Chapter 2
Re–Conceptualizing Race in New York City’s High School Social Studies Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In New York State Public Schools, social studies education centers on employing interdisciplinary approaches to help students learn civic values and historical events. Increasingly, due in no small part to the influence of popular culture, social studies education research is making fewer distinctions about racial and ethnic identities. Following some trends in the larger academic community, more of the research in social studies education categorizes ethnically and religiously diverse European and African groups into the narrow categories of White or Black. This practice of flattening diverse European and African groups into current day race frameworks can be problematic when teaching high school social studies, particularly in highly diverse urban centers, because it perpetuates binary racial constructions that both are rooted in the historical fallacy of presentism and tend to contradict the students’ ontological realities.

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Johnson—this school is crazy. We got those damn white cops outside and the crazy gang members inside. This suspension center is a gang unit. The gangs are for real in this school. You see how the Bloods walk around this school? It’s no joke. The Bloods: now there is some power! Did you see them all lined up outside in red? I’ve never seen that before. But then that blue squad showed up. I don’t mean the Crips. I mean New York’s Finest. Now the police—there is a real gang. (Jaykwon, focus-group interview)
Jaykwon1 was a 17-year-old high-school junior at East New York Alternative Learning Center (ENYALC), a suspension placement center in the East New York section of Brooklyn. ENYALC provides an alternative learning experience, functioning much like a high school except that it only serves students who have been suspended from a conventional school for a period no shorter than one full academic year. In the short excerpt above, Jaykwon articulated his perspective on the intersection between gangs, power, and race a few days after over 100 members of a Brooklyn-based Bloods branch had surrounded the alternative school. The gang associates encircled ENYALC to apprehend one student, Runner. Allegedly, Runner had insulted a gang member at a weekend party. On the following Monday, a blisteringly cold but clear January day, a crowd of young men enveloped the school, most in their twenties, predominantly appearing to be of African descent, and given the neighborhood, likely to have been overwhelmingly and more specifically of Afro-Caribbean ancestry. This Bloods clique had gathered to find Runner.2 In response, the New York City Police Department’s Gang Unit descended upon the school, and a group of 30 police officers, most of Latinx heritage and also in their twenties, dispersed the Bloods. This was a rare occurrence not repeated during the school year; yet, this impactful event changed the trajectory of the remainder of that year’s 11th-grade social-studies instruction.

This experience placed the discussion of power, policy, and race front and center in the 11th-grade American History class. After the event, student perspectives on the class’s content and reading seemed sensitized to the enactment of racial disparities in ways that had not been not fully apparent before the gang incident. The ‘gang event’ afforded an opportunity for mediated discourse about the nature of power and the role that gangs play in urban society, and specifically in Brooklyn. The ‘Runner Episode,’ as Jaykwon described it in a later interview, also encouraged discussions about the police and their role in enforcing social order. Classroom content-based conversations often evolved into students emotionally recounting complicated, frequent, and often heartbreaking interactions with both gang and police violence. Specifically related to the focus of this study, the Runner Episode increased the prominence of race in discussions about American History itself.

Race and racism were already prominent themes in the 11th-grade American History social-studies course, and this ethnographic study followed the ways in which that prominence was modulated and remained a significant topic both in and out of class for the rest of the school year. This research started prior to the Runner Episode and became an instance of naturalistic inquiry, affording a vantage point on ethnic and racial constructions. Guba and Lincoln (1985) described naturalistic inquiry as a form of qualitative research that centers on how social actors naturally behave in authentic settings. The naturalistic framework of this study genuinely developed as a result of lived experience—in this case, a confrontation between a gang and the police. With the study designed akin to the naturalistic framework detailed by Yin (2017), as the research ran its course, the naturalistic findings tended to underscore the complexity of studying the historical aspects of race and racial descriptors in the context of American history for both educators and their students. Moreover, a significant question arose: Can high-school teachers discuss the nuances of race in historically accurate ways that are both pertinent to diverse students’ social and academic lives? This ethnographic work supports the contention that more specific instruction should focus on historical racial constructions and current notions of race discussed straightforwardly in high-school social-studies classes, but always within sufficient and abundantly detailed historical context.
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