust?” In stark contrast, only two students raised their hands at the beginning of the study when asked a similar question, and the pre-activity survey responses indicated confusion with even the idea of taking action. Months later, beyond increased confidence, students articulated specific, actionable goals and reflected on their improving skills. For example, Symone, who had been a little cynical, felt “more confident to talk in front of the class,” willing to “do it again,” and motivated to “do more in [her] community because it was easy really to send an email.” Lia’s participation in the action activity made her “happy,” as she remarked, “I could help my community even if what I did was small. I think I made a difference.” Students were articulating understandings consistent with Schmidt’s (2021) definition of civic identity as “that sense of self that propels one to engage the community and the world with a sense of connection, purpose, and efficacy. It also enables the individual to transcend self and find common purpose with neighbors towards a more equitable, just, and loving community” (p. 175). The students’ collective and

individual experiences with high-quality civics instruction informed their civic identities as they contextualized and practiced citizenship.

RQ 3: How does ongoing instructional coaching in culturally responsive practices support teachers in implementing high-quality civics instruction?

Answering RQ 3 required examining the transformational coaching cycle to determine whether and how it aided Ms. Jackson's implementation of high-quality civics instruction. Specifically, I sought to ascertain whether key tenets of culturally responsive practices were incorporated throughout the cycle and enhanced instruction. Based on observations, coaching documents, and the pre- and post-interviews, the cycle helped us surface certain biases and assumptions, plan and implement culturally responsive practices with intentionality, and cultivate a collaborative learning community.

Aguilar (2020) identified resistance to difficult conversations as a potential barrier to transformational coaching; with Ms. Jackson, that resistance was almost nonexistent. From the beginning, she was willing and eager to examine her bias and privilege. In our first interview, she embraced CRP, saying, "I think it's something that, as a white educator, I have to kind of come in and leave it at the door—all of my biases—understanding that my reactions may be coming from a place of privilege." This mindset drove ongoing conversation around our assumptions about students' understanding of and exposure to civics and the word *citizenship*. We questioned whether students' seeming disassociation with civics concepts stemmed from their lack of exposure and instead began to examine our own vocabulary. In our first interview, Ms. Jackson tied students' exposure to civics and citizenship to their experiences with law enforcement, remarking, "of course they have a very negative view and a very negative experience." In our final

interview, when I asked about the most helpful aspect of transformational coaching, she said, “bias for sure,” recounting the deputy chief’s visit to explain, “I kind of assumed they were all going to be anxious. . . . Some of them weren’t,” and recognizing her process of “shedding” that bias. Ms. Jackson’s willingness to delve into her own assumptions, realizing their impact on her interactions with students, and making necessary adjustments illustrate the success of the transformational coaching cycle.

Instructional planning was also a critical part of the cycle, responsive to student experiences and needs based on culturally responsive practices. By centering students’ work and experiences and linking our sessions to Equity Rubric indicators, I hoped to model how to make instructional decisions based on students’ expressed and observed needs. When students were clearly frustrated, I prompted Ms. Jackson to reflect, “They don’t know where to start. It feels like the opposite of empowerment; I think they feel powerless.” When I inquired how we should proceed, she explained, “I think we ask them. We can put our ‘whys’ all over them, but it’s getting us nowhere.” Such adjustments lengthened the study, yet Ms. Jackson’s flexibility illustrated her prioritization of student needs ahead of expedience or convenience.

Despite knowing the value of student collaboration, Ms. Jackson exhibited resistance, especially at the beginning of the study. She mentioned not “trusting” the class and justified isolating Kevin because of his inability to contribute productively. Over time, I gently pressed Ms. Jackson on the value of collaboration and ensuring all students felt included in the learning community. During one coaching session, she admitted to “doing a lot of hand-holding, giving them less agency.” As we continued to talk about what students were discovering together, she seemed to become less cautious and

controlling. She was able to celebrate their collaborative successes, remarking on her ebbing doubts after one day of group work, “I am so proud of them!” Ms. Jackson’s shift in attitude was most pronounced with Kevin, whom she initially deemed “could not handle” working with others. Through gradual, intentional conversation and personalized assignments, I helped Ms. Jackson see how including Kevin benefitted him—and the class. Affirming the positive changes, Ms. Jackson also validated her evolving instructional decisions.

Likewise, I recognize the impact of my coaching decisions, including helping Ms. Jackson imagine how to replicate something similar in the future. The Equity Rubric indicators ably framed our conversations and planning by corresponding to the teacher’s and students’ needs. The transformational cycle, with its focus on culturally responsive practices, was thus instrumental in Ms. Jackson’s high-quality civics instruction.

Summary

Just as Ms. Jackson and I lengthened the study based on student needs, I intentionally lengthened this chapter to provide a nuanced understanding of all co-participants’ experiences, including my own. In keeping with CRT, I wanted to elevate Black student voices above and outside the dominant narrative of citizenship. Able to engage with high-quality civics instruction and participate in an action activity of their own devising, students experienced a shift in their civic identities. The counter-narrative of Black citizenship they co-created centered them as informed civic actors with the capacity to enact meaningful change in their community. In the next chapter, I will discuss the study’s implications for myself as a practitioner, make recommendations for other coaches and social studies teachers, and consider my next steps as a researcher.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS

The call to teach directly related to my experience as a political operative who had witnessed an underinformed and underrepresented young electorate; as a teacher, I thought I could inspire greater political awareness and voter participation among young people. Instead, I learned *from* the youth. My primarily Black students were already aware of what was happening in the world and deeply unsatisfied, but they had been subjected to a civics curriculum that ran counter to their lived experiences, reinforced white supremacy, and presented the traditional idea of citizenship as, if not unattainable, then unpalatable and foreign. This study was an effort both to formalize such observations I had while teaching and improve my practice as a residency coach for teachers of marginalized students.

My problem of practice was the challenge of providing the training and support for social studies teachers to implement high-quality civics instruction that encourages Black students to become informed, engaged, and active citizens. Through action research, I aimed: (a) to recognize how the unique experiences of Black middle school students influenced their perceptions of civic engagement and participation in order to encourage them to engage with civics-related content and participate in civic action that fostered the development of positive, empowered civic identities and (b) to analyze how explicit coaching informed by a critical race praxis impacted one social studies teacher's implementation of high-quality civics instruction. Three research questions guided me:

1. What contributes to Black middle school students' perceptions of citizenship?
2. How does high-quality civics instruction impact civic engagement, civic participation, and civic identity among Black middle school students?
3. How does ongoing instructional coaching in culturally responsive practices support teachers in implementing high-quality civics instruction?

As Chapter 4 showed, I gleaned answers over a period of 4 months in one sixth-grade class, focusing especially on 10 Black students and Ms. Jackson, the classroom teacher. At the outset, civic estrangement, authoritarian patriotism, and a lack of exposure to civics content and concepts shaped students' understandings of citizenship; as a result of my action research study, however, students' perceptions of citizenship shifted and they saw themselves as active "helpers" for their local and global communities.

Consistent with the cyclical nature of action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015), I worked closely with Ms. Jackson to plan, re-plan, and dissect plans based on students' dynamic needs. Adding to the complexity, the study had two distinct, overlapping, layers: our work with students and my work with Ms. Jackson. Students' responses to a lesson Ms. Jackson and I carefully designed during one coaching session dictated the focus of the next session, while the dual lenses of CRT and SIT helped me examine how civics instruction impacts civic identity. Through critical ethnography and critical narrative inquiry, I observed how Ms. Jackson, with explicit coaching on culturally responsive practices, implemented a high-quality civics curriculum that enhanced her Black students' conceptions of themselves and each other as informed civic actors.

This final chapter reviews how my findings are both supported by and expand on existing literature, makes recommendations for other practitioners, and discusses next

steps for my own practice. I also reflect on how I might improve on the study design and methodology and highlight areas of research I may pursue in the future.

Reflection on Existing Literature

The literature in Chapter 2 provided a vital frame for my study, highlighting the historical barriers to high-quality civics education, opportunities for enacting high-quality civics instruction, and how transformational coaching might ensure teachers are prepared to work alongside their students to facilitate liberatory outcomes. My observations and interactions with students and Ms. Jackson largely reflected what I found in the literature; however, I detected some nuance and departures, given the students' unique perspectives and experiences. Additionally, the findings that emerged from my work with Ms. Jackson can improve the available body of literature by providing an example heretofore absent of how transformational coaching specifically focused on implementing high-quality civics instruction yields powerful results for both teachers and students. Likewise, adding the voices and perspectives of Black students, whose experiences have been historically dismissed, abstracted, and suppressed, to extant literature evinces the power of emancipatory civics instruction.

The Master Narrative and Civic Disjunction Made Manifest

Known barriers to high-quality civics instruction manifested during the study, according to student surveys and observations. Chapter 4 cited evidence of students' disconnection with traditional civics concepts—images, vocabulary, and content—consistent with Shapiro and Brown's (2018) critique of the lack of civics instruction in elementary school. Others have suggested even more insidious factors affecting Black students' civic engagement, participation, and civic identity development, which my data,

through a CRT lens, illustrated: students had internalized at least parts of the master narrative of citizenship, rooted in white supremacy, racist ideologies, and authoritarian patriotism (Busey & Walker, 2017; Ender, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Woodson, 2016). For example, Kevin somehow knew criticizing the founders was off limits, while his peers viewed criticizing a sitting president as being a “bad citizen.” Students knew enough about traditional civics content to identify classically patriotic symbols, but they vocalized a lack of personal connection thereto.

Referred to in the literature as both civic estrangement and civic disjunction, students had trouble reconciling the messages of liberty, justice, and freedom with their own lived experiences (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Duncan, 2020; Tillet, 2012). Social studies, the subject ostensibly charged with preparing students to be active citizens, is bound to whitewashed curriculum, devoted to non-controversy, and mired in lackluster instruction, which does little to invite Black students’ interest, engagement, or active civic participation (Cummings, 2019; Journell, 2016b; Kissling, 2016; Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016). When asked to take action steps in their activities, participants expressed understandable anxiety, frustration, and even anger; they had been denied opportunities to conceive of themselves as civic actors, let alone opportunities to practice. The traditional civics instruction these students had experienced—in the hidden and unhidden curriculum, as well as their own lived experiences—had failed to prepare them to be active civic participants. (Busey & Walker, 2017; Duncan, 2020; Vickery, 2017).

Creating a Counter-Narrative of Black Citizenship

While the literature accurately predicted and explained students’ disconnection and disjunction from traditional civics, it also provided insight into ways to cultivate

connection and meaningful engagement. The literature repeatedly pointed to open classroom conversation that intentionally complicates race, history, and citizenship as a means by which Black students can make authentic connections to civics content and understand how they might carve spaces for themselves within (and outside of) the dominant narrative of citizenship (Cummings, 2019; Duncan, 2020; Vickery, 2016). Parkhouse (2018) discussed how such conversations demystify the master narrative and problematize systems of power, ultimately helping Black students develop “empowered” civic identities (p. 303). During discussions, students interacted in a safe space, based on a district-developed Courageous Conversations framework, where their opinions and observations were encouraged and valued; they began to develop a shared vocabulary and vision of citizenship that centralized community, being helpful, caring, and—in the latter stages—collective action. Consistent with SIT, students’ individual civic identities evolved based on conversations they were having together in this common language they created to make sense of citizenship (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018; Myers et al., 2015). Student conversations transitioned from discussing what was wrong in the world to what they, as change makers, would do about it—together.

Situating an action activity within ongoing class discussions helped students move beyond thinking about the nature of citizenship to taking concrete steps on issues about which they were passionate—that impacted them and their community. The literature endorsed such opportunities to participate in meaningful, authentic, student-led civic actions, especially in combination with rigorous discussions about race and power (Blevins et al., 2016; Schmidt, 2021). Moya (2017) even argued students exposed to robust and critical conversations alone, without opportunities to participate in civic

action, can only see themselves as *future* civic actors. As I described in Chapter 4, the 2-day civic action at OCMS, when students enacted their plans after months of preparation, was a testament to the power of collective civic action; the students wore their newly understood citizenship like a badge as they questioned the Deputy Chief of Police about race and diversity and enacted projects at their school to help the environment.

The literature specific to civic action did not address the acute levels of frustration and resistance students experienced as we began the action activity; however, because Ms. Jackson and I intentionally made space for students to express how they felt and learn to navigate systems of power—locating “helpers,” community leaders, and donors—students overcame at least some civic disjunction to truly see themselves as change agents (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Schmidt, 2021). Instead of the recommended linear approach—class discussion, isolating a problem, and creating and implementing a plan (Blevins et al., 2016), overlaying the action activity with ongoing discussion provided a crucial forum for celebrating progress and addressing hardships as students navigated citizenship in practice. In this “talking and doing,” students discovered a counter-narrative of citizenship that described their collective experiences in a way no one else could. A powerful tool of CRT, counter-narratives disrupt common understandings of concepts like citizenship, including who gets to benefit from its privileges (Ender, 2019; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). By creating their own counter-narrative, students contested “civic myths” (Tillet, 2012, p. 10) and flexed their newfound civic identities and agency.

Merging Theory and Praxis with Transformational Coaching

CRT played out in a unique way during the study, in that operationalizing the theory into action—a critical race praxis—was instrumental in developing both the

curriculum and climate to help students find their path toward an understanding of citizenship and civic action that included them as change agents. In our transformational coaching cycle, Ms. Jackson and I focused on culturally responsive practices from the Equity Rubric to guide our work together and with students; CRP, especially its goal of sociopolitical consciousness, framed our discussions of bias and our planning for discussions and the action activity (Aguilar, 2020; Duncan, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2014). The literature suggested, and my observations and interviews confirmed, that explicit coaching in culturally responsive practices yields emancipatory outcomes for students and teachers (Bradshaw, 2018; Gladney, 2021; Teemant, 2014).

In the second interview, Ms. Jackson identified exploring bias as the most meaningful component of the cycle. Unlike traditional instructional coaching, transformational coaching encourages coaches to centralize uncovering bias in their work with teachers as a necessary first step before and during implementation of instruction with students, particularly marginalized students (Aguilar, 2020). Ms. Jackson and I were able to unveil existing biases and assumptions, especially about Black students' relationships with law enforcement and conceptions of civics, which enabled us to design more equitable activities for her students. As Aguilar (2020) suggested, a trusting relationship between a coach and a teacher accommodates uncomfortable questions. When I saw inequitable practices like excluding Kevin from collaborative activities, our thoughtful dialogue and eventual changes in instruction yielded more emancipatory outcomes. Ultimately, the study showed how a transformational coaching cycle focused on culturally responsive practices like highlighting student experiences and voices can help a teacher make reflective, student-centered instructional decisions.

Recommendations for Fellow Practitioners

This study could benefit any educator who seeks to help Black students navigate the complexities of citizenship, exclusion, belonging, and activism. Principals and other district leaders might deem the transformational coaching cycle something to explore in their instructional coaching models. Teacher residencies like mine might find the graduate support element useful in their own induction work. In this section, though, I will concentrate on two main groups: social studies teachers and instructional coaches who want to explore how high-quality civics instruction might be liberatory for students.

Teachers, ideally in collaboration with other teachers or an instructional coach, might look to the activities Ms. Jackson and I planned as a guide for their classrooms. I suggest, first, introducing the idea of courageous conversations with low-stakes opportunities to practice honest dialogue, taking care to elevate student ideas and voices. After establishing a safe space for discourse, teachers can gradually invite students to share their experiences with citizenship, racism, and other components of the master narrative. If a teacher is at a loss for where to find conversation starters, there is no better place to look than state social studies standards themselves; they are rich in the master narrative and provide ample opportunity to expose students to the history they are expected to know juxtaposed with what is suppressed, omitted, and layered with half-truths. Incorporating current events discussions is another way to ensure real-world connections and opportunities for students to formulate opinions and share ideas.

As the study illustrated, one way for students to contextualize their understandings of citizenship and their role as civic actors is to provide opportunities for authentic civic action. Teachers who want to create these opportunities should consider

three important factors for success. First, the activity should be student-driven; learners should feel a personal connection to what they are doing because it was their idea. Second, teachers should be prepared for civic disjunction when working with marginalized students. Ongoing, honest, and vulnerable discussion about frustrations and celebrations is vital to students' discovering their agency. Teachers should also plan in advance to provide scaffolding like connecting students to resources. Third, civic identity is not created in a vacuum; teachers should encourage collaboration and collective action.

Instructional coaches like me who wish to guide teachers in the implementation of high-quality civics instruction should establish trusting relationships that allow for potentially uncomfortable conversations about race and bias. As the study illustrated, dynamic civics lessons are more powerful when teachers are interrogating, reflecting on, and making instructional adjustments in response to their own biases and assumptions. I urge teachers who want to explore transformational coaching to examine the Equity Rubric, find points of alignment with their own school or district framework, and be explicit about how and why certain practices are culturally responsive. I caution coaches who truly wish to see emancipatory outcomes not to get lost in the weeds of instructional strategies, lesson planning, and teacher-fixing, and instead to remember the urgent need for Black students to learn how to access power and develop a sense of themselves as change agents. Coaches have a unique opportunity to remind justice-oriented teachers to remain committed to lofty goals even as they work to improve day-to-day practices.

Knowing the Rules and “Coloring in the Lines”

Educators committed to racial equity and social justice have become targets in current debates surrounding how race is discussed in schools (Arceneaux, 2022). CRT is

the latest rallying cry, with a steady stream of directives about what teachers can say, have in their classroom libraries, and even post on their walls (Contreras, 2022; Zimmerman, 2022). Tennessee is one of many states with new legal restrictions on teachers and schools related to CRT, hence the initial district rejection of my proposal (Allison, 2021). I thus proceeded with extreme caution in terms of what I said and did in Ms. Jackson's classroom. I kept a PDF of the law on my computer desktop and referred to it often, we adhered to state social studies standards, and I used state- and district-produced material in coaching conversations. Although I consider what we did critical race praxis, I never uttered those words or CRT on school grounds. I never said or implied one race was privileged over another or more or less inclined toward racism—nor did Ms. Jackson and I stifle students' insights based on their own experiences.

I mention this stance not as a caution, but as a call to action. I know educators who no longer broach certain topics with students out of fear, yet the reality of systemic racism—that the system will always work to preserve itself when threatened—demands courageous conversations. What Ms. Jackson and I accomplished proves that educators can engage in the hard work of dismantling unjust systems, even as we color in the lines. Black students everywhere, not just in our community, deserve a space to contemplate injustice, work through complicated emotions, deliberate on the implications of racism in their lives, and discover how to challenge the status quo. Social studies classrooms are uniquely situated to be that space, and we have a responsibility to secure it.

Next Steps in My Practice

As an action researcher, I know my work on this study is transitioning rather than concluding. The findings will pave the way for my future work in three areas: coaching

graduates, training mentor teachers, and teaching pre-service social studies teachers. As my teacher residency evolves, we plan to increase our level of graduate support dramatically. I have been charged with spearheading that effort, and the success of the transformational coaching cycle with Ms. Jackson will serve as a foundation for our graduate coaching framework. Ideally, our graduates, who have already been exposed to training in culturally responsive practices during their residency years, will have that training extended to include their first year as teachers of record.

Even though I work with residents extensively during their year of residency, their most important coach is the mentor teacher with whom they are embedded and work alongside every day. Currently, we conduct monthly training for mentors, including in CRP, to prepare them for the work of residency. Based on my experience with Ms. Jackson during this study, I would like to explore how to train mentor teachers to implement transformational coaching in their work with residents. I suspect elements of Aguilar's (2020) framework are already being implemented; I would like to train mentors to implement it more intentionally and with fidelity.

As a residency coach, I work with residents and graduates across all K–12 grade levels and subject areas, including, but not exclusively, social studies. To satisfy my passion for social studies education, I also began teaching an undergraduate social studies methods class at a local university this semester and am applying what I learned. We are discussing the implications of the hidden curriculum, the Chief Equity Officer for the district will give a guest lecture on racial disparities, I have a class dedicated to courageous conversations, and culturally responsive practices are embedded throughout. I also invited Ms. Jackson to be the guest lecturer for a class devoted to high-level civics

instruction. By making explicit how important these elements are to being an effective social studies teacher, I hope students will be able to apply them when they have their own classrooms in ways that are emancipatory for their students.

Reflection on Methodology

Action researchers should be reflexive and responsive, and my study certainly demanded near constant adaptation. As I discussed in Chapter 3, the original proposal experienced multiple iterations due to internal and external factors—district research requirements, pacing to meet student needs, and ongoing scheduling complications. Some modifications resulted in valuable data and positive student outcomes, and in hindsight, I would make additional modifications if replicating the study.

Two major changes were enhancements. First, because the district required me to collect data from all students, I was able to include compelling nuance. Beyond the 10 primary participants, other voices punctuated the findings; for instance, when one student who was almost never in class, but participated in the tree planting, articulated that “what we did . . . was citizenship,” he created a buzz during our final discussion. Gathering data from all students also helped me zoom out during observations and visualize the class as a community, which provided perspective on the social element of civic identity creation. The second major—and most significant—change was our decision to extend the study based on student needs; when students were flailing, Ms. Jackson and I stepped back, provided additional scaffolding, and gave students the time they needed to work on their activities. This decision had a profound impact on student outcomes, allowing them to grapple with their plans and develop the confidence to see them through.

I would make two modifications to a repeat study. First, I would plan for an uninterrupted implementation period of 2–3 weeks, rather than portions of class every week over a longer period of time. Implementing the study after state testing in the spring, when students have completed their work with state standards, would allow for greater focus and encourage more continuity in class discussions. Second, I would word the survey questions in a more accessible way. As we discovered, *civics* and *citizenship* were unfamiliar to most students, though the implications were not. I would modify the survey questions to probe for understanding of denotation and connotation. Further, two questions on the second survey included the phrase “inform your feelings,” which I suspect confused some students, based on their responses, whereas “change how you feel” would be clearer.

Other design elements did not undergo any fundamental changes but contributed to the quality of the data and streamlined collection and analysis. First, I decided early to collect only qualitative data, placing student voices and experiences in the foreground. Quantitative survey responses, for example, would have reduced their experiences to numbers and limited my access to their unique perspectives. Second, I considered including student interviews and/or focus groups, which would have compounded the already-extensive dataset in terms of being both overwhelming and redundant. The one-on-one, small-group, and whole-group conversations I organically captured during observations were quite sufficient to provide insight into students’ perspectives and processes. Third, selecting Equity Rubric indicators to guide each transformational coaching session was crucial to ensuring my time with Ms. Jackson went beyond co-

planning; each session had a clear and distinct tie to social justice, helping us remain focused on the big ideas of emancipatory teaching even as we attended to logistics.

Plans and Possibilities for Future Research

Consistent with action research, answering my research questions surfaced more questions to guide future research. One such opportunity is broadening the scope to include Latinx students, who, based on my interactions and observations in Ms. Jackson's classroom, have their own important stories related to citizenship and civics content. I would also like to research the impact of coaching around culturally responsive practices, especially for pre-service teacher residents and first-year teachers. I am, to that end, piloting a study with the residents in my program this year using mixed-methods, which I would like to conduct formally with the 2023–2024 cohort. Being a practitioner should always include some variation of action research if one expects to improve and grow; what conducting this study taught me is how rewarding formalizing that research can be. As my professional responsibilities shift and expand, I look forward to my continued growth as both a practitioner and a researcher.

Final Thoughts

When I began designing this study, I was curious about how Black students perceived themselves as citizens, what combination of civic engagement and participation might influence their civic identity development, and how transformational coaching might help teachers implement high-quality civics instruction. What I discovered were the profound, unique stories of conflicted citizenship waiting to be told by exceedingly bright, bold, courageous, and insightful learners. Together with their teacher, we unraveled the threads of a master narrative that had manifested in a

disconnection from or outright rejection of traditional notions of citizenship. We interrogated and complicated what students assumed a good citizen should be, elevating dissent, service, and community as tangible and accessible paths to good citizenship. Students contextualized these new versions with authentic participation, during which they found agency and purpose. Through courageous conversations and collective action, students rewove a counter-narrative of citizenship using their own words and experiences, situating themselves as informed civic actors eager to and capable of enacting meaningful change in their communities.

As students were making these discoveries about themselves, Ms. Jackson was digging deeply into her own biases and assumptions during the transformational coaching cycle and learning how to implement high-quality civics instruction. She, as a teacher, witnessed the impact of true collaboration and highlighting student voices. She and I worked to channel her strong commitment to social justice into specific practices that proved emancipatory for students. Ms. Jackson was instrumental in helping her students discover, through collaboration and civic participation, their power to impact change.

To say the study went off without a hitch would be insincere. However, I believe most of our learning happened in the struggles. Through frustration, anxiety, and distress, students learned they could come out on the other side of hardship and succeed. Ms. Jackson was willing to allow what I marketed as a 6-week, fairly non-invasive, activity explode into a semester-long, extended event in her classroom. Though not surprised, I found Ms. Jackson's prioritizing her students' big-picture needs to be a dazzling example of emancipatory teaching. She embodied the definition she was unable to provide in her first interview.

On a deeply personal level, this work was immensely challenging and fulfilling at the same time. I was discouraged to find what I thought I would find. Students were, as the literature foretold, disconnected from both content and the idea of themselves as citizens. They suffered from civic disjunction and had internalized the master narrative. Their civic identity creation had been stunted by subtle and insidious outside influences. Almost from the outset, though, I was heartened by students' ability to begin reimagining civic concepts, vocabulary, and impact. Out of the space of disjunction and disillusionment, students, along with their teacher, showed me what is possible. They worked hard all semester to find their voices and to make sense—through questioning, interrogation, and action—of where they fit in the master narrative. What they found was that they did not necessarily fit. Instead of giving up, however, they created a counter-narrative of citizenship that fit their lived experiences perfectly. They retold the story with themselves as the heroes.

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APPENDIX A

OBSERVATION TOOLS

Student Semi-Structured Observation Indicators (spreadsheet form during data collection)

	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F
Planning (e.g., research, group collaboration)						
Engagement (e.g., asking questions, immersion in activity)						
Reflection (e.g., time spent writing, group disc.)						
Mindset (e.g., sense of purpose, enjoyment)						
General Observations (e.g., interactions w/teacher, researcher)						

Teacher Semi-Structured Observation Indicators (spreadsheet form during data collection)

Application of CRP (e.g., celebrates questions, values student voice and choice)	
Application of specific strategies from coaching cycle (TBD)	
Student Interactions (whole group and 1:1)	
Self-Reflection (e.g., bias checking, self-assessment of influence of student choices)	

APPENDIX B

PRE-ACTIVITY SURVEY

1. Explain what the word “citizenship” means to you. What are the responsibilities of citizenship?
2. When you are an adult, how will you exercise your rights as a citizen?
3. Do you believe everyone is treated equally in the United States? Please explain your answer.
4. As a young person what can you do to change something you think is not right or unfair?
5. If you could change one thing about the world right now, what would it be? And how would you start?

APPENDIX C

POST-ACTIVITY SURVEY

1. What does the word “citizenship” mean to you?
2. When you are an adult, how do you see yourself engaging as a citizen?
3. Do you feel like you, personally, can take action to change what you find wrong or unjust in the world around you—school, community, country, or globe? Please explain your answer.
4. How has participation in classroom discussions about citizenship changed or informed your feelings about your role as a citizen?
5. How did participation in your civics action activity change or inform your feelings about your role as a citizen?
6. If you could change one thing about the world right now, what would it be? And how would you start?

APPENDIX D

PROTOCOL FOR INTERVIEW 1

1. What made you want to work with marginalized students?
2. How did your experience as a Project Inspire resident prepare you (or not) to teach marginalized students?
3. How do you feel like your racial identity impacts the way you teach Black students?
4. How often (if ever) do issues of race, racism, or identity come up in your classroom?
How do you usually address them?
5. How do you incorporate civics and civics concepts into your regular curriculum?
6. What is your impression of how Black students experience civics instruction in your classroom?
7. What is your impression of how Black students conceive of their own citizenship?
8. How would you define “emancipatory teaching?”
9. What is your experience with culturally responsive pedagogy?
10. Do you incorporate elements of CRP in your curriculum and, if so, how?
11. What is your experience with instructional coaching?
12. In terms of outcomes for you and your students, what would you like to see as a result of participation in this study?

APPENDIX E

PROTOCOL FOR INTERVIEW 2

1. What is your overall impression of the implementation of the study?
2. How do you think students benefited (or not) from the open discussion elements of the study?
3. How do you think students benefited (or not) from participation in the civics activity?
4. Do you perceive or anticipate any short-term or long-term benefits to students from their participation in the study? Please explain.
5. How has your impression of students' experiences with civics, racism, and identity changed (or not) as a result of participation in this study?
6. Is this type of unit one you could see yourself implementing in the future? Please explain.
7. Please describe your comfort level facilitating the open discussion element of the study.
8. What is your overall impression of the coaching element of the study?
9. What were some specific elements of the coaching cycle that you might implement into your future practice?
10. Please describe your comfort level with the elements of the coaching cycle focused on your personal biases and emotions.
11. How has your understanding of culturally responsive practices evolved (or not) as a result of the coaching cycle?
12. What recommendations or suggestions do you have for me, as a Project Inspire coach, to better support teachers in the work of CRP and emancipatory teaching?

APPENDIX F

EXAMPLE OF A COACHING DOCUMENT

February 3, 2021	
Coaching Focus	E4: Uses students' lived experiences to help them connect with and make meaning of in-school learning Strategies: Make direct connections between the real world and lesson content
Reflection	On 1/21 lesson: We discussed the ways that students had the most connection to the idea of citizenship as "helping." We also discussed the need to help students start to see their own agency as civic actors. We noticed that students did not identify racism or inequalities as major problems that needed addressing.
Discussion	<p>E: What are we trying to show the kids?</p> <p>B: That there is more than one way to be a citizen.</p> <p>E: How can we help the connect the content in Greece to their own lives?</p> <p>B: Citizenship grade in elementary, what you have to do to be a citizen in Greece?/in U.S.? Is citizenship regulation fair?</p> <p>E: When do you think kids are first exposed to civics content?</p> <p>B: Elementary? Probably during presidential election, at least in terms of voting</p> <p>E: There is limited exposure in elementary</p> <p>E: Of the elementary age students who get it, which ones?</p> <p>B: Not ours</p> <p>E: Why?</p> <p>B: Because they are so hyper-focused on math and literacy. Other kids are also exposed to it at home/pre-K</p> <p>E: What type of instruction in civics do you think other kids are getting?</p> <p>B: Hyper-patriotic, pro-government when it aligns with ideals, political talk at home, gun rights</p> <p>E: How do you think our kids react to "hyper-patriotic" content?</p> <p>B: Disconnected, people that don't look like them, friction, feelings of not belonging</p> <p>E: What can we do to help kids connect?</p> <p>B: What we're doing right now. Teaching reconstruction differently. 95 theses lesson-question authority. "Fuck the Catholic Church" from one 7th grader.</p>
Planning	<p>For 2/4 lesson:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening question: what are the characteristics of a good citizen. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Discussion of rights? • Image search: citizen, right • BLM video • Images of political action—are these good citizens?

APPENDIX G

EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL DOMAIN AND TAXONOMY

Cultural Domain: Strict Inclusion

<u>Included Terms</u>			<u>Semantic Relationship</u>	<u>Cover Term</u>
I am a citizen	Having a job	}	Is a Kind of	Student Description of “Citizen”
Don’t look like me	Good attitude			
Helper	Sportsmanship			
Flag	No robberies			
Government	No connection			
Rights	Pledge of			
Equality	allegiance			
President	Regular person			
Helps the President	Person in a			
Other people	program			
Pays taxes	Don’t understand that word			

Taxonomy of Student Descriptions of “Citizen”

Student Descriptions of “Citizen”	No Connection	Personal	Don’t look like me
			Other people
		General	Don’t understand that word
			No connection
	Connection	Personal	I am a citizen
		Definitions	Regular Person
			Person in a Program
			Helper
		Characteristics	Sportsmanship
			Good attitude
			Having a job
			No robberies
		Associations	President
			Government
			Flag
			Rights
			Equality
			Pledge of Allegiance

APPENDIX H

PARENT/GUARDIAN LETTER

Dear Parents and Guardians,

My name is Erica Kelley and I am the Residency Coach for Project Inspire, a teacher residency program of the Public Education Foundation of Chattanooga. Before working with Project Inspire, I was a social studies teacher and instructional coach at Oak Crest Middle School. This year, I am excited that I still get to work at OCMS on occasion, where I have enjoyed working with Ms. Jackson and your student's class. I am currently a graduate student at the University of South Carolina, hoping to graduate with a Doctorate of Education degree.

As part of my graduate program, I will be conducting a study in Ms. Jackson's 3rd block social class from January 19th through May February 25th. The purpose of the project is to identify better ways to help students make connections between the ideals of citizenship and their own lived experiences, as well as helping them learn how to take civic action based on issues they identify in their communities. It is my hope that your student will benefit from the activities during the study and that the results of the study will help other teachers and students in the future.

During the course of the study and in the written report, I will ensure that all student information is kept strictly confidential; in other words, your student's name, and even the name of Ms. Jackson and Oak Crest Middle School, will not be used. There will be no audio or video recordings taken during class time or any other student interactions. Most

of the study data will be based on observations during normal classroom activities in which all students already participate. Students will also be asked to fill out two electronic surveys, which should take about ten minutes of class time to complete; surveys will be administered during normal classroom activities and will be completed by all students. You and/or your student are welcome to review any and all data collected related to your student; you are also welcome (and encouraged!) to read and comment on the draft report. If you choose for your student's data to be omitted, you may let me know before, during, or after the study.

Please feel free to reach out to me with questions at (404) 849-1854 or Erica.d.kelley@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Erica D. Kelley

APPENDIX I

ACTION ACTIVITY DOCUMENTS



ACTION CIVICS PROJECT

How YOU can change the
world around you



This project is a chance for you to think about ways you can make the world around you a better place. You will get to work in groups or on your own to identify a problem, make a plan for change, and take some concrete action steps to solve the problem (or a part of it). Have FUN learning about how you can really make a difference in your community and world!

WEEK 1: 2/14-2/18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define the ONE problem you will be addressing in your project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research problems impacting your community (local, national, or world) How does the problem you identify impact your life and your community? DUE Friday, 2/18
WEEK 2: 2/21-2/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create an ACTION PLAN for your project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research ways other people have been taking action on the problem you defined Identify other people involved with your problem Identify others who could help you implement your project DUE Friday 2/25
WEEK 3: 2/28-3/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take ACTION on your plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Show evidence of progress on your plan Evaluate remaining work needed to complete plan Due Friday, 3/4
WEEK 4: 3/7-3/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> COLLABORATE with at least one other group to compare projects and make suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create one paragraph description of your problem and how your action plan is working to solve the problem. Due Friday 3/11 Continue to evaluate work remaining to complete plan
WEEK 5: 3/14-3/18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> REFLECT on project in a journal entry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider successes and setbacks Determine what remains to do and next steps Due Friday, 3/18

ACTION PLAN

Group #:	Names of all members:
Problem:	
What CHANGE do you want to see? (Be specific.)	
Who are the decision-makers who can make the change happen? (This can be people who also believe in your ideas for change OR people who stand in the way.)	
What are you going to do? (Remember, you don't have to solve the whole problem; think of one thing you can do to HELP solve the problem) Step 1: Step 2: Step 3: Step 4:	
Who can HELP you put your plan into effect?	

APPENDIX J

STUDENT POST-ACTIVITY SURVEY RESPONSES

Student	Q 1: What does citizenship mean to you?	Q 2: When you are an adult, how do you see yourself engaging as a citizen?	Q 3: Do you feel like you, personally, can take action to change what you find wrong or unjust?	Q 4: How did participation in classroom discussions change or inform your feelings about your role as citizen?	Q 5: How did participation in your civics action activity change or inform your feelings about your role a citizen?	Q 6: If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be and how would you start?
Monique	Being kind to people	Giving stuff to the homeless and stuff like that	Yes, because I can do something when I see something wrong	When the police was here it made me feel scared	(Thumbs up emoji)	Less greenhouse gases.
Ocean	Being a part of a community, doing things to help others, actively participating in things going on	I'm not sure yet because I'm not an adult yet	Um, ask people I guess.	It helped me understand what is really going on in our community	It helped me find ways to help us live better in our surroundings	Pollution. Just pick up trash and recycle more.
Blossom	Being a good person	Help the community	Yes, I can make a difference	I don't know	I don't know	I don't know
Niyah	Helping	Getting a job and helping people	Yes	Yes it did change my opinion	When we were picking up trash it made me feel like I was helping out	I don't know

Student	Q 1: What does citizenship mean to you?	Q 2: When you are an adult, how do you see yourself engaging as a citizen?	Q 3: Do you feel like you, personally, can take action to change what you find wrong or unjust?	Q 4: How did participation in classroom discussions change or inform your feelings about your role as citizen?	Q 5: How did participation in your civics action activity change or inform your feelings about your role a citizen?	Q 6: If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be and how would you start?
Symone	All color people should have equal rights	Not being racist to people that's not my color and treat them how I want to be treated	Yes because if I see something wrong I can try to stop it	Yes it made me learn about little things that can make a big difference	...I know I can do projects...I'm not shy anymore to talk in front of a big crowd	Recycling and I can start by picking up trash
Ra'niyah	Participating in a program	When I get older I see myself in a protesting program	I can take action personally. Giving speeches on how our world needs to change	It changed how I look at the world	It makes me want to put in more action than just picking up trash around my school	I would change littering. I would start by protesting then I start picking up a lot of trash then get more people to help me protest and pick up trash
Lia	Being a citizen of the country	Being normal and still trying to have fun	Yes I think I personally can take actions to change what I find wrong	Yes because I worked with my classmates to discuss citizenship. It made me feel like we should work in groups to find the answer quicker	I don't know	Gas prices because gas prices are too high.

Student	Q 1: What does citizenship mean to you?	Q 2: When you are an adult, how do you see yourself engaging as a citizen?	Q 3: Do you feel like you, personally, can take action to change what you find wrong or unjust?	Q 4: How did participation in classroom discussions change or inform your feelings about your role as citizen?	Q 5: How did participation in your civics action activity change or inform your feelings about your role a citizen?	Q 6: If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be and how would you start?
Jared	Helping and having a job	Having a job	Yes, because it's not that hard to do something good	It helped you know what to do to be a good citizen	Helped me feel like I was being a good citizen	Pollution. Just picking up trash makes a big difference
DJ	To be a citizen of the world and help the country and the community	To vote and clean areas where people leave trash	Yes, because you can do anything you put your mind to	It made me feel like I could do something for the community	It made me want to do more things for the community	I would change racism and I would start by going to a city meeting and letting people know that we are people too
Kevin	Helping the community	Maybe helping the community it's a whole bunch of stuff	Yes I can try to get other people to do stuff but mostly do my part	Yes it influence me to help the community more	Sometime it felt good not littering as much as I used to like just helping out the community	Trash being on the ground because that is how some animals die because of pollution going into the water