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Images of America: What Youth *Do* Know About the United States

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Interviews with a diverse group of juniors and seniors from three secondary schools in the northeastern United States revealed substantial agreement in their images of America. Three themes predominated: inequity associated with race, gender, socioeconomic status, or disability; freedom including rights and opportunities; and diversity based on race, ethnicity, culture, and geography. Three additional themes were voiced by at least one third of the students: America as better than other nations, progress, and the American Dream. Crosscutting these themes were a sense of individualism or personalization and an incipient critique and/or activism expressed by more than 30% of the students. Sources of or influences on students' images of America also were investigated as were changes over time. Although not overly positive, what students do know about the United States is both realistic and generally supportive of the nation-state. There are, however, grounds for concern insofar as the major themes about which students agree play out differently for different individuals and groups, masking deep societal tensions and fissures.

KEYWORDS: *culture wars, student diversity, student knowledge, U.S. history.*

> American Dream is just a joke to me. . . . I think it was all a facade. . . . People in despair want something to wish for. (Sheldon, 2)[1]

> In some countries a woman is discriminated against. . . . Here I can be the same as a man. . . . I might have to work harder . . . but I have the same opportunities. . . . We've come from racial prejudice to equality. We've come from sexual discrimination to women's rights. (Carrie, 2–3)

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> I'd say that there are opportunities. . . . America, it's the land of the free, but it's not everything it's cracked up to be because there are a lot of limitations. . . . There's very few like amazing success stories. . . . There's definitely like racism and prejudice. . . . There are some limitations, especially on minorities. (Melissa, 1)

> Better than I think other countries. Like you don't read about like the Nazis over here, that we ever killed anybody. The only thing maybe is the slaves. But, other than that we've always had good presidents who did good things and not really bad things. So it's pretty good. We have more freedom and stuff. (Marissa, 3)

> I see, well I see a lot of like things haven't changed too much. Like some of the laws have changed. But people—you still see like racism everywhere you go. It's—I don't know—bad. (Richard, 4)

> . . . free people . . . those who can pursue their desires . . . I know there's been discrimination against certain minority groups in the past, but I like to think that's changing. (James, 1)

These are a sampling of comments from urban and suburban high school juniors and seniors in response to our questions about their images of America. Overall, their images are more personalized and localized than the images of America conveyed in their U.S. history classes (Cornbleth, 1998); in some ways, they also are more complex, mixing critique with pride, misrepresentation, and hope. These students' understandings of America and the implications of those understandings are the focus of this article.

As in related work, I use *America* rather than the more specific *United States of America* when referring to questions of U.S. national identity and (re-)definition because, unfortunately, the terms of the continuing "America debate" (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995/1999) already have been set by conservatives who have tended to cast the issues in the language of *American* and *un-American*. It also is less awkward to ask what it means to be an American than, for example, a "U.S.A.-ean." This also is true for *American* as an adjective as in *American character*. The United States is, as an academic colleague born in Mexico remarked, the only nation in North or South America without a name of its own.

Over the past decade in the United States, there has been renewed argument about what kind of national history the public schools should teach. The arguments could be heard in public, professional, and educational policymaking circles. Reports of various test results (e.g., National Assessment of Educational Progress; Ravitch & Finn, 1987) provide some data about what students do not know, but very little about what they do know and believe about the United States, the nation's history, and their own and the nation's future. In response to Ravitch and Finn's (1987) claim that U.S. 17-year-olds knew shockingly little about American history, Dale Whittington (1991) offered a careful analysis of what previous generations of U.S. 17-year-olds have

known and a critique of testing methods. She concluded that, with respect to "objective" test scores, "for the most part, students of the 1980s are not demonstrably different from students in their parents' or grandparents' generation in terms of their knowledge of American history" (p. 776). Given continuing disagreements about what history the schools should teach and students should learn, and about national pluralism and unity, I sought to move beyond questions of how much students know or what they do not know to what the increasingly diverse population of U.S. high school students does know and believe about America.

A four-page *NAEPFacts* report, "U.S. History: What Do Students Know, and What Can They Do?" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996) is a rare exception to the "don't know"emphasis in the literature, noting, for example, those 12th-grade students scoring near the 50th percentile could "show general knowledge of historical chronology, especially 20th century history" (p. 3). Barton and Levstik (1998) provide access to middle school students' knowledge and beliefs about significant individuals, events, issues, documents, and time periods in U.S. history. Their analysis of major themes in students' responses offers glimpses of images of America characterized by progress, including the expansion of individual rights and opportunities. Although suggestive, these glimpses do not necessarily add up to the broader view sought here.

Schooling plays a key, but not exclusive, role in shaping students' knowledge and beliefs about the nation. Public schooling has been charged with a major role in nation-building at least since the mid-19th century in the United States (see, e.g., Elson, 1964; Foner, 1998). First, the schools were to transmit a recently created national identity. Later, they were to Americanize large numbers of immigrant children. A celebratory, nation-building, and assimilating history—what Stern (1956, p. 6) calls "history as a national epic"—still appears to predominate in U.S. school curricula and textbooks (e.g., History—Social Science Curriculum Framework and Criteria Committee, 1987–88/1997; New York State Education Department, 1999; Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1979). Trends within academic history and historiography (e.g., emergence of conflict theoretical frameworks, work in social history) may appear as sidebars or special features in school textbooks, but there is no evidence that they have altered the main contours of school history nationwide. There is evidence, however, that the celebratory grand epic of U.S. history has begun to crack under the weight of contrary evidence, the struggles of marginalized groups to be fairly represented, and the decisions by some teachers to include more of the histories, cultures, experiences, and perspectives of the peoples who make up the United States (see, e.g., Cornbleth, 2000).

Because school curriculum is a key means by which visions or versions of the nation are transmitted to the next generation, schools have been the arenas where Americans have debated social values and national priorities (see, e.g., Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995/1999, chap. 2). Too often lost in this curriculum contestation has been recognition that students are not simply blank tapes upon which the schools' or other institutions' messages are forever imprinted.

Societal messages are mediated by schools in at least two interrelated ways—institutionally and individually. By mediation I refer to the interpretive process by which people make sense of or create meaning from experience. Mediation is an intervening and linking process between messages on the one hand and meanings and actions on the other. Schools as institutions mediate between local community and national preferences on one side and the daily curricular and other experiences arranged for students on the other; "External interests are thus filtered through institutional arrangements" (Cornbleth, 1984, p. 32). Further mediation occurs both by teachers as professionals and individuals and by students as individuals and group members.

Underlying this conception of mediation is the assumption that people, students included, are active participants in the creation and interpretation of their social environments and actions. But students are not independent agents; they are shaped by history and culture, through prior personal experience in that history and culture (or cultures), and by the immediate social relations and practices of schooling. Students, like others, are situated agents. Their social locations are neither unidimensional nor mutually exclusive. They carry racial–ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and other addresses, each of which is more salient, or influential, in some situations than in others, and for some students more than others. The relationship of individual, history, and setting is a dynamic one that is neither mechanistic nor predetermining (Mills, 1959). Consequently, it is wrong to assume that intended school messages are, first, transmitted and then received and interpreted as intended by their advocates. If one wants to know what teachers are teaching and students are learning regarding American national identity, one needs to examine curriculum practice and student knowledge directly. And what one finds carries political and social as well as pedagogical implications.

Although some or many students lack information that some or many adults believe that they should know about the United States and its history (e.g., Ravitch & Finn, 1987), high school students do know something about the United States. What students know and/or believe is important because it influences their understanding and acceptance of what they learn in school and elsewhere (e.g., Epstein, 1997; Seixas, 1993). Existing beliefs also are important because they influence actions. Changing or extending people's knowledge and beliefs is not simply a matter of addition or exchange as cognitive psychological research has shown for several decades (e.g., Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996; Shuell, 1996). It is a matter of working with and building on what people already "know," whatever that might be.

Consequently, my purpose in undertaking this study and the significance of its findings and interpretations are twofold: (a) to identify some of what high school juniors "do know" about the United States for consideration in curriculum planning in history–social studies education and perhaps in other arenas; and (b) to test the extent of disagreement about the United States among students, given the dire warnings of conservatives such as Ravitch (1990) and Schlesinger (1991) that the increasingly diverse U.S. population is

in danger of disunity if history–social studies curriculum does not stress unity and encourage assimilation, allowing for only "modest multiculturalism."

My approach to these issues can be characterized as critical pragmatism, which I have described more fully elsewhere (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995/1999, chap. 2). For the present study, the most salient aspects of this theoretical perspective are its bringing together of critical and pragmatic traditions, linking "the contextual emphasis and equity goal of critical theory with the self-questioning and pluralism of pragmatic philosophy" (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995/1999, p. 33) and its "opposition to efforts to limit or close off debate, either by putting topics or issues out of bounds or by *a priori* rejecting particular viewpoints or the participation of particular individuals or groups" (p. 34).

> The critical perspective gives depth and direction to pragmatic inquiry and dialogue. Pragmatism, in turn, reminds us that cultural critique encompasses us all; none of us or our cherished beliefs, individually or collectively as a member of one or another group, is above or beyond question. Emergent and oriented toward action, this critical pragmatism eschews materialist and theological determinisms on one side and postmodernist quicksands on the other. (p. 33)

The first aspect is evident in inviting students' images into the America debate and doing so at several school sites by means of open-ended questions. The second aspect is evident in data interpretation that probes beneath the surface agreement among students to consider implications of apparent similarities in students' images of America across school sites.

In sum, the present study complements and extends prior work about students' understanding of history and the influence of their background or family experience as well as my own investigation of the images of America actually conveyed in urban and suburban, elementary, middle, and high school U.S. history classes (Cornbleth, 1998). High school juniors and seniors were interviewed regarding their images of America and the sources of those understandings.[2] The focus here is on the students' reported images of America—the meanings they have made of their experiences in school and elsewhere.

Seeking Students' Images of America

Students' images of America were obtained by means of individual interviews lasting from approximately 20 to 45 minutes each.[3] Students were volunteers, interviewed at their schools by myself, another faculty member, or a graduate student member of the research team, toward the end of the larger project of which the present study is a part. Interviews were conducted during 1996 and 1997 in conjunction with observations of the students' 11th-grade U.S. history and government classes; consequently, we were not strangers to the students, and they appeared to feel reasonably comfortable talking with us (all of us are of European descent). Interviews usually were conducted during a study hall period, following a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol. All of the interviews were taped and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

The sample consists of 25 high school juniors and seniors (ages 16–19) from three secondary schools in upstate New York. The two districts and three schools were selected to provide a range of student socioeconomic and racial–ethnic backgrounds, excluding demographic extremes, within the public education system and reasonable commuting distance for the research staff. The four 11th-grade U.S. history teachers within these schools were those who agreed to work with us and invited us into their classrooms. As previously noted, the students we interviewed also were volunteers.

Lincoln, an urban secondary magnet school with a "traditional academic" program, draws students primarily from working class families; 60% of the students are of African descent, and 37% are of European descent. Most of the White students travel to the school from beyond its immediate neighborhood. Johnson, a predominantly Hispanic–Puerto Rican urban high school, has the most diverse student population in the region—linguistically and racially–ethnically—and a higher proportion of students from poor families than the other two schools. Eisenhower, a suburban high school, is predominantly White (92%) and upper middle class. Three of the four teachers whose classes we observed and whose students we interviewed are of European descent and male (Peter, Stephen, and George); one of the Eisenhower teachers is of African descent and female (Lindy). More information about the teachers and their classes is provided as it appears directly relevant to students' images to avoid suggesting that there is (or ought to be) a one-to-one relationship between classroom practice and student belief when U.S. history classes are only one of several influences on, or sources of, students' knowledge and beliefs about the nation.

The median household income in the suburban district is reported (by the New York State Education Department in 1998 at their web site: www.nysed.gov) as more than two and one half times that in the urban district. At Johnson, 71% of the students were eligible for free lunches in 1995–96 compared to 64% at Lincoln and 1% at Eisenhower. In 1995–96, 5% of the students at Johnson and 13% of the students at Lincoln earned Regents (rather than local) diplomas compared to 73% at Eisenhower.

In presenting the results of the data analysis, pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity. Students usually are identified by school because of school-related differences in their images of America. District, racial–ethnic, gender, and teacher–class identifications also are noted when relevant; to note them routinely would perpetuate the assumption of group differences unsupported by the present data. Appendix A presents a roster of the 25 students.

Consistent with the norms of ethnographic interview research (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Erickson, 1986), data analysis has been inductive. I read, reread, and marked the transcripts in the process of constructing, testing, and refining interpretive themes in response to the research questions about images of America and change over time. The question about sources of images involved a simple tally of student responses noting of their explanations or examples. Initial interpretations also were shared with other members of the research staff who had participated in the data collection and were

working with some of the same data for different purposes. Major themes are emphasized in what follows, drawing on the interview transcripts for illustration and the tenor of students' talk about America.

Students' Talk About America

"What youth *do* know about the United States" refers to what they believe or think is true about U.S. history and contemporary society and how they feel about or evaluate that knowledge. We asked specifically about their images of America, for example, "When you hear the word U.S. or America, what comes to mind?" and, "Imagine a fill-in-the-blank question, America is like _____. What would you say?"

Three themes predominated in students' reported images of America: *inequity* associated with race, gender, socioeconomic status, or disability (18 of 25 students); *freedom* including rights and opportunities (14 students); and *diversity* based on race, ethnicity, culture, and geography (14 students). Three additional themes were voiced by at least one third of the students: America as *better than other nations, progress,* and the *American Dream.* Finally, beyond negative descriptors or isolated complaint, nine students offered more a general *critique* of America. Like the inequity theme, critique typically was associated with the promise of America, as in Langston Hughes' 1930 poem, "Let America Be America Again." For most of these students, America is more complex than a soundbite, a banner slogan, or a bicentennial minute.

Inequity: "America's not like it should be."[4]

Inequity of some kind, past and/or present, is part of the image of America held by 71% of the students at Lincoln and Eisenhower high schools and 76% of the students at Johnson. More than half of the students mentioning inequity made specific reference to racism or to racial–ethnic prejudice or discrimination. Racism seemed particularly salient to two Black male students at Lincoln, a Johnson male student who described himself as Native American and Black, and three White Eisenhower students (two male and one female) who had just completed an 8-day civil rights unit including a video revealing the era's violence.

An articulate, young Black man, who prefers to be described as "a person first . . . a human being" (1), Blake echoed Langston Hughes,[5] saying,

> America's not like it should be. . . . it hasn't been for a long time. And until America decides that it's going to be, or live by the principles that it was built on, it will never be what it should always have been. [JM: Was it ever like that?] It may have been at one point in time. . . . This country wasn't built to be segregated. It says, "All men are created equal." Then where does segregation come in? And then they said, "separate but equal." Okay, the country was built on equality, but it wasn't equal. It was separate, but it was not equal. . . . I believe it wasn't because when the principles that were made to build this country, the principles were not in place for all Americans.

> I believe it was only put aside for a certain group of Americans. At that time, you had, you were White or you were Black, and the principles really were set for the White Americans. . . . It was not, "You're an American, I'm an American. We're supposed to be equal." You were either Black or White. (4, 5)

Later, Blake described feeling like an outsider:

> In some ways it makes me feel cheated. Sometimes I feel like I don't belong here. Like I was born here, I was raised here, but it doesn't feel like I belong here. Sometimes I feel like a stranger, a foreigner. . . . Why can't I just be an American just like anybody else? Why can't I just be treated fairly like anyone else? That's what it's supposed to be. That's what you say it should be. (7)

Despite his feelings of inequity and alienation, Blake is not without hope for America or himself:

> America's not all bad, but there's too much wrong with it, you know? There are a lot of things that are right about America. It's a good place to be. One thing that is good is the many cultures that are here. And the many different backgrounds that are here. Um, there's a lot to learn, a lot to experience. Um, a lot of places to go in the country. Um, many things that are good. Those are some of the good things, but there are too many wrong things that are outweighing the good things, which makes it very unbalanced. So what we need to do is eliminate the bad things, tip the scale. (6)[6]

Three Eisenhower students, lacking firsthand experience as targets of racism or negative discrimination, expressed surprise and disgust with what they had learned recently about the history of racism and discrimination in a civil rights unit. Particularly informative and unsettling, the students reported, was the video, "The Shadow of Hate," produced by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Ned described knowing something of the events of the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement but not having had direct experience or seeing the film clips of White violence (e.g., clubs, hoses, dogs) against mostly Black civil rights demonstrators before:

> When you hear something, it's different than if you actually can see it, witness it. . . . I wasn't there, but you saw the footage of it, in the film, and that was, I believe it. They really, I mean, the teachers I've had in the past really never said, you know, "This is how it was," and showed us. (2)

He also spoke for his peers in this regard:

> I never saw that till then. I never learned that till then. And a lot of kids in class were like that too. They didn't know that. I got that just

> from talking to the kids. So I think that, I think that just the past couple of weeks has really turned my mind about stuff. That there is stuff like that that can happen. . . . I never thought that, I mean, the United States would ever let something like that happen. . . . Really, when I saw that video, that was really, I never knew . . . how bad it was and how they were treated. I mean, that was really, really cruel. I don't know . . . somebody that could live then . . . could live through that. . . . it was bad. . . . I'm glad I saw it though. (2)

Ned also thought that the video might incite Blacks to hostility toward Whites, saying, "if I were Black and I saw that, I'd be, I'd hold a grudge against the Whites" (2).

James echoed Ned, saying,

> Just recently, we did a unit on discrimination against Blacks, and, you know, we've been shown on TV films about how they were beaten, Blacks were lynched, and, and unjust discrimination that Whites have demonstrated against certain minority groups. And, it just makes me nauseous, some of what I see. (2)

Melissa, the only Eisenhower student to offer a more general critique of America, was more introspective:

> When I went into the class in the beginning of the year, I had a much more positive image of America than I did now, getting through it. Um, I found that there is a lot of hidden things in our past that many people don't know about. . . . And um, I think there's a lot of people that don't know, you know, about our past and how it was not a great past. It was something that I think Americans should look at and not be proud of. . . .
>
> I still think America is a good country. I'm not gonna like move away because I don't like what we did in the past. There's nothing I can do about that now. But, it kind of disappoints me that, um, this country that, in our Constitution is, you know, equal for everyone, and they tried to be different from the other countries by not limiting anyone, and they were, you know, hypocritical, went back on their word and did . . . destroy these people's lives just because of their race and color. (3)

She also related her own personal experience to what she was learning:

> This year like I have a lot of friends who are minorities [apparently referring to Asians and Asian Americans], and I see how they're treated. And how, you know, it's really uncomfortable for me when I go to their, when I like go to their family gatherings and they've got all Koreans there and I'm the only, only White person there. And I feel uncomfortable. I told my one friend that, and she said, "well, how do you think I feel everyday?" And I, you know, it just blew my mind,

> and then we started something about, um, civil rights movement and everything, and I realized that our country is a little more backward than I thought. You know, for being so modern, their thoughts are backward maybe. Not as modern. (3)

Only one of the four Eisenhower students in the other class mentioned racism, which she attributed to "all the different cultures." Alice commented that, "we have so much more racism here 'cause we have so many different . . . Blacks, and different races" (3).

The contrasting comments about racism from the students in the two Eisenhower U.S. history classes are one indicator that teachers and curriculum can make a difference, at least temporarily, in what students come to know and believe. In addition, two of the three students in Lindy's class (the one that had recently completed a civil rights unit) but none of the students in the other class commented in general terms about effects of living in the suburbs, especially that it limited their opportunities to learn about people different from themselves. Melissa, for example, said,

> "I don't like to think that I'm racist. I really try, you know, but coming from [a suburb] I don't know how to deal with people . . . people accuse me of being racist like, and you know, I'm not doing anything. . . . it's kind of embarrassing to me but I don't have like good public relations like that. I don't know how to act." (5)

Similarly, James assumes that he is isolated in the suburbs and that people who live in cities are more aware of, or knowledgeable about, America. He noted changes in his image of America, saying, "I knew discrimination, for example, existed but I didn't know it, ah, quite to the extent that I've learned this year" (6). In this context, however, neither student specifically referred to the social class and racial differences that separate their relatively affluent, predominantly White suburb from the poorer, more racially and ethnically diverse city. My impression is that their seeming naivete stems from being sheltered from urban and world realities by both family and school as well as physically removed in their suburb.

Fewer students mentioned inequity associated with socioeconomic status or gender, and only one mentioned disability. Compared to their statements about racism, students' comments about class or gender inequity tended to be equivocal like Carrie's comment at the beginning of this article that she has the same opportunities and can be the same as a man but she might have to work harder. Carrie's statement also illustrates students' tendency to personalize their images of America.

Freedom, Rights, and Opportunities

Despite, or alongside, the cited inequities, freedom (including rights and opportunities) was a major part of students' images of America: 57% of the

students at Lincoln and Eisenhower, and 55% of the students at Johnson. Freedom is what distinguishes the United States from other countries. "We're free here . . . not like other countries," Ann said (1). Similarly, Magdalena asserted that "in some countries the government tells you what to do, and you have to do it. Here we have a choice of how we want things" (4).

For some students, this freedom is not always equally distributed or accessible, as illustrated in Melissa's and Marissa's comments at the beginning of this article. Two Johnson students, Kaylee and Yolanda, and Lincoln's Mary seemed to recognize the apparent discrepancy between freedom and inequity saying that, unlike other countries, the United States was fair—except sometimes. As will be described in relation to the progress theme, several students saw unfairness or limits on freedoms, rights, or opportunities as primarily in the past.

Although students frequently mentioned freedom, often as their first response to our questions about what comes to mind when you hear the word *U.S.* or *America,* few had much to say about it. Most commonly, freedom was described as simply having the right, or being able, to do what you want. For some students, freedom meant having opportunities and choices, for example, about what to do with their lives. Manuel elaborated more than most students, saying,

> Freedom . . . A Hispanic has all his rights to be a Hispanic. To have a second language. To talk about our culture and stuff. Americans—everybody has the same quality of who they want to be, you know, how they want to be. It's like, you make your life of it. Not nobody else, you know. (5)

Although a few students mentioned freedom of speech, none mentioned other first amendment freedoms or the Bill of Rights. Overall, freedom seemed to be a symbol or slogan for most students, something they took for granted but gave little thought.

Diversity

The third major theme in students' reported images of America, diversity, was mentioned by 71% of the students at Eisenhower, 57% at Lincoln, and 45% at Johnson. Students mentioned regional or geographic diversity (seven) and multiple perspectives (two from Eisenhower) as well as racial—ethnic—cultural diversity. Interestingly, students at the most racially—ethnically diverse school were least likely to mention diversity as part of their image of America. Johnson students did, however, more often mention the diversity of their school population and that it was a plus. Reminiscent of Grant and Sleeter's (1986) findings from their study of a heterogeneous, midwest junior high school, Arthur, for example, said "it's fun . . . because you get to meet a lot of people" (2).

Students mentioning regional diversity usually compared large cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago unfavorably with midsized

cities such as their own, largely because of crowding and crime. A few of Johnson's Puerto Rican students said they preferred the diversity and dynamism of New York City. Rural areas in the midwest and south were portrayed less favorably than urban and suburban areas in the northeast.

Very few students described the United States in specific ethnocultural terms. For most students who mentioned it, racial–ethnic–cultural diversity seemed almost decorative. Illustrative student comments include, "all different kinds of people . . . different kinds of cultures" (Carl, 8); "a melting pot . . . you're aware of all the diversities, different racial groups, religions, and stuff" (James, 1); "a box of chocolates . . . filled with different people, different languages, different everything" (Kate, 1). Alice provided a slightly different view, saying "America is like a whole bunch of pieces put together, as a whole . . . different states, different cultures, different ethnic groups, different people" (1). Blake, in contrast talked at greater length about America's diversity of backgrounds and cultures offering a lot of experience and opportunities for learning. He used to think diversity was bad because it would lead to conflict, Blake said, but now he sees it as good. If there were no diversity, "It would be like nothing really to talk about because you know you're gonna agree on the same thing and think the same way" (8). He continued,

> So I feel now that diversity is good because I feel if we disagree on something, we can talk about it. You know, because you can give your viewpoint, I can give my viewpoint, and as long as we don't offend each other by what we say, that we don't take it to heart, but we can just talk. . . . I talked to somebody who, about racism and everything, and she had different viewpoints, I had different viewpoints. We sat down and talked for, I don't know how long, it was last summer. It was like, we had a good conversation because, I mean, she was different, I was different, and we had different backgrounds. I learned a lot from her. She learned some from me. So I think different is, diversity is good because diversity means learning. And difference means learning. (8)

Although most students saw racial–ethnic–cultural diversity positively if superficially, a few were more critical. Julian and Alice suggested that diversity was responsible for prejudice and racism while Melissa blamed immigration for increasing economic competition. She said that because there are more people competing for jobs, you need more education and college costs more. Rather dramatically, Sheldon said, "I picture a mongrel dog . . . America as a melting pot of all the nations' worse. Their worse ideas. Their worse thoughts, everything" (1). As examples, he offered racism, White supremacy, and ignorance.

Diversity, like freedom, although a dominant part of students' images of America, seems lacking in depth of meaning for most students.

Imperfect but Best

The three additional themes drawn from student interviews—America as better than other nations, progress, and the American Dream—fit within the

parameters of the major image of America conveyed in the observed U.S. history classes: America as the best nation in the world despite past problems and current difficulties (see Cornbleth, 1998). Nine students, six of them from Johnson, described America as better than other nations in one way or another. Only one student from Lincoln (Carrie) and three from Eisenhower (all from George's class) shared these sentiments. Students at Johnson were more likely to be immigrants to the mainland United States (e.g., Simon whose family emigrated from India) or to know recent immigrants who spoke positively about coming here, which may explain the high proportion of students who shared this image.

Simon, who had been in the United States about 6 months at the time of his interview, said, "From all over the world people come here. Straight to America. Better than any other country" (3). Julian commented, "a lot of people come here because we live a better life over here than other people do in other places" (2). Johnson students also mentioned freedom from government constraint and "rules" (Magdalena, Manuel) and America's wealth and opportunities (Richard, Marissa) as reasons why the United States is better than other nations. Magdalena, for example, compared the United States to Cuba where "you have a dictatorship and whatever Fidel Castro says goes" (4). Freedom and opportunity were echoed by students at Lincoln and Eisenhower. Alice, for example, told about her grandparents coming to the United States from Italy. "People came here for peace and . . . new ideas, and new ways of life," she said (1).

Nine students, five of them from Eisenhower, mentioned progress—that things are getting better in the United States. The United States has had its problems but is resolving them. Most of the students who talked about progress as a part of their image of America referred to that message as being part of their social studies classes. All three students in Lindy's class at Eisenhower, for example, referred to the civil rights unit they had just completed, indicating both that they had not realized the extent of discrimination and racism back then and that things are better now (cf, Blauner, 1992). Progress for two of the students in George's class was primarily economic and technological, since the Great Depression.

Carrie, in contrast, while referring to her social studies class, spoke more personally:

> It seems like we've come a long way. Like, um, we've come from racial prejudice to equality. We've come from sexual discrimination to women's rights. There's a lot of things done to better our country, but there a lot of things that hinder from being a better country. . . . Me being a minority and a woman, seeing what I could have been into, what I have now. Just, it's nice to know that somebody cared way back then. (3)

Although not prominent in any of the student comments, struggle for change was more evident in the comments of two of the Johnson students.

Progress did not just happen; people worked for it. Referring to African Americans, Arthur said that people have come a long way to get their rights (3). Magdalena talked about the struggles of women and African Americans:

> It was hard. I mean people had problems with it. They didn't like how things were going. I mean women had to fight to get rights. To get recognized as we have a voice. We want to be able to vote too. . . . [Enslaved Africans] had to fight to become free. Because they were owned. They were like, it was your dog or something practically. I mean they went through a lot. Especially for African Americans. . . . Glad that I, you know, that I live now, not then, because then—I don't know how it would be. I would be scared. (4–5)

For Marissa, past progress provides grounds for hope that current problems will be resolved. "Things aren't good," she said, "but they will get better. Like the gangs . . . the smoking and the drugs . . . nobody is gonna let that control the America because it's not good" (10). Asked how she has come to believe that, Marissa said,

> 'Cause all the things that have happened, like the slaves, like that's gone away. The Black and White, you know, that they couldn't be together. That went away. That got better. You know, it took time and people had to go through certain things, but it went away. (10)

Marissa's hopefulness provides a link to the last of the themes to emerge from the student interviews: the American Dream. Although a number of student comments can be seen as reflecting belief in the American Dream of individual opportunity and material betterment as a result of hard work, eight students more directly mentioned this image, three each from Lincoln and Eisenhower (43%) and two from Johnson (18%).

All three of the Lincoln students were African American and were in Peter's U.S. history class during the second year of the study. Even one of the most critical students, Sheldon, was not ready to turn his back on the American Dream. Early on he said,

> Um, the American Dream is just a joke to me. It's not even feasible to achieve anymore I feel. [CC: Say a bit more if you would about the American Dream, what it means to you, what it used to mean.] That everybody is equal, everybody can get a house, a picket fence, and raise a family. That's no longer possible. Virtually. [CC: When do you think things changed?] . . . I think it was all a facade. I don't think it was every really possible. [CC: How do you suppose that the image caught on?] People in despair want something to wish for. I mean they want something to achieve. Even if it's not achievable. (2)

Later, in seeming contradiction, Sheldon said "I'm optimistic. I'm gonna make it. I'm determined to be all I can be in America" (7). In this and other

student comments about the American Dream, the optimism is personal or individualistic. Individualism is a thread that loops through several of the students' images of America.

Mary volunteered, "There's no such thing as the American Dream anymore" (9). She continued,

> The American Dream, what is that? There's no such thing. . . . A man and a woman getting married, buying a house, buying a car, that's not true. We don't even have health benefits anymore. . . . by the time you're 40, you've already switched your occupation three times. It's so unstable now. . . . I mean, we get just enough to survive. And after that, you're just living. (9)

But Mary has not given up hope. In response to my question, "So how does this affect your plans and your hopes for your life?" Mary said,

> It doesn't affect my planning at all because I know what I want. As long as I believe in God, everything is gonna be all right. I just know what I want. And I'm gonna stay in school. And all the resources that are open to me, scholarshipwise, things like that, I'm gonna take the advantage. And I'm gonna move on. And one day I do, I want a family, I want to be married, I want children. . . . I want what's left of the American Dream, the little bit. (9–10)

Although not using the language of the American Dream, Carrie emphasized a combination of freedom and individual effort, saying, "I can be just anything anyone else can be" (2). She explained,

> Well, you have the freedom to get your opportunities. You have your own abilities as a person, but whether you want to work for an opportunity is your own business. It's not like anyone is forcing you not to or forcing you to go for what you want. It's up to you. Your own freedom to do what you want to do. (3)

For the Eisenhower students, the American Dream was something to be earned by hard work. The Protestant work ethic was very much in evidence. The two Johnson students who seemed to have a sense of the American Dream expressed optimism that things will get better and that their lives will improve.

Cross-Cutting Themes: Individualism and Critique and/or Activism

Two themes that cut across the substantive themes of inequity, freedom, diversity, and imperfect but best in some students' images of America were an individualist bias and an assertion of critique and/or activism. Individualism took two general forms in the students' talk about America. One reflects legendary, American competitive individualism, rugged or otherwise, where one advances on the basis of merit and effort.

Three Eisenhower students, for example, commented on how difficult it is for a person to get by or to "make it" now because of increased competition for good jobs and "the good life." Kate commented on how now you "gotta work to succeed" as if to suggest that in some time not too long past one did not have to work as hard. Success is largely economic, and the competition is individual in these views. Whereas Lincoln and Johnson students tended to believe that they could get ahead if they worked hard, and they did not seem to mind the prospect of hard work, Eisenhower students were less likely to volunteer optimism. These Eisenhower students seemed resentful of what they perceived as diminished opportunities for economic success. Melissa explained,

> I think there is less opportunity. I mean, before there was not so many immigrants and now it's, you know, second and third generation of immigrants, and it's becoming overpopulated and the opportunities for jobs is becoming less and less, and if you want to get a good job you've got to go to college for what seems to be an exorbitant amount of time. And you also have to have enough money to pay for all this graduate school and, you know, just to make it so that you can support yourself and then support your own family and put your kids through college. (2)

In contrast, Lincoln's Kirk said that despite poverty, drugs, and violence in the area surrounding his school,

> there's places where people are owning businesses, doing the right thing, raising families. Ya know, even myself, going on to college. Most of the seniors in this building are going on to do something. So it shows it's not all bad. . . . [other people] got to see that it's not all bad, that you can actually push out of this and become better. (6)

Across schools there is little or no sense of collective in the students' comments and if they are aware of structural changes in the economy or society, they rarely mention them directly. Even Carrie's seemingly contradictory comment about having the same opportunities as a man but maybe having to work harder does not recognize structural dynamics. Acknowledging that she "might not be treated the same way" as a man, Carrie claimed, "but that's a personal issue. It's not about the whole country" (2). Individual merit and effort are emphasized. For a few students, individual greed or selfishness are prevalent. "Everyone's all out for themselves now," Mary stated matter-of-factly (5). Sheldon was more vehement, describing the United States as an "evil, maniacal, dog-eat-dog nation" (3). Concurrently, he was very proud of his first paycheck from a part-time job—and unhappy about the several deductions.

A related, more frequently expressed form of individualism is personalization or students describing their images of America in terms of personal experience, perception, or future expectations. Mary's comments about the American Dream and wanting and working for the little bit that is left illus-

trate both personalization and belief in meritocracy. She is not talking about high school students, young women, or African Americans as a group. Also highly personalized are students' comments about freedom in terms of being able to do what you want. Because most of these students were in the midst of or had recently completed the state-required, 11th-grade U.S. history and government course, I expected some reference to the Bill of Rights or, at least, first amendment freedoms as such.

Bill, a student at Eisenhower, took personalization another step, insisting that he could not really understand U.S. history or "know what it feels like" (4) unless he had lived through it personally.

> I don't know. I can't really feel a part of it [America, U.S. history] just from seeing everything that's happened. And me being like 16-years-old, nothing's, I mean besides from like the Gulf war, whatever, nothing's really happened that's affected me. (3)

A second cross-cutting theme in students' images of America is an emergent social critique and/or activism expressed primarily by students from Lincoln (five, both African and European American, male and female) but also by two students from Eisenhower (both female) and two from Johnson (an Hispanic female and a mixed race male). Although critique was expressed primarily by males, activism was expressed entirely by females. Social critique as used here refers to more than complaint about or disapproval of a particular circumstance or event (e.g., past discrimination and violence against African Americans). Emergent rather than fully formed among these students, critique involves linking two or more instances of inequity so as to suggest a pattern (but not yet structural properties) and/or recognizing and attempting to understand causes or reasons for the situation(s) deemed undesirable. It involves being proactive, at least intellectually, beyond passing judgment as in (dis-)liking, accepting, or rejecting.

Most critical were Blake and Sheldon from Lincoln and Richard from Johnson. All three spoke about racism. Recall, for example, Blake's critique of inequity, "America's not like it should be," and his feeling sometimes of not belonging because he is treated differently than White Americans. Recall also Sheldon's assertion that the American Dream is a "facade" and his references to racism and White supremacy. Observing that "it looks like it's [America] starting to fall apart" (2), Richard noted drugs, crime, and racism as significant problems in the United States. Richard said, "to be American should be like a privilege" (2), but there are problems and "we can't get along" (12).

Less bitter than these three young men were Lincoln's Mary and Kirk. Mary was clear that opportunities were not equal in the United States:

> 1996 has nothing to do with whether you're Black or you're White or you're Vietnamese. It's what you want to do. Anything that person wants to do they can do because there's opportunities out here. . . . But it's just some things are just unfair. . . . I guess they say, you know,

> we help the ones that want to help themselves. But what about the ones that want to help themselves but can't get started on helping themselves? [a reference to school dropouts about whom she had talked at length] So that's a problem. (7)

Mary also noted, "Many of us, we don't have those opportunities" (9), referring to the President's daughter attending a private school. Yet, although she claimed that the American Dream no longer exists, she wants the little bit that is left.

Hopefulness clearly is evident alongside Kirk's relatively extended critique of poverty in the United States, especially the gap between rich and poor—in addition to violence, drugs, and self-serving politicians. But it is not all bad, he insisted; there are grounds for hope. Although Sheldon's and Mary's hopefulness was personal, Blake and Kirk were more generally hopeful for their community and/or country; Richard, in contrast, expressed pessimism and frustration. Reasons for the absence of explicit statements of hopefulness (or despair) among Eisenhower students are not at all clear. Hope may be taken for granted among the more privileged. Alternatively, what have been the implicit entitlements of White, middle and upper-middle class status now may be less certain as there are fewer grounds for expectation that each generation will be better off than the last. Support for the latter interpretation comes from the previously cited comments of Eisenhower students about how you have to work harder to succeed now.

Johnson's Magdalena noted that throughout U.S. history people have fought for their rights. Improvement has had to be struggled for. In talking about and endorsing others' activism, Magdalena seems to bridge the critique and activism strands of this theme. She also is one of the few students who explicitly indicated understanding that historical events do not "just happen."

Activism here refers to suggesting or participating in some way of responding to or resolving the undesirable situation(s). It may or may not be associated directly with critique as used here. Both critique and activism, as expressed by these students, seem to suggest hopefulness. Although they were not content with America as they saw it, these students seemed to assume that problems could and should be resolved.

Three White female students, Lincoln's Linda and Eisenhower's Melissa and Ann, were clear that it was time to "do something" about America's problems, not just complain. Linda was tired of the negativity, especially what she hears in her family; she would like to focus on good things and deal with the problems—get on with it. She explained,

> everybody focuses on, you know, the decline of America. . . . violence . . . morals decline, the budget, the corruption. Nobody really looks at the good things either, you know. There's always, for every dark moment, there's a bright spot too, but nobody likes, nobody likes good news. . . . There's too much focus on the bad things. It's getting kind of stale. . . . Everybody's complaining, nobody is try to do anything. (4)

Instead of the media focus on controversy, Melissa said that it would be better to deal with the problems that Americans can do something about. Ann also referred to the mass media, particularly portrayals of violence. There are always problems, she said, "so you just gotta deal with those and go on" (7). She mentioned having been a member of Amnesty International for a year at the time of the interview. It is noteworthy that two of these three young, White women seemed to qualify or apologize for their strong views. Ann said that she tends to be optimistic while Linda said that she tends to avoid conflict and that "A lot of people think that I'm naive or I think too simply or something. I don't know. Why does it have to be so complicated? I mean it really isn't. I mean, people really aren't that different" (5). These young women may well be naive about how change can be accomplished insofar as they seemed not to recognize the nature of systemic change and the role of broad-based social movements. Even their "activism" seemed individualistic.

As Yet Unfulfilled Promise

In sum, these students' images of America are characterized by themes of inequity (72%), freedom (56%), diversity (56%), and imperfect but best (36%). Cross-cutting these themes are a sense of individualism or personalization and an incipient critique and/or activism expressed by more than 30% of the students. Generally similar images were offered by a smaller sample of urban and rural western New York middle school students who mentioned freedom most often (67%) followed by danger (58%) and diversity (50%); only 2 of the 12 students, both urban, mentioned inequity. Like the older students, the middle schoolers also offered mixed, positive and negative, descriptions of America. Their images, however, tended to be more localized, more often citing direct experience in their communities, for example, the fear or threat of personal danger (Lawrence-Brown, 1998). Also similar is the major theme in a study of Kentucky middle school students' explanations of historical significance, what the authors characterized as America's "progressive expansion of rights, opportunity, and freedom" (Barton & Levstik, 1998, p. 486). These rough similarities across studies both lend credence to the findings reported here and suggest the desirability of testing their generalizability to other locales and student groups.

Despite differences in emphasis, the high school students' reported images of America are not inconsistent with the two major themes derived from an analysis of the images actually conveyed in 5th-, 8th-, and 11th-grade U.S. history classrooms: imperfect but best—America as the best nation in the world despite past problems and current difficulties—and multiple perspectives (Cornbleth, 1998).[7] That the students interviewed here put more emphasis on the "imperfect" is consistent with both our classroom observations showing more consideration of multiple, including critical, views of the nation in the upper grades and students' reports of change over time in their understandings. It is also the case that students report multiple influences on their thinking about America of which school experience is only one. Sources of

and influences on their thinking as well as change over time are considered in the next section.

Although these young people may be as attuned to discrepancies between democratic ideals and realities as their elders, they do seem less willing to accept America's imperfections as inevitable or incurable. Their loyalty to or stake in the nation appears to come much less from celebration of heroes, military victories, or inventions than from belief in—or desire to believe in—America's promise of opportunity and equality, of freedom and justice for all. A diverse group, they appear much less wary of diversity than older Americans of European descent who express concern that too much diversity threatens national unity (and, at least implicitly, social stability). In contrast to "ordinary citizens" or the much-polled U.S. electorate, which frequently has been characterized as frustrated and/or distrustful (especially of the federal government, e.g., Uchitelle &Kleinfeld, 1996), these students—like their U.S. history classes—tended to be more positive. Instead of alienation, I heard disappointment alongside still high expectations for America (cf. Hochschild, 1995).

Shaping Students' Understanding of America

We asked students about the major sources of their ideas about America. If students did not mention family, friends, school, TV, movies, newspapers, and magazines, we asked about each of these possible influences. For the most part, students spoke about influences on their images of America in general terms, and it was not possible to link particular images with particular sources.

Overall, school, including specific courses, was the most frequently noted source of students' images of America (23 of 25 students). This was not surprising insofar as all the interviews were conducted in the students' schools, and in most cases we asked specifically about images of America conveyed in social studies and English classes that the students were currently taking or had recently completed. Images that students reported as having been conveyed in classes were not attributed to the students unless they explicitly indicated their agreement with or adoption of the image. The students in the Eisenhower class that had completed a civil rights unit just prior to the interviews seem to have incorporated the new information about racism into their images of America—a clear cut indication of the potential influence of teacher and curriculum practice. The Lincoln students, in contrast, displayed a greater range of images of America and seemed to be offering their own interpretations of images conveyed in class and elsewhere. The Johnson students showed the least evidence of classroom curriculum impact on their images of America except perhaps for a leaning toward a "great man" view of history. It also was the only school in which any student claimed not to have learned much if anything in his or her 11th-grade U.S. history and government class. Representative of comments from several students were, "we really don't do nothing in that class" (Magdalena, 5) and "'cause he don't really teach. He don't do nothing" (Kaylee, 2).

Generally, students' comments about sources of and influences on their images of America are consistent with the findings of Ehman's (1980) review of two decades of political socialization research about the effects of schooling on political knowledge, attitudes, and participation. Although schooling generally and curriculum practice in particular are important sources of students' political information, and more so in secondary than elementary school, secondary civics and government curriculum "appears not to be an impressive vehicle for shaping political attitudes or participation orientations" (p. 113).[8]

After school, personal experience was the next most frequently cited influence (15 students), followed by family and/or older people and TV and other news media (11 students each). Interestingly, one Lincoln student described her views as a reaction to her family's bigotry; the same student, Linda, and Eisenhower's Kate described TV as a negative influence, meaning that they either discounted it or reacted against what they saw as overstatement or misrepresentation. Kate referred to sitcoms depicting the "perfect" American family, which she implied does not exist, while Linda cited "the overkill of things on TV" and "all the big thing about the O. J. Simpson case" (5).

Reading and books were mentioned as sources of images of America by five male students, three of whom were non-White (one Native and African American and two African Americans) who challenged conventional, largely positive versions of U.S. history. These are the same three previously described as offering the strongest social critique. Blake, for example, said,

> what I learned in school throughout grammar school and everything, America's been painted as such a great country, and it's been painted as a country that could do no wrong. The government's so good and it works, and the system is so great. But as I grew older and began to read things outside of what they taught in school, I found out that it is not so great. It's not so flowery as it's been painted to look, as it's been painted to be. And so, and then, like I've said, the encounters I've had, also show, this country's not so great, and it's not so good and as flowery as it's said to be. (6)

He mentioned reading "a history of the Negro in America" and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* saying "And he [Malcolm X] kind of had the same somewhat feeling about America also, that it is not what it is or what it should be, and has not treated people fairly" (6–7).

Blake, Sheldon, and Richard mentioned family (and/or older people) as well as books and reading as influencing their images of America and leading them to be more critical of America past and present. In this respect, they resemble the African-American students in Epstein's (1998) study of the historical perspectives of 11th-grade students in an urban high school in the Detroit area. Epstein attributed the different choices and explanations of significant actors, events, and themes in U.S. history offered by African- and European-American students to "race-related differences in the lived experiences of the

adolescents themselves and their family members" (p. 397). Although evident, as just noted, race-related differences in the current study were neither as clear cut nor as pervasive as in Epstein's analysis.

Lastly, movies were mentioned as a source of images of America by three students and peers by two.

School differences in the reporting of sources of images of America were evident in only two instances. Eisenhower students were less likely to cite personal experience (one of seven students) and more likely to cite TV (six of seven) as influencing their images of America. Recall the two Eisenhower students who commented about being isolated in their suburb insofar as they saw themselves as having limited opportunity to learn about people different from themselves. One of these, Melissa, was the only Eisenhower student to mention personal experience, saying,

> I've seen enough of the United States to know that things aren't always the way they seem. You know, I've been up and down the east coast and, you know, we, when we do go on vacation we do the touristy things but reality always slips into it. . . . we have relatives in Long Island, so we drive through New York City every, every uh year, and somehow every year we end up going the wrong way and end up in one of the worst neighborhoods of New York City. And uhmm, it's, it's kind of, I mean it's scary. . . . And you see the houses and how run down they are. And me coming from [suburb], I don't see this stuff very often. I mean, I'm used to like white picket fences. So, we go down to New York City and, uh, it's just reality right there staring you in the face. (4)

In contrast, all the Lincoln students cited personal experience as a source of their images of America. Blake said, "My sources are the encounters that I've had. The encounters that my family has gone through. Um, history. Um, what my grandparents and great-grandparents have gone through" (6). Kirk described his experience on the streets:

> I've seen a lot. It doesn't really seem it, but in 18 years I've seen a lot. I've seen people get in fights. I've seen people pull out guns. I've seen good things happen. . . . If you were like, let's say, in a, in a better area, you know, you don't see a lot of homeless people or people that pull guns or drug dealers, you know. Those are the kinds of things you really, ya know, those are the kinds of things that people want to shield you from. But you, I think you got to see 'em in order to realize it's going, that it is there, it's going on and something has to be done about it. . . . I've had five people in 18 years that I've known that have gotten murdered by a weapon, by some form of firearm. . . . you gotta think to the future and think before you do, ya know, instead of just going out and being, doing something stupid. It could be your life right there. So it's kind of what has shaped me. Seeing those kinds of, seeing the negatives actually, that made me work harder so I could be positive. (5–6)

Johnson's Mercedes described more specific experience with segregation in the city:

> when you travel around [the city] itself, how it's so segregated. You know? It's like the west side is mostly Hispanic. The east side is mostly Black Americans. And then you got the south part which is mostly . . . So I see when I'm in the streets, when I go to different places in [the city], it's there in my face. . . . I don't like it. I really don't. . . . And I'm not used to living like that. In the City [New York City] we used to, you know, everybody lived together. . . . I'm pretty sure it [segregation] happens all around the United States of America. . . . I'm pretty sure it happens in New York too, you understand? But I don't, I never experienced it over there until I came to [the city]. . . . It's good to learn about other people and their culture and the way they live. You learn interesting things. But it's real segregated over here. (5–6)

Mercedes' experience with racial–ethnic segregation in the city has led her to see America as segregated. It was not unusual for students to generalize from their personal experience to "America." And, as students' experiences have changed, in and out of school, so have their images of America.

Change Over Time

Students' comments about change over time in their images of America also shed some light on what shapes those images. Except for the three Eisenhower students who had just completed the civil rights unit that had a major impact on their images of America, students who noted changed images tended to attribute change to personal experience.[9]

With the exception of Lincoln's Blake, who reported more hopeful, positive images of America compared to a year or two ago, despite his learning that "this country's not so great . . . as it's said to be" (6), the students reported change toward more realistic (i.e., less positive) images of America. The three Eisenhower students who said the civil rights unit changed their images of America said that it provided information new to them. James said he learned more about discrimination, "how difficult it was [for blacks in the United States] and how degrading" (3), while Ned said he learned about the extent of racism and "how bad it was" (2) for Blacks before then. Both were particularly taken with the video, "The Shadow of Hate." Ned, as did a few other students, suggested without prompting that students should learn about prejudice, discrimination, and racism earlier, before 11th grade:

> I don't think you should show that [the video] to elementary kids because they really wouldn't understand the point of it, but . . . like, eighth grade and on, I think the kids should know, because I think that might be able to stop racism in the U.S. if they see that. I mean, not that it's totally going to solve it, but, just give you a different perspective on what it was like. (2)

Melissa, as described earlier, characterized her image of America as less positive than at the beginning of the academic year, because of the extent of prejudice in the United States that she did not know about before. In retrospect, she described her seventh- and eighth-grade U.S. history classes as superficial.

> Uhm, seventh and eighth grade, the only thing that I really thought about was, uh, the way the Indians were treated. And how they were forced to move. But even then we didn't go into that enough, you know, just they said, oh um, you know, the Indians had to move. They had to go to the other side of the country and, you know, reservations and stuff like that. But we didn't really get into anything of detail. . . . we did the whole Martin Luther King, Jr., uh, you know, how he fought for civil rights but we didn't hear about the people being beaten on buses and, you know, the busses being burned and, uhm, the actual, the actual hate that went on. (3–4)

In contrast, Melissa characterized the civil rights unit as "graphic":

> It was graphic . . . I mean it was disturbing to me, but it wasn't, it wasn't overboard like sometimes some groups will make things look worse than they are, just you know, to get attention I think. This was really the, the videos that we saw and the, uh, worksheets that she handed out about actual people, uh, it was really moving to me to see that. You don't know that, you don't know their names. And she handed out a worksheet that had the names and the, you know, how they died and what date they died on, and it was, you know, it was kind of, you could put a name to some of the faces maybe. (4)

Only one of the four students in the other Eisenhower class mentioned any change over time in images of America. Alice attributed the change to TV's showing an America where "there are like terrible things about it, and different things that are bad in our society and stuff" (6). She cited greed and killing as examples.

At Lincoln, none of the four female students mentioned changes in their images of America while all three male students did. Kirk talked about change accompanying his move from a neighborhood Catholic elementary school 4 years ago to Lincoln in a poorer, city neighborhood. He emphasized meeting and getting along with people different from himself and learning about social problems:

> I grew up in [city neighborhood] all my life. Uh, I went to the neighborhood school, ya know, so I didn't experience too many things. . . . basically everybody knew each other. You hung around in your own neighborhood. You stuck with your own, ya know. It was, it was, ya know, it was nice. . . . So when I came here it was like a learning experience on my own. I learned that life isn't so nice and sweet and perfect. It's not like that everywhere. Some people got it harder. And

> it seems, I feel lucky that I still have both my parents and that I have a family that cares about me. So that's why, ya know, it all fits in somehow . . . if you know what's going on . . . (7)

Like Ned, Kirk believed that younger students should not be sheltered from all the rougher and nastier aspects of life:

> when you're growing up and you're little, ya know, I think you should be exposed a little bit to everything. Ya know, you should know what's going on. . . . If you don't know what's out there, you don't know that, that if you're doing drugs it's gonna screw your life up, ya know, because you never really knew about it. . . . or you didn't know about even sex and all that, pregnancy, AIDS, all that. You don't know about it, you're going to go ahead and do it. . . . you gotta know those kind of things so you can see [inaudible]. I feel that information is the key to everything. Knowledge is the key. (7)

Whereas Kirk remained hopeful, Sheldon described change toward largely negative images of America. He attributed change to learning and "just experiences" (7), which probably include some of his reading outside of school. Sheldon described the change as follows:

> when I was a freshman I used to say the, say the Pledge of Allegiance and things like that. But not anymore. . . . I'm not really proud to be an American. After realizing some of the things that we did as a people. Some of the things that we did to ourselves and to other nations and things. Our whole frame of thought is just polluted. America has polluted itself. (7)

At the same time, he described himself as more open than he used to be:

> I used to be real, real stubborn. If everybody didn't think like me, then they were wrong, but now I'm open. . . . I've got a job now. And since I've been open to different people and things like that. . . . I believe everybody as a person should be respected. But I still hold strongly about different things that I know is not right. (7)

In contrast, Blake, who expressed rather critical images of America and how he had become more critical since elementary school, also said that he recently found reason for hope. As noted earlier, he described thinking that diversity was bad because it led to conflict but now thinking it is good because he had found that you can talk things through and learn from one another. Blake also referred to an extended partner project with students from a suburban high school (in the same district as Eisenhower) as having a major impact on him. On the basis of that experience he said,

> America has a bright future, because just the youth in that group as a whole [from the suburban high school], um, were very positive. I

> didn't feel any racial tensions while I was there. It felt like a family, basically, because you know, everyone was entertaining, laughing, talking together, and some of them had some of the same ideas and viewpoints. And so I feel that America has a bright future because that group alone of young people who could work together to bring America back or take it to what it should have been all the time. (7)

Blake rather poignantly reflects the mix of critique and hope evident in several students' images of America. Moreover, the changes that he and other students described suggest that their images of the nation may well undergo further change as societal circumstances, their experiences, and their knowledge changes. To expect stable images of America in the face of changing circumstances is unrealistic unless those images are abstract (e.g., ideals, principles) or limited to what Melissa called the "symbols" such as the flag and the Statue of Liberty.

Concluding Considerations

It is not my intent to pass judgment on these students' images of America beyond noting that, although not overly positive in the way of 1950s TV sitcoms, they are both realistic and supportive of the nation-state. There are no grounds here for either super-patriotic lament or celebration.

That varied images of America are reported by this group of high school juniors and seniors is not surprising given the racial–ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the sample as well as district, school, and teacher differences. They simply have not experienced "America" similarly, in or out of school. And, like other school messages, the images of America communicated by school curriculum and culture are not necessarily received by students or understood as intended (e.g., Cornbleth, 1984).

Moreover, a number of students appear to hold inconsistent, even contradictory, images concurrently. That their images of America tend to be disparate may be an appropriate reflection of the nation and its history. Such images can be seen as reflecting changing interpretations and differing sources of information about the United States as well as the differing experiences and views of various participants. It seems, for example, that to several Johnson and Lincoln students, *America* means freedom and equal opportunity in the abstract or in principle alongside their experience of discrimination in local stores and other situations—a general good alongside nasty particulars. A mix of acceptance and dissent was evident in the images of America put forward in the western New York elementary, middle, and high school classrooms we observed (Cornbleth, 1998, pp. 641–643), especially in the upper grades. Partial, unconnected images predominated, with an overall effect that was more a complex, multifaceted America than a fragmented one. The seeming disjointedness of both curriculum and student images of America, whether or not a reflection of contemporary sensibilities akin to MTV, provides openings for alternative images and questions about the nation's history and possible future.

Given this mix, the similarities in students' images may be more noteworthy than the differences. Either way, Epstein's (1998) suggestion that U.S. history curriculum and teaching should better accommodate students' differing historical perspectives, such as those brought to class by the African- and European-American students in her study, merits serious consideration here. The prior knowledge and perspectives that students bring with them shape what they make of what is offered in history classes and what they take away (e.g., Seixas, 1993). To ignore student mediation of teaching and learning is to undermine its potential positive effects. One means of accommodation is to invite and incorporate student perspectives, and the evidence on which they are based, into the classroom dialogue. Then, consider these perspectives and their supporting evidence as historical strands to be braided with others (e.g., textbook version) in constructing fuller, more authentic historical accounts (Cornbleth, 1997).

Social and Political Considerations

As noted previously, the present work is one of very few studies of the substance of students' knowledge and beliefs about the United States and its history. The findings carry implications left undisturbed by analyses over the past several decades of how much students know (e.g., a lot, some, very little), how politically supportive or cynical their attitudes, or how similar or different their social and political beliefs. With respect to the latter, it has been asserted by numerous commentators, especially those of moderate and conservative bent, that similarities are good, contributing to national unity and well-being. Differences, in contrast, are seen as actually or potentially dangerous, leading to dissension and disunion; with disunion comes disaster. Thus, we are offered language in state history curriculum standards such as,

> the study of New York State and United States history requires an analysis of the development of American culture, its diversity and multicultural context, and the ways people are unified by many values, practices, and traditions. (Standard 1—History of the United States and New York, NYSED, 1996, p. 2)[10]

Without rehashing or entering into the pluralism—unity or common culture arguments prevalent since the mid-1980s (see, e.g., Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995/1999), my intent is to suggest that they are dangerously simplistic insofar as they obscure substantial tensions underlying the surface similarity or agreement in adult opinion or in young people's beliefs about America.

Looking for similarities, one could be reassured by the extent of unprompted agreement within this racially–ethnically and socioeconomically diverse group of young people. We asked open-ended questions rather than multiple-choice questions that limit respondents to predetermined choices. Even so, more than two thirds of the students (72%) agreed that inequity was part of their image of America whereas a majority (56%) agreed that freedom and diversity were part of their image of America. In addition, more than a

third (36%) agreed on an image of America that I have characterized as "imperfect but best." It is when we examine what is agreed upon, not merely the extent of agreement, and how it plays out for various individuals and groups, that agreement becomes problematic.

Inequity, part of the image of America past and/or present described by more than two thirds of these students, provides the most striking example. By school, there was agreement among 71% of the students at Lincoln and Eisenhower and 76% at Johnson, which does not indicate differences along racial–ethnic, socioeconomic, or urban–suburban lines. Two aspects of the inequity theme bear repeating: more than half of the students mentioning inequity specifically referred to racism or to racial–ethnic prejudice or discrimination, and inequity often was mentioned in relation to U.S. ideals or constitutional promises (e.g., "America's not like it should be").

It is one thing for students of European descent, whether or not from a relatively affluent suburb, to acknowledge racial inequity and another for students of African, Puerto Rican, or other ancestry. Clearly, racial inequity plays out very differently in their lives. For example, students from Eisenhower told of only recently learning of the extent and viciousness of racism prior to and during the post–World War II civil rights movement—none mentioned personal experience of racial discrimination—whereas students from Johnson told of recent personal experiences of racial inequity and discrimination. Rarely do White students directly experience racial inequity except insofar as they benefit from it. It is something to be deplored but need not be faced on a daily basis. Inequity divides the advantaged and disadvantaged.

Pointing to the discrepancies between U.S. ideals and realities—"America's not like it should be"—could feed cynicism about the nation's hypocrisy, resignation, or hope that conditions will improve. Progress, implicit in the "imperfect but best" theme, and direct student statements of hopefulness suggest but do not guarantee the latter. Cynicism or alienation, however, ought not to be ruled out as a possibility. The prominence of individualism in students' talk with us; the absence of evidence of structural understanding (e.g., social class, institutional racism); and the limited recognition of struggle as an integral if not essential aspect of the expansion of civil rights all suggest that these young people are likely to remain outside the social movements that might alleviate racial–ethnic and other inequities. Some may be or become vulnerable to the promises of extremist organizations.

There also is evidence in the Eisenhower students' interviews (but not those of the White students at Lincoln) to suggest that, in the present highly competitive economy, they do not welcome more competitors. Recall, for example, Melissa's comment about diminished opportunity and increased competition from immigrants. Although deploring inequity, she seems uneasy about playing on a level field. Her Eisenhower peers, who appear to have given the issue less thought, may react even more strongly.

A focus on similarity or agreement in this instance clearly masks underlying fissures. Similar lines of argument could be laid out for students' agreement on the themes of freedom and diversity. Freedom, including rights and

opportunities, was part of the images of America described by 57% of Lincoln and Eisenhower students and 55% of Johnson students. Although some students pointed to limits on freedom, specifically unfair distribution or access, these problems were viewed as occurring primarily in the past. In the turn of the century United States, however, freedom plays out differently for relatively affluent young people of European descent than it does for young people of African, Puerto Rican, and other ancestry or for any working class or poor young person. In effect, because they face less prejudice and discrimination, higher socioeconomic status Whites have more freedom or privilege (see, e.g., McIntosh, 1992, for examples of everyday, unearned White privilege).

Diversity, too, plays out differently depending upon who one is. Here, school differences were apparent with 71% of Eisenhower students, 57% of Lincoln students, and 45% of Johnson students mentioning diversity as part of their image of America. The less racial–ethnic diversity at the school or in the neighborhood, the more students noted diversity as characteristic of America. Diversity may be taken-for-granted, or less noteworthy, in more diverse settings. In any event, diversity in the contemporary United States tends to refer to non-Whites, to "others"—White is not a color; it is the norm. For example, a recent Sunday *New York Times* "Careers in Education" ad announced a "Career Fair for Culturally Diverse Educators" sponsored by several suburban New York City school districts. The most specific statement about the meaning of diversity read, "In response to the changing demographics of students within the . . . school districts, we are building a team of culturally diverse educators" (January 31, 1999, Week in Review, p. 10).

Recall Melissa's story about feeling uncomfortable being the only White person at her Korean friend's family gathering and her friend's reaction. Racial–ethnic diversity may be interesting to young people of European descent, but it usually is outside themselves, out there. Not so for the African, Puerto Rican, and other young people in our study who *are* diverse, that is, different. They are diversity's objects.

Even this brief examination of some of the social and political implications of apparent agreement in students' images of America indicates that similarity is no guarantor of solidarity or peaceful coexistence—especially when the agreement masks and deflects attention from significant group disparities in current circumstance and future prospects. Expecting school curriculum and culture to remedy these societal fissures and social–political–economic tensions with positive images or common symbols is naive at best.

Pedagogical Considerations

These students are learning the traditional patriotic mythology (cf., Frisch, 1990, chap. 3). Our interviews with juniors and seniors indicate, however, that by this point in their formal education even the Eisenhower students, who might be expected to be most accepting, know at least vaguely that it is myth and symbol, and their images of America reach deeper. For example, in response to the question about images of America, Melissa responded,

> the Statue of Liberty and the American flag, just because they're such symbols of America . . . when you say America I think first of those two things and then I realize that, like, those probably aren't the best examples, and I start thinking of other, like, actual people that live in the United States. (1)

Ann suggested that these symbols are taught early on. She told us,

> Uh, the Statue of Liberty. . . . Mount Rushmore, the presidents, George Washington. [SG asks, "Why do you think those things came to mind?"] Well, they're like monumental. . . . George Washington is the first president, you know, . . . everyone knows that, I mean, you learn that, like, in kindergarten. [Ann and SG laugh.] Just, like the Statue of Liberty. (1)

The traditional patriotic mythology and symbolism may backfire, however, when students' own experiences or other sources they trust provide counterevidence. The danger here is twofold. Students might become unnecessarily cynical, having come to expect an America that's "such a great country . . . that could do no wrong" (Blake, 6). Not only might young people become distrustful of the nation—and perhaps join the growing ranks of apathetic nonvoters or followers of extremist gurus—but schooling also might lose credibility as a source of information and an activity worthy of one's effort (e.g., Epstein, 1998). Teachers and school subjects then, instead of nurturing the intended political loyalty and efficacy, may prompt disdain or rejection. Alternatively, students might just dismiss the school's messages as irrelevant. Johnson's Julian, for example, related,

> It's like the things we talk about in school are way different from what happens in real life. [AS: "Tell me more about that."] Well, at school they talk about, know what I'm saying, everything you can be in life, but out in the street it's something different because you get caught up in different types of things . . . They just don't connect. (4)

When asked for a specific example, Julian mentioned that "A lot of people can't even afford to go to college. . . . they try to tell you to go to school and be all that you can be when you can't even go to college" (4).

The potential for various forms of backlash appears to be among the most serious pedagogical implications of the present study. Perhaps policymakers and educators would do well to heed the advice of students like Ned and Kirk who advised letting younger students know more about the real world and the nation's history sooner rather than later. Despite the urging of conservatives, neither students nor America seem to benefit from partial, highly positive portrayals of society and history as "flowery" or "sweet."

Clearly, times have changed since the 1950s, prior to which the schools apparently played a major role in nation-building, communicating a consistent if not comprehensive and coherent message about America's provenance

and mission (e.g., Foner, 1998). In addition to the diversification of the population, the unwillingness of previously silenced and/or marginalized groups to remain so, technological advances in communication and transportation, and much broader historical and social science research, the relatively recent explosion of mass media has severely undercut K-12 schooling as a source of information and influence about America and most everything else. Our data indicate that some school messages are getting through to students—frequently modified by other sources and interpreted through students' lenses. Schooling, specifically history–social studies curriculum and instruction, however, may be missing opportunities to exert more constructive influence on young people's knowledge and beliefs about who "we" are.

To the extent that school history focuses on people, places, and events, it not only competes with other, often more powerful sources, but also misses opportunities to help students comprehend and think critically about the information they encounter in and out of school. Instead of "one damn thing after another," school history also might help students to see connections and longer term processes (e.g., industrialization and post-industrialism) and struggles (e.g., civil rights, environmental protection). Examination of structural dynamics and collective experience (e.g., social class and gender-related) as well as individual accomplishments and frustrations will enable students to see both the societal forest and its various groves and trees—as will examining these from varied perspectives past and present. Rather than being told a single story, students would be encouraged to braid the several strands. Moreover, studying how specific groups have worked for recognition and expansion of their constitutionally guaranteed rights and opportunities can offer students realistic expectations and assist their empowerment to constructive public action. It can counter other press toward cynicism and alienation or extremism.

A final consideration here stems from students' comments about diversity in America. Recall that Johnson and Lincoln students were more vocal than Eisenhower students about liking and learning from experiences with people different from themselves in school or in their neighborhoods. Eisenhower students seemed less opposed to such interaction than apprehensive because of limited contact with young people outside their largely White and affluent suburban area. None of the students suggested the desirability of Americans becoming more alike; there were no self-described common culturalists in our sample. Instead, several students talked about accommodating diversity, of talking and working across differences. A strong case could be made here for more cross-cultural education and experience, especially for students in largely White schools.

America and its peoples might well benefit from nurturing continuing "dialogue among differences" (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995/1999, p. 198) in and out of school. Social connection and coherence are more likely to emerge from interaction and participation in the public sphere than from school attempts to impose commonality of any stripe. There are grounds for optimism in these young people's images of America and willingness to talk.

Notes

[1]All names are pseudonyms. Interview transcript page numbers are provided for direct quotes. Because racial–ethnic differences in images of America, although evident, were not all-encompassing, students' racial–ethnic identities are not routinely reported. To do so would suggest racial–ethnic difference when it is not apparent in these data. Racial–ethnic, school (a rough proxy for socioeconomic status and, to some extent, race–ethnicity), and gender differences are reported as relevant. Appendix A provides a who's who of participating students.

[2]The study reported here grows out of the cross-disciplinary Fallingwater research project co-directed by S. G. Grant, Suzanne Miller, Barry Shealy, and myself. My thanks to Lois Weis for feedback on an earlier draft of this article and to research project staff members who contributed to the data and interpretation for it: S. G. Grant, Diana Lawrence-Brown, Julia Marusza, and Angela Stevenson. Research support from the Professional Development Network, Graduate School of Education, University at Buffalo should not be construed as concurrence with the interpretations offered and positions taken here.

[3]The shorter interviews occurred at Johnson High School. Interviews at this school were shorter because of time constraints and, possibly, the preferences of students as well as the relative inexperience of the interviewer.

[4]Blake (4).

[5]The poem, "Let America Be America Again," had been read and discussed in an English class project in which Blake participated.

[6]The suggestion that Americans "do" something about our problems is offered by three other students as well (White female students from Lincoln and Eisenhower) and is considered in conjunction with the cross-cutting theme of critique and/or activism.

[7]These classrooms included five at Lincoln and six at other schools in the Eisenhower suburban district.

[8]Classroom and school climate, and student participation in school-related activities, however, were found to be related to political attitudes.

[9]Because of interview time limits, most Johnson students were not asked about changes in their images of America. No data from Johnson are presented on this question.

[10]Elementary students are expected to "explain those values, practices, and traditions that unite all Americans" (p. 2) whereas middle school students are expected to "explore the meaning of American culture by identifying the key ideas, beliefs, and patterns of behavior, and traditions that help define it and unite all Americans," in part by identifying "ideas of national unity that developed amidst growing cultural diversity" (p. 4). It is only at the secondary level that specifics are offered. Here, students are to "analyze the development of American culture, explaining how ideas, values, beliefs, and traditions have changed over time and how they unite all Americans," in part by exploring "the meaning of the United States motto, '*E Pluribus Unum*' " by identifying both those forces that unite Americans and those that potentially divide Americans. "Based on a study of key events in U.S. history, such as the American Revolution, the Civil War, the women's suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement, discuss how at least two core civic ideas, such as individual rights and the consent of the governed, have been forces for national unity in this diverse society" (p. 6).

APPENDIX A

Roster of Participating Students

Lincoln Secondary School

Blake	African American	male
Carrie	African American	female
Kirk	European American	male
Linda	European American	female
Maggie	African American	female
Mary	African American	female
Sheldon	African American	male

Eisenhower High School

Lindy's class with two-week civil rights unit:		
James	European American	male
Melissa	European American	female
Ned	European American	male
George's class without separate civil rights unit:		
Ann	European American	female
Alice	European American	female
Bill	European American	male
Kate	European American	female

Johnson High School

Arthur	African American	male
Carl	Native & European American	male
Julian	Hispanic	male
Kaylee	African American	female
Magdalena	Hispanic	female
Manuel	Hispanic & African American	male
Marissa	Hispanic	female
Mercedes	Hispanic	female
Richard	Native & African American	male
Simon	Indian (recent immigrant)	male
Yolanda	Hispanic	female

(At Johnson, we asked students to identify their racial/ethnic background, and we use their self-identifications. All the Hispanic students are Puerto Ricans.)

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