Agency and Identity:
How Research Informs *Teaching for the Common Good*

Linda S. Levstik

As argued in Teaching History for the Common Good, the measure of a democratic society lies in the degree to which its members learn to exercise individual and collective agency in informed, intelligent, and humane ways and to demand the same from national and global institutions. One way in which teaching history can advance democratic aims involves the exploration of the historical roots of democratic dilemmas with particular attention to analyzing the differential agency available to individuals, groups and institutions in responding to such dilemmas. This paper draws on an on-going research project to explore the ways in which personal and aspirational identities support students' deeper engagement with history. Students' more nuanced understandings of how the past influenced the present led to interest in and concern for the power citizens have to shape those influences.
Key Words: History Education, Agency, Identity, Perspective, Civic Engagement

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them. . . . The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

Frederick Douglas, 1857

The measure of a democratic society lies in the degree to which its members learn to exercise individual and collective agency in informed, intelligent, and humane ways and to demand the same from national and global institutions (Bourdieu, 2000, 1994; Hess and McAvoy, 2014; Parker, 2002; Levine, 2013; Levinson, 2012). As a quality of human experience, *agency* describes ways in which individuals, groups, and institutions ignore, support, resist, blunt, or otherwise alter historical conditions. As we suggest in *Teaching History for the Common Good*, history curricula with democratic aims would take Frederick Douglas' warning into account and not only explore the historical roots of democratic dilemmas but analyze the differential agency available to individuals, groups and institutions in responding to such dilemmas (Ayers, 2003; Sant, et al., 2015).

In writing *Teaching History for the Common Good* we drew on an extensive body of research that suggested that history education could inform a humane civic agency that acknowledges and respects citizens' intersecting and sometimes conflicting identities. Because this is a considerable challenge, we continue to examine how this might work. In recent years I have worked with colleagues in archaeology to investigate how archaeological methods and concepts might help in this regard (Levstik, 2014; Levstik & Henderson, 2016, 2015; Levstik, Henderson & Lee, 2014). Our most recent work (Levstik & Henderson, 2015), speaks directly to the intersection of agency and identity. Briefly, students age 10-13 studying in predominantly (97%) European American, Protestant,

high poverty ($27,000 median family income) and rural schools used archaeological and historical sources to examine a civic controversy involving a working poor community (Davis Bottom) in an urban area near their communities (Youngman, 2015; U.S. Government, 2014).

Established as a haven for newly freed African Americans in 1865, Davis Bottom thrived for a time. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Davis Bottoms' history involves how it became an integrated neighborhood—the first in its city—and, over time, home to generations of black, European immigrant and Appalachian families. Faced with the destruction of their tight-knit community to make way for highway consruction, residents wanted to make their stories public. The concessions they demanded from a city that had discounted them for over eighty years included creating affordable housing while preserving historical aspects of their neighborhood. Among other responses to community concerns, the city funded historical and archaeological work in Davis Bottom. As a result, Dr. Henderson and I had access to rich historical and archaeological sources to support student investigation (Levstik & Henderson, 2015).

As we designed this study, Dr. Henderson and I thought we had a powerful inquiry into a civic issue, the destruction of a community whose deep historical roots could be explored using a wide variety of sources. We knew from previous studies that students identified archaeological study as investigatory, but we were not sure how they would respond to investigating a community that was economically similar but urban and racially quite different (Pew, 2008; U.S. Government, 2010). Our observations indicated about six minority students across the four schools, but only one of the study participants identified as black. In one of the schools (5b) students recalled one black student ever attending their school. Only two students described any significant personal experience with individuals from other racial or ethnic groups. The

majority experienced differences in race or ethnicity at a distance, through media, occasional trips to larger cities, and by listening to the adults in their lives.

As it turned out, students strongly identified with the residents of Davis Bottom as "normal" and "real" people like themselves, working hard against overwhelming odds and facing discrimination when they left their community. They did, however, identify a disjunction between their own communities and Davis Bottom that surprised us. Students described Davis Bottom, the poorest neighborhood in its city, as an enviable place where children played together outdoors, were watched and cared for by the entire neighborhood and where adults were mutually supportive and interacted with each other on a regular basis. This, students said, stood in stark contrast to the isolation they experienced in their own lives.

Several factors seem to be at play here, beginning with how powerfully students focused on the lives of children in Davis Bottom. Studying shelter involves studying the people sheltered—the size and composition of households, the affordances and constraints of a particular type of shelter on the lives lived within it, the day to day social, cultural and economic activities that engaged residents. Students examined the detritus of other lives from historical documents tracing early settlement and housing patterns and artifacts of daily living found when the privy and house were excavated to oral histories of lives spent in Davis Bottom. Many of these sources provided evidence of children's communal play. For example, in every interview group, students expressed some degree of envy for children who had playmates nearby and the freedom to enjoy themselves outdoors. With a tiny handful of exceptions, student participants were not allowed to wander their neighborhoods on their own. Only two children reported playing outside (usually basketball) on a regular basis. And, they admitted, computer games often kept them indoors and by themselves. As a result, life in Davis Bottom had

considerable appeal—at least in the abstract.

Focusing on shelter had another advantage in not presenting Davis Bottom and its people as a problem for investigation. Rather, Davis Bottom was presented as an answer to the lack of housing for free blacks in post-Civil War Kentucky. Historical sources described the community's origins as motivated by emancipationist aims (Davis, 2013; Law, 2013; McDonald, 2009). Fire insurance maps, photographs and census records allowed students to examine housing patterns, occupations and family structures in order to interpret the kind of lives people might have lived as the community integrated. They knew exactly how big a neighborhood house was likely to be—they had laid one out on the playground. Their examination of census data allowed them to conclude that some households included multiple families and that black and white families lived side by side. Reading the fire insurance map, they noted the juxtaposition of commercial, recreational, religious and residential structures. Oral histories introduced them to residents who described their community as a good place, and safer, in many ways, than the surrounding city with its daunting array of discriminatory practices.

Although photographs showed how poor the community would have looked to outsiders, had those outsiders ever ventured into the neighborhood, in all but one fifth-grade classroom, students looked beyond houses in disrepair to search out details of lives they thought should be recorded and remembered. If anything, the perspectives represented in the sources led students to romanticize rather than demonize Davis Bottom. Students addressed the civic issue—road construction at the expense of affordable housing—as a form of official urban neglect and concluded that residents deserved a different outcome than demolition, even if a land trust would eventually provide affordable housing.

Students' overwhelmingly positive analysis of integration in Davis Bottom also defied our more

pessimistic predictions. Only one of the sixty-seven students thought that different races should live separately to prevent the protests and street violence he had seen on television. All the other comments were striking for the remarkable degree of longing they exhibited. As it turned out, these students envied a community where it appeared that people "got along" across racial lines, where, in fact, racial lines seemed not to matter to the degree that they did elsewhere. Even when they thought it likely that power was more often in the hands of white people, they reported this as a sad fact, rather than the natural order of things.

To some extent, this response was supported by the sources students examined. In the oral histories, for instance, residents tended to locate virulent racism outside Davis Bottom. It occurred more often when residents visited or worked in other parts of the city, or when their children went to segregated schools. And, because this community was a *bottom* economically as well as topographically, helping each other might be considered less a social nicety or moral high ground than a life-saving necessity. As one resident commented, too, not everyone was quite so community oriented as some of the oral histories suggested. She estimated that about 75% of the population included "good people" and the other 25% accounted for the bad reputation the community had among outsiders (Law, 2013). In many ways, then, students' discussions of race were naïve (Bolgatz, 2005; Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011; Lee, 2005; Segall, 2014; Thaneka, 1999). They are nonetheless important because they represent, at least in part, the impact of an instructional shift from race as an inevitable problem to race as a fact of community, and community as an agent of positive responses to social change.

Students may not apply their analyses of race relations in Davis Bottom to whatever encounters they have across racial boundaries in their own lives. One study is unlikely to have so profound an impact. Students' descriptions of racial harmony appear to represent what students wish for but do not always experience in their own lives. Their wonder at and enthusiasm for a peacefully integrated world may also reflect trepidation about encountering more volatile responses in their home communities and elsewhere. The poignancy with which they express their concerns about the racist views of friends and family contrasts with the world suggested to them by Davis Bottom, where help and friendship were less bound by race (Bolgatz, 1999; Lee, 2005; Thaneka, 1999).

The city's decision to demolish Davis Bottom to make way for a major thoroughfare struck the majority of students as a bad idea. They thought residents should have had more say in what happened to their community. They were also convinced that this would not have happened to a wealthier white community. However, when asked what alternatives were available to people on any of the various sides of this public issue or how citizens might have intervened at any point over the years, they struggled with institutional agency. They knew little of how government might be involved in resolving community issues, and were equally unfamiliar with such functions in their own communities. Fifth graders in the smallest rural school, knew something of the separation of powers at federal levels of government but were unsure of how their community was governed—whether there was a mayor or if they were incorporated into a nearby town. By seventh grade some students were pretty sure that ordinary people had little power relative to any level of government. One of the seventh graders captured this sense of defeat in the face of larger powers, explaining that the people in Davis Bottom had done everything they could to "make everything better, but there is really not much you can do without a lot of money. . . the city kind of over-ruled them and that is why they destroyed it to make the road (SM7). Another concluded that decisions about Davis Bottom "shows people. . .what the power of the city can do to a neighborhood" (SH7).

Not all students were quite so pessimistic. Some fifth and sixth graders thought that talking to government officials had, in fact, helped in making sure that residents were assured of housing once the road was completed. Asked who the most powerful people were in determining the fate of the community, however, they, too, noted that prejudice and poverty had led the city to ignore Davis Bottom for almost a century. Seventh graders explained that even in this seemingly equitable community "that probably the most powerful people [from 1865 to the present] were the white people. Even if they are ok living with black people, I think [whites in Davis Bottom] had the most power in that neighborhood"(EM7). One of her interview partners considered this argument, then offered a different interpretation:

> HM7: I think the people with the most power was the people who were willing to change their neighborhood. . .because they were willing to stand up for their rights, stand up against the racist people like maybe powerful white leaders who didn't want them to have rights even though it was legal, since the Civil War. The people who had the most power were the ones who stood up for each other and for themselves and for their community. They were willing to change their way of life, others' way of life, and basically how life would be for future generations.
>
> EM7: That was a *really* good answer.

Fifth graders more often represented Davis Bottom as an example of social justice. Asked what that meant, one student responded that "justice is like peace" and people "don't treat each other bad" (G5b). As the fifth graders explained it, a more just community encouraged active civic participation, even when prejudice and poverty constrained people's civic agency.

Teaching for the Common Good?

What does this study have to do with teaching history for the common good? In my previous work investigating the impact of archaeology on students' historical thinking my colleagues and I noted the distinctions students drew between archaeology as inquiry, and history as learning the end results of someone else's inquiry (Levstik, Henderson & Schlarb, 2005). We argued for expanding students' historical repertoire to include greater attention to material objects, landscapes, and oral histories as sources and to collective agency as a way to help students imagine taking historically informed individual and collective civic action (Levstik, Henderson & Lee, 2014). The findings from this study lead us to argue for more careful attention to three types of *positionality*—how questions and sources position historical content, how historical inquiries position students in relation to civic agency, and how students' identities position them in relation to historical questions, sources, content, and civic agency.

First, in emphasizing the importance of understanding working class people in a historically integrated neighborhood, the Davis Bottom inquiry called students' attention to race as a connective rather than divisive feature of community. It also identified collective agency as a powerful response to racism. As one of the seventh graders explained, people were "willing to stand up for their rights, stand up against the racist people" in order to "change. . .how life would be for future generations" (HM7). As a result, the inquiry provided a space for discussing what might otherwise have been a more volatile topic (Bolgatz, 2005). Further, the majority of the inquiry was not oriented towards debating the *governmental* response to a public dilemma, but to investigating the richness of the lives lived in the path of governmental decisions. As a result, students addressed the civic dilemma on a very human rather than institutional scale.

Second, the question and sources that initiated student inquiry positioned *shelter* as provisional—a

sometimes fragile thing that could be lost—rather than as a given—something to which everyone had access. The questions focused inquiry on three aspects of the common good: a very human need for shelter, an equally human fear when facing the loss of shelter, and a profound debate about a humane response to threats to shelter.

The primary sources emphasized individual perspectives through the oral histories and the collective life of Davis Bottom through census records and artifacts. Further, that collective life belonged to a community established with emancipationist intent that became an integrated community at a time when that was not only rare, but also sometimes illegal and often dangerous. This combination of content, methods and materials supported discussions about agency and identity and their relation to informed civic engagement in a pluralist democracy (Barton & Levstik, 2008; Bolgatz, 2005).

Third, although students identified with the economic status of residents of Davis Bottom came to identify with a wished-for community rarely experienced in their own lives. Davis Bottom presented them with an alternative to prevailing local constructions of racial identity that emphasize separation, especially as young people approach adolescence (Coates, 2015; Thaneka, 1999). Students' response to race differed from their expressions of class solidarity, representing a nascent cosmopolitanism. They did not elect to be poor—that was a condition and an identity that attached to them by virtue of the families into which they were born. What they made of that identity, and the extent to which they saw it as separating them out into a definable group, motivated interest in Davis Bottom and influenced how they interpreted the data they analyzed. It was, however, an identity only one student explicitly said she would choose. In contrast, all but one student said they would choose to be part of an integrated community. That was an identity they admired and participated in vicariously.

Overall, their class identification reflected populist perspectives that fit within the larger political environment in their communities. For them, Davis Bottom exemplified the historical struggle between "normal" people like themselves who rarely entered the historical record—at least as they experienced school history—and the privileged elite who lived on the labor of others.

Perhaps more surprisingly, students expressed admiration and envy for Davis Bottom as an integrated community *unlike* their own. The counties these students live in are not benign in regard to race—students mentioned the blatant racism they experienced in their homes and communities. One student explained, for instance, that people in Davis Bottom weren't "raised so you have to hate that color. You are raised as 'Hey, you are now my best friend'. . .instead of 'you can't be friends at all'". She recalled her grandparents' explicit racism and expressed relief at her parents' divorce, saying, "I'm glad [my mother] got me out of that environment because I have a lot of black friends. I'm glad I have them. I've shared a lot of good memories with them, and if I'd stayed with my dad I'd probably hate their guts." Another student was impressed that people in Davis Bottom "didn't care who they was [sic] friends with. They just wanted to be friends with Black and White."

If we are serious about teaching history for the common good, we should be exploring the ways in which student identities can support deeper engagement with content and more attention to differential agency and more nuanced understandings of how the past influences the present and what power citizens have to shape those influences.

Notes

1. In the U.S., school districts are independent of the state, county, and municipal governments.
2. A *Making History Local Academy* was conducted by the researchers in collaboration with local archeology educators and Project Archaeology national staff.

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Apprendix A. Student Survey

Name_____

Date_____

Project Archaeology: Investigating Shelter
Pilot Project
Student Survey

Hello:

We are about to start an investigation using archeology and history to study shelters. All investigations begin as researchers ask themselves what they already know and what they still need to learn.

As good researchers, we need to figure out the best questions to use to organize our investigation. The survey below will help us do that.

This survey won't be graded. We will talk about the results, but other students will not know which answers you gave, and you won't know what answers other students gave. Instead, we will all know what we still want to learn.

As you complete the survey, don't worry if you don't know the answer to a question. You can guess the answer or just leave it blank. Remember, if we knew all the answers, there would be nothing left to investigate!

****

Part 1.

How much do you agree with the following statements?

		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
a.	I like learning about the past.	☐	☐	☐
b.	I am good at history and social studies.	☐	☐	☐
c.	Doing archaeology is one way to learn about the past.	☐	☐	☐
d.	Archaeology is a way of understanding people by studying the objects they make and use.	☐	☐	☐
e.	Learning about the past helps me understand how things work today.	☐	☐	☐
f.	History means questioning, explaining, and interpreting people, ideas and events.	☐	☐	☐
g.	Learning about my culture is important to me.	☐	☐	☐
h.	I am interested in learning more about my culture.	☐	☐	☐
i.	I am interested in learning more about other cultures.	☐	☐	☐
j.	Understanding culture helps people make better decisions in a democracy.	☐	☐	☐

Part 2.

How much do you already know about the work done by archaeologists and historians? If you need more room to answer the questions below, please write on the back!

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2.1. How would you describe the work done by archaeologists?

_____

_____

_____

2.2. How is the work done by historians and archaeologists similar?

_____

_____

_____

2.3. How is the work done by historians and archaeologists different?

_____

_____

_____

2.4. What do you think we could learn about people by studying their shelters?

_____

_____

_____

2.5. Archaeologists use _observation_, _inference_, and _classification_ as tools to help them in their research.

Give an example of an archaeologist using the tool of _observation_.

_____

_____

Give an example of an archaeologist using the tool of _inference_.

_____

_____

Give an example of an archaeologist using the tool of _classification_.

_____

_____

2.6. Archaeologists study artifacts in context. Look at the picture below. In what context could an archaeologist find an artifact like this?

_____

_____

_____

One way archaeologists and historians learn about the past is through *inquiry*. An inquiry is an investigation with three parts: 1) asking a question, 2) looking for data or evidence to help answer the question, and 3) answering the question using evidence.

2.7. Have you ever done an inquiry or investigation about the past? (Please circle your choice).

          Yes   No   (If not, skip to #2.9)

2.8. If yes, briefly answer the questions below:

    <u>What question were you investigating?</u>

_____

_____

_____

    <u>What evidence helped you answer your question?</u>

_____

_____

_____

    <u>What was the most important thing you learned during your inquiry?</u>

_____

_____

_____

Archaeologists and historians help protect and preserve important places that tell us about the past. Many people like to visit these places.

2.9. Name two rules people should follow when they visit an archaeological and historical site like the one in the picture below.

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_____

Why should people follow these rules? ?

_____

2.10. Name two actions you think people should *not do* if they find or visit an archaeological or historical site.

_____

Why should people *<u>not do</u>* these actions?

_____

Appendix B

Project Archaeology: Investigating Shelter
Student Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Welcome students, introduce yourself and say:

Thank you so much for being part of our study. We know you have been working on investigating shelters in ways similar to how archaeologists and historians investigate them to learn about how people lived in the past and how they live now. We are interested in how people your age think about the past and how they use the past to help make sense of what is happening in the world right now. We hope our discussion today can help teachers do a really good job of teaching about the kinds of things you learned in the Investigating Shelter unit.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we are asking today. We just want to know about your ideas about studying the past.

Test recording equipment. Be sure to have the students say their names on tape. Play names back to check for sound quality.

Introduction: History Background Questions:
- Why do you think people want to know about how people in the past lived?
- Other than in school, have you ever learned about how people in the past lived? Where? What kind of things did you learn?
- What is the difference between archaeology and history?

Tool-mediated Human Behavior Questions:
- [Show picture of outhouse.]:
  o What tools, technologies or inventions would people need to know in order to make and use this technology?
  o How would having this technology change the kinds of shelters people might build?
  o When archaeologist finds a privy, what might the archaeologist want to know about the people who used it?

Inquiry As a Tool: How Shelters Illuminate Lives of Working Poor Questions
- [Show Image #2]
  o This is the portion of a **Sanborn map** you used when you studied the Davis Bottom shotgun house What two observations can you make based on the Sanborn map (wait while they discuss and decide what to say). Now, use your observations to make two inferences about the people who lived in this community or about the community itself.
  o People sometimes complain that the only thing they learn about in history is how rich and powerful people lived and thought. What do you think we can learn from studying people who weren't rich and powerful?
  o What are the most important things you learned about the people who lived in Davis Bottom?

- [Show set of images of Davis Bottom]
  o If you were creating a documentary about Davis Bottom using the theme "social justice", which two of these images do you think would be most important to include? How would each image help explain your theme?

Civic Engagement/Site Protection and Preservation Questions
- In what ways could protecting and preserving archaeological and historical sites help people be good citizens?
- What power did people in Davis Bottom have to change their lives and their community? Who do you think had the most power in deciding what happened to the Davis Bottom community? (probe...Why do you say that?)

- Probe: (use if there is time or if they struggle with first two questions here) How might understanding Davis Bottom's history have helped people in Lexington make decisions about what should happened to that community?

Final Shelter Questions:
- What are the most interesting things you learned from your study of shotgun shelters?
- What were the most confusing things from your study?
- Would you recommend this unit for other students in Kentucky and in other parts of the U.S.? Why or why not? What makes it worth using?
- What problems might students have using the unit?
- If you could change anything about the unit, what would it be?

Interviewer, say: Thank you for talking to me today. Your answers will help us improve the shelter unit and other inquiries for students your age.