

“Research & Practice” features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Dafney Blanca Dabach, Aliza Fones, and Natasha Hakimali Merchant to share their research on teaching in mixed-citizenship classes. Since 2012, this team of researchers has collaborated on the Civic Lessons and Immigrant Youth (CLAIIY) study in order to understand how committed, skilled, and experienced social studies teachers teach inclusively about civics when not all youth in the classroom have access to the same citizenship rights. Alongside youth who have full citizenship rights through birth or naturalization, some are students with undocumented status, some have temporary visa status, some have permanent residency status without voting rights, and others who have U.S. citizenship may be part of mixed-status families. Although the authors focus on teaching about citizenship in mixed-citizenship U.S. Civics classes, many of their research-based recommendations are relevant to teachers working in classrooms in which all students have formal citizenship, as well as educators teaching all grade levels and subject areas.

—Patricia G. Avery, “Research & Practice” Editor, University of Minnesota

When Some Students are Undocumented, and Some are Not: Teaching Civics in Mixed-Citizenship Classrooms

Dafney Blanca Dabach, Aliza Fones, and Natasha Hakimali Merchant¹

“[In my other government class in my old school] it was the president elections. So everybody was like, ‘Oh, you know, I’m going to be 18 and I’m going to vote and I’m going to vote for this person’ ... [I felt] like I couldn’t vote.”

—Daniel, student with undocumented status, age 18²

As Daniel’s words highlight, undocumented youth experience heightened moments of exclusion in certain places and at particular times. Civics classrooms can be such places, especially during times of hypernational focus such as national elections. Daniel found civics subject matter challenging, but not because the concepts were hard for him to grasp. What was hard about civics was that it made visible the contradictions in his experience as a youth with undocumented status in school. Like other students, he was required to take U.S. Civics for a presumed transition to adult citizenship duties; yet within the traditional curriculum Daniel was invisible and was continually reminded that he could not participate within society in the same ways as his peers who had full citizenship rights.

In Daniel’s old school, his civics teacher was rigid and stuck to a civics curriculum that only exacerbated

his sense of disjuncture—that is, the disconnect between the ideals being taught and his lived experience. He hated the class, where his teacher not only did not account for different kinds of citizenship but was also not skilled at developing meaningful relationships with students. In contrast, in his new school his civics teacher had a profound understanding of community struggles (including undocumented status) and, importantly, she cultivated deep relationships with her students—so much so that while Daniel did not reveal his citizenship status to his fellow classmates, he felt comfortable revealing his status to his teacher, Ms. Aguilar.

We came to know Daniel, Ms. Aguilar, and other teachers and their students while we conducted a study of high quality civics teaching in mixed-citizenship classrooms. In other words, although students who had formal citizenship were not necessarily aware of their class-

mates’ citizenship status, teachers were aware of the vast array of citizenship statuses of their students. For example, some students were U.S. citizens, either by birth or naturalization; others were officially sanctioned “permanent” residents without voting and other citizenship rights (i.e., “green card” holders); others were temporarily-authorized migrants (visa holders whose visas were still current); and yet others were undocumented. And later, once the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was established, there was an even greater range of variation within the undocumented status category.³ To add to the complexity, some were U.S. citizens, yet still impacted by immigration enforcement policies because their parents were undocumented.

We carried out our study to learn from skilled, committed, and experienced teachers in what is complex terrain. Under the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* U.S.



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Rally at the Supreme Court as the DACA cases are heard inside, November 12, 2019.

Supreme Court ruling, undocumented students are guaranteed a right to a free and public education in K-12 schools.⁴ While *Plyler* offers needed protections, it also “comes at the price of invisibility” and often operates as a “don’t ask, don’t tell policy.”⁵ In social studies classrooms especially, it is easy to fall into the trap of talking about undocumented people as if they are not in the room, especially if debating immigration policy or discussing voting in normative ways.⁶ Yet undocumented students, formerly undocumented people, and youth from mixed-status families are part of the fabric of our educational system.⁷

In this article, we focus on the idea of *citizenship status normativity* (CSN). CSN highlights how citizenship privilege operates and assumes a taken-for-granted status, especially for those who occupy dominant positions, whether or not they are aware of it. CSN is based on an untroubled and idealized conception of citizenship—one that legitimizes the status-quo built into the intersectional hierarchies of citizenship. It renders invisible the belonging and claims-making of those who are denied formal citizenship rights. And currently, it plays a role in perpetuating inequalities in classrooms: When educators nor-

malize citizenship hierarchies and only address the rights of formal citizens in civics education, permanent residents, temporarily-authorized immigrants, and undocumented students are invalidated, and all youth become deprived of a richer understanding of civic and political participation.

CSN becomes especially problematic in social studies classrooms where it can intensify disjunctures (the gap between civic ideals and students’ lived realities). Rubin describes how disjunctures are sometimes a barrier to learning in social studies classrooms for underserved youth; they can engender a variety of responses, including resignation or anger.⁸ Disjunctures are exacerbated for many undocumented youth who learn about a society in which they do not have the same rights. Even as many undocumented youth are politically engaged, teachers can work to reduce students’ sense of disjuncture and foster an increased sense of belonging, community, and learning for all students. Moreover, if, alongside the rights of formal citizens, we also include examples of civic and political practices that transcend formal citizenship, we can offer more meaningful and accessible forms of civic and political participation.⁹ Here, we argue

for the importance of collectively challenging citizenship status normativity for more equitable educational experiences for all students. In what follows, we first provide some context about how we think about “citizenship.” Second, we share a brief overview of our research. And third, we share about teachers from our study who challenged CSN in practice and we provide a summary of what we learned from them.

Contextualizing “Citizenship”

“Citizenship” reads differently to differently powered individuals. Some have never had their citizenship questioned while others’ citizenship and belonging is often seen as suspect.¹⁰ “Citizenship” can be synonymous with systems of gatekeeping and precarity where inclusion is only granted to a select group.¹¹ Here, we emphasize the significance of both formal and everyday experiences of citizenship and highlight the ways in which normative citizenship intersects with race and other dominant forms of control.¹² Historically, normative citizenship has stood for “whiteness, settler coloniality, heterosexuality, maleness, affluence, and able-bodiedness.”¹³ Meanwhile, others have articulated alternative forms of citizenship that challenge the status quo.¹⁴

In terms of citizenship and immigration status, it is crucial to understand the history of how these systems came to be. Ngai’s scholarship documents the rise of a regime of exclusion in immigration policy based on racialization.¹⁵ Furthermore, as these regimes emerged, policies that had previously extended voting rights to noncitizens were rescinded.¹⁶ Indeed, for most of U.S. history (1776–1926) many states and territories extended some form of voting rights to noncitizens.¹⁷ However, once noncitizens became increasingly non-white, such policies were eliminated. We highlight this history to contextualize how immigration and citizenship policies change over time, are connected to systems of power, and are not inherently moral. And as Martin Luther King Jr. argued, there is a difference between

what is moral and what is law.¹⁸

Because of the disjunctures between the ideals and realities of citizenship, teachers' messaging about citizenship and political action is especially significant. Even well-intentioned teachers can inadvertently normalize outsider status for those whose belonging is constantly under scrutiny. In a previous study, a teacher positioned her students as "noncitizens" when she conflated their language status (as "English learners") with their citizenship status.¹⁹ Addressing a class of emergent bilinguals during a moment of national importance, she made assumptions about their citizenship status, saying "You can't vote, right?", emphasizing what she thought they could not do. Yet we knew there were other teachers who had thoughtfully navigated this complex terrain and we set out to find them.

The Civic Lessons and Immigrant Youth (CLAIIY) Study

We developed the Civic Lessons and Immigrant Youth (CLAIIY) study, a multi-sited ethnographic study designed to better understand the complex nature of civics instruction in mixed-citizenship contexts. Our central question was: "How do skilled and experienced civics teachers who support immigrants' rights teach about elections in mixed-citizenship settings where some youth have full citizenship rights and others do not?" During an eight-month process, we carefully selected case study teachers who were nominated by different stakeholders as skilled and experienced in working with immigrant youth. In interviews, these teachers articulated support of immigrant rights and awareness of the range of citizenship statuses in their classrooms. We conducted nearly 90 hours of classroom observation, and carried out multiple interviews with teachers and students over the course of a year.²⁰

What We Learned from Teachers

Setting up the Space: Inclusive Language and Signaling Practices

As a starting place, our participants

developed important safety-related practices, including using spoken and visual language in ways that challenged citizenship status normativity and affirmed the presence of undocumented students. First, all teachers asked students to avoid using the dehumanizing label of "illegal" when referring to undocumented people.²¹ Here, we also highlight how one of our participants, Ms. Scott, went beyond this by normalizing undocumented status within the classroom space; she made sure undocumented students were visible in the classroom and the school, while also being protected. An example of her intentionality could be seen by everyone who came into her classroom: she posted resources for undocumented students in plain sight in a highly visible part of the classroom. She wanted "*any kid walking in the classroom ... to see this.*" For undocumented youth, it served a signaling function that she was a safe person. To others with full citizenship rights, it raised the idea that theirs was not the only status in the space. Reflecting on this she said:

You don't whisper about [undocumented status], you say it out loud. I mean, don't ever name a kid in terms of documentation but ... to openly talk about ... undocumented students ... in a very affirming way, in a natural way and to always talk about the options that exist for them and always make them very public and available.

She endeavored to normalize undocumented youth by "always trying to recognize the fact that not everybody has documentation and that's a pretty normal thing, it's very normal here at this school, and that it's very normal in America." Ms. Scott challenged CSN by recasting what is "normal."

Teachers Can Complicate Conceptions of "Citizenship"

The teachers in our study held broad and inclusive conceptions of citizenship

that went beyond legal definitions. They described citizenship as belonging and contributing to a community. They also framed their understanding of citizenship within a historical context, drawing connections between groups that have historically been denied formal citizenship. In making these connections, they offered a different perspective on citizenship, one that did not preclude youth's participation in politics and provided ways to think about citizenship within a larger context. In Ms. Keller's words:

There's actually a fair bit of history to inspire how people can effect political change even when they aren't fully recognized citizens ... women somehow got a constitutional amendment to get the right to vote while being completely disenfranchised—so it can happen.²²

Here, Ms. Keller gave an example of another group of people who were denied the right to vote at the time, but nevertheless participated in the political process. In this way, she provided an interpretive resource for students.²³ Sociologist Irene Bloemraad found that when immigrants had access to interpretive resources (ideas and symbols that helped them interpret their political participation as legitimate), they participated politically at higher rates. Here, we highlight how drawing on historical examples of others who faced formal exclusions—and making that connection explicit to youth—is an important part of adding interpretive resources.

Similarly, Ms. Scott would historically contextualize citizenship in ways that acknowledged the contradictions between the ideals and realities of citizenship:

The notion of always having students in every unit, essentially, come back to that question of who is an American, what is America.... We would talk about the fact, "It is 1914, and you're

a woman.... You are a citizen but you can't vote. What does that mean?" Then the notion of, "What does it mean to be a Black man in 1910? You've got the Fifteenth Amendment but it's not really enforced," so just the notion of the social construct versus the actual implementation of the legal piece.... "Okay, so we have a Fourteenth Amendment. Is it being applied? Are we enforcing it?"

These questions openly addressed disjunctures and connected them to historical experiences of citizenship for those who faced exclusions.

Furthermore, Ms. Scott connected formal exclusions to undocumented status within the classroom space. For example, when she invited a student to share how he had volunteered for a campaign (despite not being able to vote because he was under 18), she made a connection between his formal citizenship restriction (being too young to vote), to another formal citizenship restriction (not having formal citizenship status required for voting). She addressed the class following the student's excited comments about the power of participating despite voting age restrictions and she added: "It doesn't matter whether you're a citizen or not, none of that matters.... Anybody can get out a vote drive, if that's what you want, or go to work with an interest group, or politically participate. It doesn't matter about your documentation status." Naming undocumented status in this way served to challenge citizenship status normativity while also providing an example of pathways to political participation.

Apprenticeship to Political Processes: The Know-How

In addition to challenging citizenship status normativity through inclusive language and providing symbolic resources that contextualized and legitimized the political participation of those who have historically faced exclusion, an important aspect of teachers' instruction was

providing actual know-how about engaging with political processes.²⁴ In other words, how does one actually engage in tactics to effect change? In a political letter-writing unit that Ms. Aguilar developed, she provided and modeled such tactics and apprenticed youth into actual practices of political participation. What was especially significant about the letter-writing unit was that she modeled the practice of *making political demands*—something key across political movements, including the immigrant rights movement. Writing letters was not merely a dry exercise, but one where youth could define their views while also articulating next steps of action from elected officials. Importantly, learning about politics was embedded in relationships of trust:

There has to be a relationship. There has to be trust there.... If you teach from the idea that what you teach in that class can be empowerment for students, it shifts the perspective.... Not "This is the USA. We have one president, one vice president. This is his cabinet." You don't teach ... with that tone. You teach with the idea that the more knowledge that they have about society around them and norms and laws and functionality of government ... the more they are going to be able to access what is rightfully theirs, regardless of citizenship.

Knowledge about the political system and know-how about effecting political change are essential, and predicated on strong relationships. The sequence is important: creating safe and inclusive spaces based on strong relationships is first, contextualizing citizenship in ways that provide interpretive resources comes next. Adding in technical know-how is a final part of this process.

Summary of Principles

In addition to sharing examples from practice, we also distilled principles

from watching teachers develop their craft in mixed-citizenship settings. The following is a summary of these principles, designed to aid teachers in the foundational and relational work that underpins the practices that challenge citizenship status normativity:

1. Safety is central in teaching about citizenship when citizenship cannot be assumed. We define safety as freedom from harm or the threat of harm—not merely a sense of comfort. Safety can be intentionally cultivated and involves signaling through both verbal and non-verbal linguistic tactics; these tactics can position undocumented people as legitimate participants in school spaces.
2. Teachers' awareness, consciousness, and discernment are essential in addressing matters of safety in context. What may be safe in one setting may not necessarily be safe in another. Different participant structures (for example one-on-one, small group, or whole class) can raise or lower students' sense of safety depending on what students are expected to divulge about their personal histories or backgrounds, including something as seemingly simple as where they are "from" or where they were born.²⁵
3. Building deep and trusting relationships with students is essential. When teachers know students well, they are in better positions to minimize disjunctures because they have a better understanding of students' realities and they can more readily address the gaps between civic ideals and realities.
4. Teachers who cultivate interpretive resources that nurture students' sense of belonging and reinforce their legitimacy as political actors provide more generative learning environments.

Conclusion

Addressing disjunctures and productively challenging citizenship status normativity opens up classrooms for more meaningful participation and learning for all students, including undocumented youth. The teachers we worked with provided examples of how to do so. Sometimes they did so in subtle ways, for example, with a passing analogy to other groups who faced de jure restrictions or a quick reference to a posted resource for undocumented students; other times they did so more explicitly with the apprenticeship of how to make political demands. They also opened our eyes about underlying issues surrounding teaching youth about civics and electoral politics. Thinking back to Daniel and Ms. Aguilar, with whom we started this article, we reflect on how foundational relationships are. Ms. Aguilar's deep knowledge of her students reduced disjunctures because she had a pulse on what was actually happening in students' lives.²⁶ Sometimes she bridged these disjunctures in one-on-one conversations during class time, other times she did this through whole class instruction or after school. Understanding students' lives within community settings was part of what made her so effective. By understanding how teachers address the possibilities of civic inclusion despite structural exclusions, we hope to foster learning environments that transcend the formal boundaries of citizenship. The need for reducing disjunctures and challenging citizenship status normativity grows in importance every day as we strive to create more equitable schooling for all. 🌐

Notes

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- All student and teacher names are pseudonyms.
- At the time of writing, the DACA program provides those who meet specific criteria with temporary work permits and protections from deportation, although some have noted that DACA recipients have still been at risk for removal (See Hannah Foote, "DACA Recipients Arrested in Protests Face Risk of Deportation," Cronkite News, <https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2020/06/18/daca-recipients-arrested-protests-deportation/> and Bob Ortega, "ICE Reopening Long-closed Deportation Cases Against Dreamers," CNN.com, www.cnn.com/2019/12/21/us/ice-reopening-dreamer-deportation-cases-invs/index.html). Although, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Trump administration did not follow due process to end the program, thus maintaining the program for now, the ruling left room for the administration to still find a way to end the program in the future. As one of our teachers noted, DACA is ripe with possibilities for teaching about the branches of government; it began as an Obama-era executive order in response to stalled immigration legislation in Congress, and later the fate of the program ended up in the Supreme Court. For more on DACA, see Roberto G. Gonzales, Sayil Camacho, Kristina Brant, and Carlos Aguilar, "The Long-Term Impact of DACA" https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/files/hii/files/final_daca_report.pdf
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- Dafney Blanca Dabach, Natasha Hakimali Merchant, and Aliza Fones, "Rethinking Immigration as Controversy," *Social Education* 82, no. 6 (2018): 307–314.
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- Anna Ríos-Rojas, "Conditional Citizens, Suspect Subjects: Producing 'Illegality' and Policing Citizens in a Citizenship Education Classroom in Spain," *Curriculum Inquiry* 48, no.1 (2018): 70–94.
- Stuart Hall and David Held, "Citizens and Citizenship," in *New Times*, eds. Stuart Hall and Jacques Martin (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989).
- Amy L. Brandzel, *Against Citizenship: The Violence of the Normative* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Noreen Naseem Rodríguez, "From Margins to Center: Developing Cultural Citizenship Education Through the Teaching of Asian American History," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 46, no. 4 (2018): 528–573; Renato Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism," in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, eds. William V. Flores and Rina Benmayer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 27–38; and Luis Urrieta Jr. and Michelle Reidel, "Citizenship Normalizing and White Preservice Social Studies Teachers," *Social Justice* 35, no. 111 (2008): 91–108.
- Brandzel, *Against Citizenship: The Violence of the Normative*.
- Andrea Dyrness and Enrique Sepúlveda III, *Border Thinking: Latinx Youth Decolonizing Citizenship* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Michelle G. Knight and Vaughn W.M. Watson, "Toward Participatory Communal Citizenship: Rendering Visible the Civic Teaching, Learning, and Actions of African Immigrant Youth and Young Adults," *American Educational Research Journal* 51, no. 3 (2014): 539–566; Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahn, "What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy," *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (2004): 237–269.
- Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- Ronald Hayduk, *Democracy for All: Restoring Immigrant Voting Rights in the United States*. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006).
- Hayduk, *Democracy for All*.
- Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Mentor/New American Library, 1964).
- Dafney Blanca Dabach, "'You Can't Vote, Right?': When Language Proficiency Is a Proxy for Citizenship in a Civics Classroom," *Journal of International Social Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014): 37–56.
- For more about the CLAIY study's methods, see Dafney Blanca Dabach, Aliza Fones, Natasha Hakimali Merchant, and Adebowale Adekile, "Teachers Navigating Civic Education when Students are Undocumented: Building Case Knowledge," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 46, no. 3 (2018): 331–373. For more about Ms. Aguilar's approach, see Dafney Blanca Dabach, "'My Student was Apprehended by Immigration': A Civics Teacher's Breach of Silence in a Mixed-Citizenship Classroom," *Harvard Educational Review* 85, no. 3 (2015): 383–412. For additional CLAIY publications see: Dafney Blanca Dabach, Aliza Fones, Natasha Hakimali Merchant, and Mee Joo Kim, "Discourses of Exclusion: Immigrant-origin Youth Responses to Immigration Debates in an Election Year," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1–16; Dafney Blanca Dabach and Aliza Fones, "Beyond the 'English Learner' Frame: Transnational Funds of Knowledge in Social Studies," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 18, no. 1 (2016): 7–27; and Dafney Blanca Dabach and Aliza Fones, "Civic Lessons and Immigrant Youth (CLAIY): Implications for Teacher Education," *The Teacher Educator* 53, no. 3 (2018): 328–346.
- For more about this, see Dafney Blanca Dabach, Natasha Hakimali Merchant, and Aliza Fones, "Rethinking Immigration as Controversy." This article also provides suggestions about how to teach about immigration in more humanizing ways. Additional resources for teaching undocumented students during elections can be found at Teaching Tolerance: www.tolerance.org/magazine/five-ways-to-support-undocumented-students-during-election-season. And, for more about why using the term "illegal" to describe people is dehumanizing see the Society for Linguistic Anthropology, Public Outreach to Eliminate the I-Word: <http://linguisticanthropology.org/i-word/>.

22. As we note, this example is a powerful one, yet historical narratives surrounding women's suffrage must account for the role of Black women, Whiteness, and race in the movement. See Tammy L. Brown, "Celebrate Women's Suffrage but Don't Whitewash the Movement's Racism," American Civil Liberties Union (August 24, 2018), www.aclu.org/blog/womens-rights/celebrate-womens-suffrage-dont-whitewash-movements-racism; also see Sharon Harley, "African American Women and the Nineteenth Amendment," www.nps.gov/articles/african-american-women-and-the-nineteenth-amendment.html
23. Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006).
24. Irene Bloemraad talks about how both *interpretive* and *instrumental* resources are important. *Interpretive* resources are ideas and symbols that help participants interpret their political participation as legitimate, while *instrumental* resources provide information and tactics of *how* to participate politically. See previous note and also Bloemraad, "The Great Concern of Government": Public Policy as Material and Symbolic Resources," in *Outsiders No More? Models of Immigrant Political Incorporation*, eds. Jennifer Hochschild, Jacqueline Chattopadhyay, Claudine Gay, and Michael Jones-Correa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 195–208.
25. Alongside teacher moves that cultivate safety, we also draw attention to how sometimes safety is cultivated by providing space and flexibility of options so that students who may be undocumented are not put in positions where they are forced to reveal their status or information that might render them as potentially undocumented. Mangual Figueroa writes about how conscientious teachers carried out activities to celebrate where students were "from" in ways that created safety dilemmas for undocumented students. See Ariana Mangual Figueroa, "Speech or Silence: Undocumented Students' Decisions to Disclose or Disguise Their Citizenship Status in School," *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 3 (2017): 485–523. Importantly, the creation of alternative spaces for undocumented youth (and allies) outside of mixed-status classrooms is also essential. We saw this through the creation of student clubs to support undocumented students outside of class time. We also highlight the work of Sepúlveda in creating alternative pedagogical spaces. See Andrea Dyrness and Enrique Sepúlveda III, *Border Thinking: Latinx Youth Decolonizing Citizenship*.
26. Rubin, "There's Still not Justice."

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