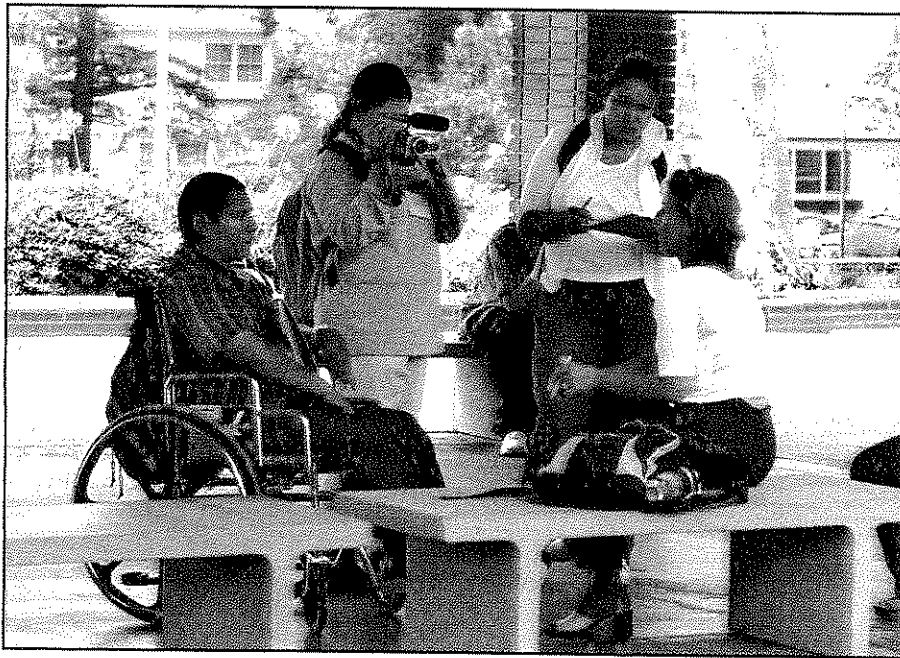


Becoming Critical Public Historians: Students Study Diversity and Access in Post *Brown v. Board* Los Angeles

Ernest Morrell and John Rogers

Anniversaries of major historical events, such as the 50th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, provide social studies teachers with the opportunity to connect their classroom study to broader public conversations about the event and its significance. This article reports on one such effort—an intensive five-week summer seminar in which urban high school students produced original historical research on the legacy of *Brown* in greater Los Angeles.



Student researchers conduct an oral history interview with a graduate from the community. (UCLA/IDEA Photo)

Student researchers studied the changing demographics of Los Angeles communities and schools; the shifting legal and policy meaning of integration and educational opportunity; and the struggles of individuals and community groups to realize *Brown's* promise of education “on equal terms.” In the pro-

cess, students moved from consumers of secondary texts chronicling a historical narrative, to producers of critical public histories. We call these “critical public histories” because the students asked why events unfolded as they did, and who benefited from the changes evident in the current issues that face their com-

munities. This article describes how the seminar engaged urban students in historical research as well as the work they produced. It identifies strategies for developing the skills of reading and writing associated with school success—what we term “academic literacies.” The article concludes by considering how positioning students as researchers and historians points to lessons for social studies education.

The IDEA Summer Research Seminar

In the summer of 2003, UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) convened 25 high school students from across Los Angeles for a five-week research seminar, “Equal Terms: The Struggle for Educational Justice in Greater Los Angeles, 1954-2004.” The participating students, all working-class Latino or African American youth from low-performing schools, were recommended to the program by their teachers. The teachers purposefully selected students from a wide range of academic backgrounds; roughly a third of the seminar students arrived with a cumulative grade point average of C or lower. The students were placed into five different student research teams, each of which was charged with studying one decade of the post-*Brown* era in Los Angeles. (For example, one team focused on the years 1954-1963; another team looked at 1994-2003.) During most seminar days, students spent roughly two and a half

hours in whole-group seminar sessions (with all 25 students), and two and a half hours with their small research team.¹ In what follows, we explain how these high school students engaged in sophisticated literacy practices as they became powerful critical public historians.

Week One:

Bringing *Brown* to Los Angeles

The seminar's first week introduced students to the *Brown* decision and its connections to Los Angeles history.² Students read and discussed articles covering *Brown*, and they watched an episode from the documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, highlighting post-*Brown* struggles to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.³ While these materials were powerful, they left students with the impression that segregation and racial discrimination were experiences unique to African Americans in the Jim Crow South. This belief was confronted when Sylvia Mendez came to the seminar. Mendez was the lead plaintiff in *Mendez v. Westminster*, the 1946 case that forced an end to state-sanctioned school segregation in California. She described her testimony in the case and spoke about her experiences as a Mexican American schoolgirl in the 1940s. Mendez was excluded from public swimming pools, as well as her neighborhood school in Orange County, California.⁴

The seminar students also heard from Sid Thompson, who recounted his experience in the 1940s attending Los Angeles schools that were both racially integrated and openly hostile to African Americans like himself. Thompson, who worked in Los Angeles schools throughout the post-*Brown* era as a teacher, principal, and ultimately a superintendent, provided the students with a sense that the struggle for educational equity is an ongoing process. This was underscored when the students viewed the documentary *Chicano: Taking Back the Schools*, which chronicled the problems facing students in East Los Angeles schools in 1968.⁵ The seminar students were astounded and invigorated to learn that students in 1968 acted to transform many of the

same challenges they face today—school overcrowding, a lack of qualified teachers, and inadequate textbooks.⁶

During the seminar's first week, the students learned to become critical public historians by participating in a public history project with more experienced researchers. In large group sessions, for instance, students learned to annotate their readings and ask questions of the text that would move them beyond surface comprehension. Knowing that their research studies would begin with, and go beyond, what was in the texts, students read for a deep understanding of the literature. The students also wrote daily journal entries, working out their own ideas about racial, economic, and educational justice. The journals provided a nice opportunity for students to make connections between larger seminar ideas and their personal experiences attending underperforming, under-resourced, and largely segregated urban schools. In small research groups, the students learned about the process of translating hunches and ideas into researchable questions, and they learned how to translate a research question into a research design for a project that they would carry out over the next few weeks.

Weeks Two-Four: Becoming Public Historians

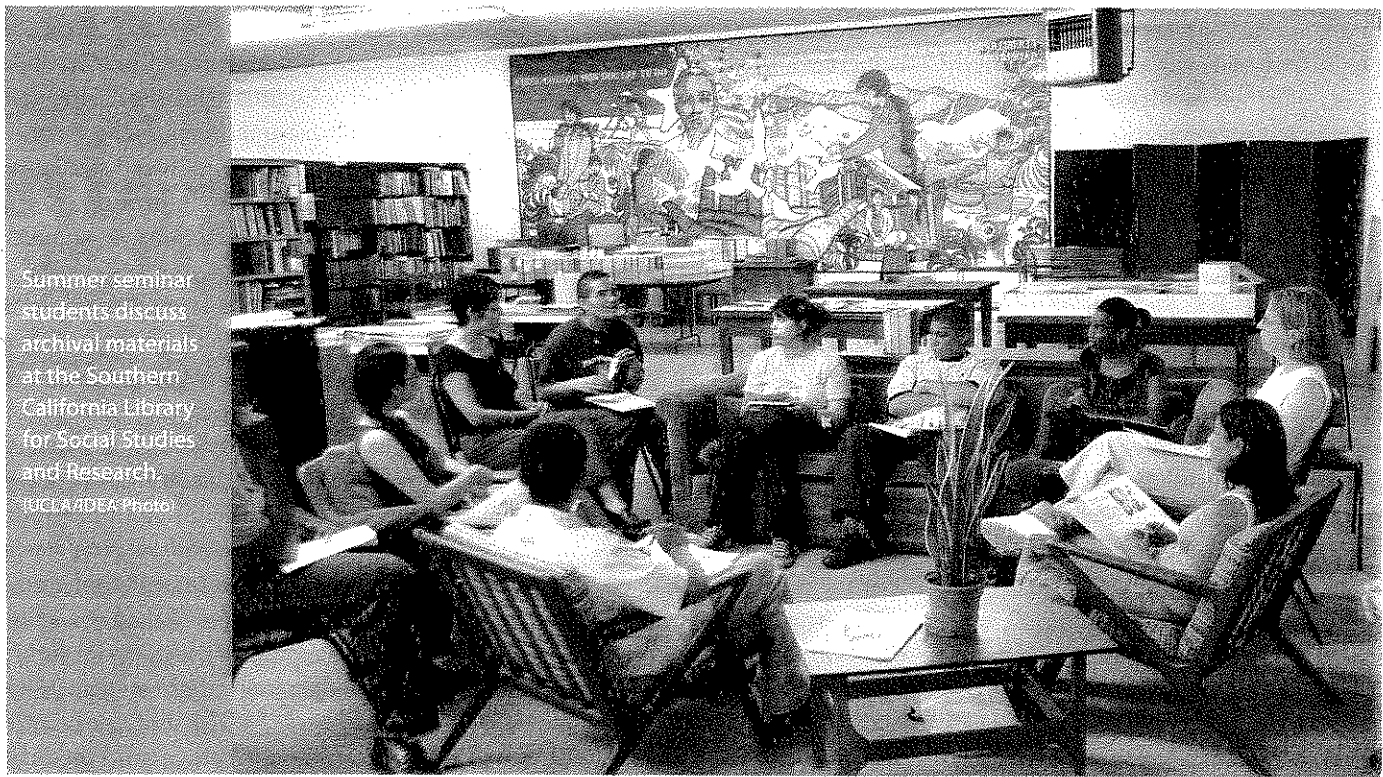
During weeks two, three, and four of the seminar, the students studied the policies that shaped post-war education in Los Angeles; they acquired a set of technical skills for data collection and analysis; and they developed and implemented a research plan. Students read widely from the secondary literature and newspaper accounts of efforts to desegregate Los Angeles-area schools in the decades following *Brown*.⁷ They also interviewed educational researchers, civil rights attorneys, and school leaders about the legal and policy battles over desegregation. Students became acquainted with tools for conducting historical research. They read articles about creating interview protocols for oral histories, and they participated in a hands-on workshop on digital video photography. The students

learned to use "My World," a fair-use software package for creating electronic maps that highlight shifting demographics in schools and communities. Further, they accessed and analyzed statistical databases containing information about neighborhood and school demographics and patterns of academic achievement.

The student research teams used these tools to conduct interviews, gather artifacts, and analyze new and existing data about their assigned decade of post-*Brown* Los Angeles educational history. For two days each week, student teams traveled to different neighborhoods across the city to conduct interviews. Each research team interviewed graduates from at least four distinct communities, who had attended high school during the post-*Brown* decade the students were assigned to study. The students also visited community archives and the high schools themselves. At the schools, students examined old yearbooks to determine the demography of students and teachers, and to tease out understandings of the school's educational opportunities and social dynamics.⁸

Week Five: Creating and Presenting Public History

During the final week of the seminar, students used their research to develop compelling PowerPoint presentations about demographic change and the struggle for educational justice in Los Angeles. They shared these presentations with a public audience of civil rights attorneys, university researchers, and community members. Each presentation featured analyses of oral history interviews and other related artifacts, along with a series of demographic maps portraying the shifting racial demography of Los Angeles and its schools. These maps did more than describe trends in housing—they responded to important historical questions. For example, one group created a map that explored a central claim of plaintiffs in *Crawford v. Los Angeles Board of Education*, a school desegregation case filed in 1963.⁹ The students' maps demonstrated that the Los Angeles Unified School District



Summer seminar students discuss archival materials at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.

RICLA/BEA Photo

could have created racially integrated schools in south Los Angeles by merely drawing the school boundaries in a different way.¹⁰

Each student group also presented four-minute video documentaries, which were developed from footage of their interviews with alumni from each decade. The student videos speak to the challenges young people of color faced in different eras—unequal access to college preparatory classes, overcrowded campuses, and insensitive teachers and classmates. The videos also convey the insight that, in the midst of tumultuous times for the city and the nation, most Los Angeles students enjoyed their high school years. The alumni expressed a great deal of pride in their alma maters and reported a great deal more social integration than is acknowledged in much of the secondary literature. Further, the videos capture the largely neglected history of student-led struggles for educational justice—including efforts of White and African American students in the 1950s to transcend racial boundaries in West Los Angeles and the 1968 Chicano walkouts in East Los Angeles. In short, the videos tell the stories of young people, the age of our student researchers, who

became quiet and not-so-quiet heroes as they confronted racial inequality in their school and communities.¹¹

Academic Literacy, Critical Public History, and Civic Engagement

By participating in this public history project, students developed an array of academic literacies. On a daily basis, they consumed and produced far more text than they had ever encountered in school. Seminar participants read complex academic articles usually intended for a university audience; took notes in lectures and small groups; developed, piloted, and refined interview protocols; transcribed interviews; recorded field notes and other observations; annotated artifacts from libraries and historical archives; wrote memos detailing their findings; analyzed interview data; and wrote up their findings in research reports (which averaged 30 pages and included APA citations). Students also learned important literacy skills associated with public speaking in preparing for 30-minute presentations of their research to an audience of academicians, community representatives, and public officials.

Each of these forms of textual consumption or production relates to an important goal of academic literacy. Students became more accomplished readers and were able to understand and make use of challenging academic texts. They also became more accomplished writers, able to produce academic texts informing issues that were important to them and their communities. In this way, developing academic literacy was at once about developing a skill set, but it was also about developing a different (and more empowered) relationship to texts and to the world.

Students also developed a deep commitment to the historical process and the project of public history. They struggled, in the words of one student, to relate the story of Los Angeles schools in “an informative manner in every respect ... [by accounting for all the] different sources.” “Our job” she argued, “is to get the facts and stories that are not told.” Like most students, her sense of historical mission was bound up with a broader civic purpose. By forging new understandings of “why education was the way it was back then, ... [we can better understand] why conditions are the way they are now and how we can begin to change [them].”

Conclusion

We feel that there are important lessons from the seminar for social studies education. First, the seminar points to the power of exploring significant historical events by studying their impact on local communities. Students in the seminar were able to grasp the significance of the *Brown* decision through understanding how school desegregation played out in their own city and schools. By using the city as a site of historical research, students began to look at their lived experience with new insight.

The seminar also speaks to the advantages of thinking about the study of history as a process of acquiring a set of tools to understand one's world. Of course, the students learned a good deal of information related to *Brown*, desegregation cases, the civil rights movement, and Los Angeles history. In large measure, this knowledge took hold and is more likely to remain useful because it was central to questions the students were interested in exploring. And by pursuing these

questions, students learned a great deal about the craft of public history—how to structure an interview, how to access historical archives, and how to make sense of census and school achievement data. Finally, we feel that the seminar speaks to the role that young people can and should play in excavating, preserving, and sharing their community's stories. As one student wrote, "We, as researchers, are the affected people and we want to make a change." ■

Notes

1. For a more thorough explanation of the IDEA Summer Seminar, see Ernest Morrell, *Becoming Critical Researchers: Literacy and Empowerment for Urban Youth* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).
2. For a general discussion of the legacy of *Brown* in Los Angeles, see John Rogers, *Brown v. Board of Education, 1954-2004: What Does it Mean for Los Angeles?* (UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2004).
3. *Eyes on the Prize: Fighting Back: 1957-1962* and *Eyes on the Prize: A Nation of Law? 1968-1971*. PBS Home Video, pbsvideodb.pbs.org.
4. For background on *Mendez*, see Vicki Ruiz, "We Always Tell Our Children They Are Americans: *Mendez v. Westminster* and the California Road to *Brown v. Board of Education*," *The College Board Review* 200 (Fall 2003): 3-9.

5. *Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, Episode 4, "Taking Back the Schools" (Produced by National Latino Communications Center and Galán Productions, Inc., in cooperation with KCET, Los Angeles, 1996).
6. For a discussion of contemporary inequalities in California's schools, see Jeannie Oakes, John Rogers, David Silver, E. Horng, and Joanna Goode, *Separate and Unequal 50 Years After Brown: California's Racial Opportunity Gap*. (UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2004).
7. A complete bibliography is available at tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/equalterms/history/bibliography.html.
8. The student researchers' report on their methodology for yearbook analysis is tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/equalterms/history/1954/paper/paper.html.
9. For an excellent overview of *Crawford*, see David Ettinger, "The Quest to Desegregate Los Angeles Schools," *Los Angeles Lawyer* 26, no. 1 (2003): 55-67.
10. The students' maps can be accessed at tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/equalterms/history/1964/ppt/sld001.htm.
11. To access the student videos, PowerPoint presentations, and papers, go to www.equalterms.org.

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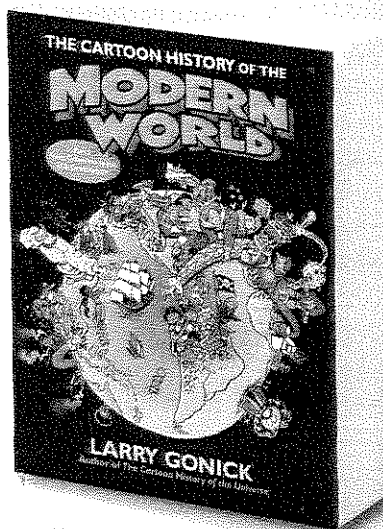
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