

FERGUSON, U.S.A.

HARDSHIPS FACED BY COMMUNITIES
IN CRISIS ARE NATIONAL ISSUES
WORTH TEACHING.

THE AUGUST 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown upended the suburban town of Ferguson, Missouri, and sent ripples of shock, fear, pain, anger and uncertainty across the country. Many educators and students learned of the tragedy as they were preparing to start a new school year—a school year delayed by over a week for K-12 students in the Midwestern suburb.

Since last summer, three other police-related deaths (John Crawford, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice—all men or boys of color), two controversial grand jury decisions and countless demonstrations across the country have collectively signaled a need for national dialogue about how identity affects outcomes when African Americans encounter law enforcement.

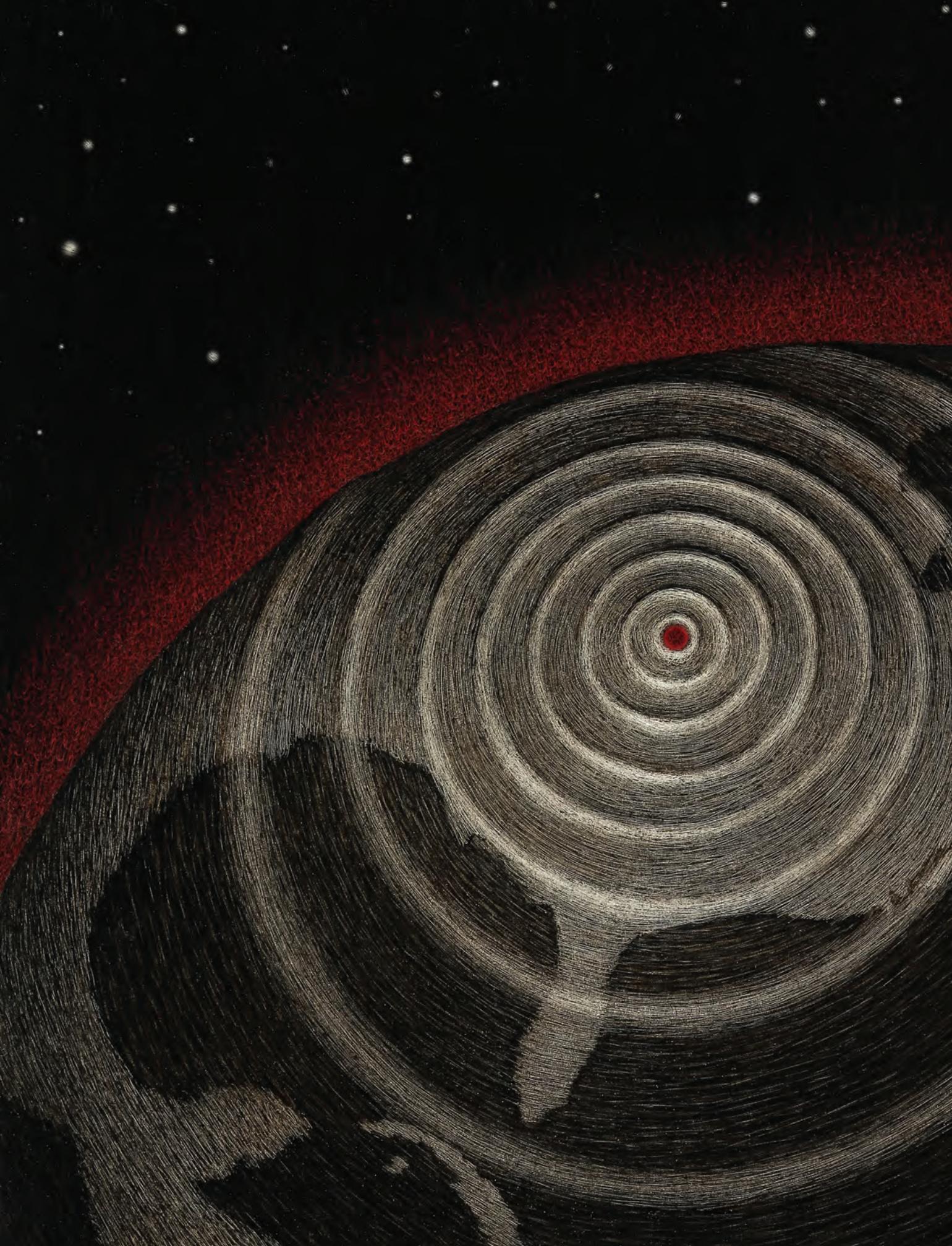
Despite sharp differences of opinion surrounding these high-profile deaths—and the outcomes of the subsequent legal proceedings—one thing is clear: U.S. schools were radically unaligned in their responses. Some districts supported teaching about the incidents; others ordered educators not to discuss the events at all.

Regardless of the support or obstacles they encountered, teachers all over the country searched for resources to help themselves and their students make sense of what was happening. These educators recognized that Ferguson, Dayton, Staten Island and Cleveland are American cities, and that the inequities and violence that occurred there reflect biases and systems of oppression that harm citizens across the country every day—including the children of color sitting in their own classrooms.

Moreover, the deaths of these men and boys remain moments ripe for teaching: about how media outlets cover clashes between civilians and law enforcement; about the criminalization of communities of color; about contrasting definitions of civil liberties; about the tensions that exist within our national dialogue about race; and about how all of these issues influence the long march for freedom and equality.

Teaching Tolerance selected three approaches to thinking and talking about the events of summer and fall 2014 that are particularly relevant to educators—as practitioners in

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the classroom and as citizens who care about *all* communities.

Supports and Silences

Between the mainstream news and social media coverage, it has been almost impossible for schools not to respond in some way to the tensions surrounding the Brown, Crawford, Garner and Rice cases. Many educators immediately responded to the need for materials that could help break through the confusion and pain and allow teachers to understand and explain the systems and dynamics surrounding each loss and the subsequent reactions.

After Michael Brown was killed, Dr. Marcia Chatelain, an assistant professor of history at Georgetown University, created the #FergusonSyllabus Twitter campaign. Educators, activists, social commentators and other contributors used the hashtag to build a crowdsourced set of suggested readings, discussion topics and classroom activities related to Brown's death and the subsequent protests.

In District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), the development of teaching materials focused instead on preparing teachers to take on such painful topics. Chancellor Kaya Henderson recognized that many educators needed support, particularly when discussing race and racial hierarchy with students, so she asked Dr. Robert Simmons, chief of innovation and research for DCPS, to write a teacher's guide. The result of his work is a publication titled "Preparing to Discuss Michael Brown in the Classroom."

As Simmons explains, "There are multiple levers in this document that really help teachers think critically, but also think through their own bias, their own perspective around identity [and] police brutality." These levers include suggestions for framing classroom conversations using democratic principles, techniques for gauging students' emotional responses and steps to encourage informed social action.

► FACT ◀

The protests in Ferguson erupted on the 49th anniversary of the Watts Riots.

Yet, in many classrooms, the response to the deaths of Brown, Crawford, Garner and Rice was silence. Educators who shied away from these events often did so because they didn't have the kind of professional support that Henderson and Simmons offered their colleagues—training in how to address systemic racism and privilege. Many teachers became stymied by conflicting viewpoints offered ubiquitously on news programs and social media. In one version of the narrative, the victims bore responsibility for their deaths by virtue of their questionable behavior, and race was irrelevant to the outcome. In the other, law enforcement is a component of a larger system that criminalizes black Americans and routinely devalues their lives. The fact that both viewpoints are held so strongly in the United States is, in and of itself, a critical conversation for educators to engage in with students—and an ideal opportunity to practice perspective-taking.

Civil Discourse About Civil Unrest

Many of the resources shared with the #FergusonSyllabus hashtag address

the events through a constitutional lens. As captured by the news media and civil liberties groups, actions taken by local law enforcement and officials in response to civil unrest in Ferguson trampled on three First Amendment principles: (1) the right to assemble peaceably, (2) the freedom of the press and (3) the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances. In Ferguson, New York City, Berkeley and hundreds of other communities around the country where citizens gathered in solidarity, protesters and the media reported mass arrests of civilians and journalists, the imposition of nighttime curfews, embargos on cameras and cell phones, and the excessive use of tear gas and rubber bullets. These experiences also raised alarm about violations beyond First Amendment rights.

Even protests that occurred off the streets have been highly scrutinized and, in some cases, put individuals at risk. In Cleveland, the police demanded an apology from the Cleveland Browns after player Andrew Hawkins wore a shirt calling for justice for Tamir Rice and John Crawford. Other athletes have been criticized for wearing "I Can't Breathe" T-shirts in protest of the lack of indictment in the choking death of Eric Garner. Similar critiques were levied

Living History

Several parallels can be drawn between the recent protests and moments in the U.S. civil rights movement, a fact that can help educators address this difficult material in the classroom.

Consider how these approaches to thinking about contemporary civil unrest are relevant in the context of civil rights history. How did segregation and violence affect schools and students in the 1950s and '60s? How did civil rights leaders use the Constitution to further their legal battles? How did protesters communicate? What role did state-enacted violence play in the events? What role did the media play? Educators can use questions like these to connect the past to the present and show students that social movements are possible in today's world.

To learn more about teaching the civil rights movement—past and present—see our publication *The March Continues: Five Essential Practices for Teaching the Movement*, and our professional development resource *Civil Rights Done Right: A Tool for Teaching the Movement*.

against teachers in Staten Island who wore T-shirts expressing support for the New York City Police Department on the first day of school. That a debate arose questioning the right of these individuals to publicly express their views makes it clear that the United States does not have a cohesive perspective on the concept of free speech.

In the context of a classroom, using civil liberties and the judicial system as lenses allows students to unpack questions raised by the deaths, the courts and the widespread civil unrest. It also challenges students to grapple with the fact that the most basic liberties can come under assault by the very people tasked with protecting them: elected officials and law enforcement. It's an opportunity that David L. Hudson Jr., a Vanderbilt University law professor and First Amendment Center Scholar, believes could galvanize an entire generation of civil and human rights advocates. He called recent events a "perfect blueprint for teaching the Bill of Rights."

Chatelain agrees. "Educators can play a role in helping students to understand the world around them," she said. "The role that policing plays in their day-to-day lives, the role that disenfranchisement and economic instability often may play. Understanding these things through the lens of our American democracy absolutely belongs in the classroom."

New Media and Collective Action

#BlackLivesMatter
#DontShoot
#IfTheyGunnedMeDown
#ICantBreathe
#ShutItDown

These are just a few of the most visible examples of hashtags that gave social media a central and powerful role in the action and dialogue surrounding the deaths of Brown, Garner, Rice and Crawford. Beginning just hours after Brown's death in August, when cell-phone video of his body began to circulate, activists on the ground in Ferguson—operating largely in a

"I could be Mike Brown. Any one of us could be."

news vacuum—were using communication platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to coordinate their efforts. Social media were again central to the debate when footage of police holding Eric Garner in a chokehold surfaced online, allowing the country to hear him utter the now-famous chilling statement, "I can't breathe."

Protests and vigils calling for acknowledgement of police brutality and immediate reforms in policy and training occurred continuously throughout fall 2014, peaking with the grand jury decisions in the Brown and Garner cases. Some were spontaneous; others—like the "die-ins" that occurred in countless locations nationwide—were highly coordinated. But a subset of every group of protesters broadcast its message via social media and received messages of support back. Expressions of solidarity came from coast to coast and beyond. Reform-minded individuals from as far away as Asia and Europe expressed support and outrage, and even offered advice on how to survive being tear gassed.

Dr. Kimberly C. Ellis, author of the forthcoming book *The Bombastic Brilliance of Black Twitter*, explains how these online tools made it possible for events that happened in a small, little-known town like Ferguson to rise to international attention almost instantly.

"Allyship—particularly white allyship—along with global engagement made this issue of police brutality a global phenomenon," she said.

Even young people who were not directly involved in protests used social media to express how the incidents affected them. Teachers like Xian Barrett used Twitter to encourage their students to practice succinct communication about their emotions following the Garner decision. "I think most of the youth can

see that an essay they write gets seen by one or maybe 30 people if you do peer sharing, but a tweet can be seen by thousands," said Barrett. "That motivates them."

The ongoing virtual commentary angered some people and empowered others. But regardless of the feelings it provoked, the prevalence of social media as a tool for logistical communication, solidarity and collective action-taking is a force that educators, media researchers and activists alike acknowledge as game-changing.

Although they bear startling resemblances to moments of the past, such as the protests in Watts in 1965 and in Los Angeles in 1992, after the acquittal of the four police officers tried for beating Rodney King, many moments of the summer and fall of 2014 could be described as game-changing. These moments sparked an urgent desire for change in a generation often described as apathetic, and demanded conversations about race in an era many describe as post-racial.

For educators, these moments brought intense challenges as well as vital opportunities. For many young people, it changed the way they saw the world.

T.J., a teenager currently living and attending school in Ferguson, feels that the events in her community have fundamentally changed her life. "I could be Mike Brown. Any one of us could be," she says. "And that he didn't just die in vain, that people all over the world are speaking out against the way we get treated, shows me that people care." ♦

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Toolkit

Use the U.S. Constitution to spur discussion about the events in Ferguson.

VISIT » tolerance.org/ferguson