



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2014 Volume III: Race and American Law, 1850-Present

Introduction

Our seminar explored the Supreme Court's, and the nation's, struggle to apply the equality provisions in the American Constitution. We focused on the period from 1850 to the present.

We spent much of our time together wrestling with contradictions. How can a nation declare "that all men are created equal," while 600,000 black slaves were held as property? How can a nation elect an African American president while one in three young black men are under criminal justice supervision? In these units, Fellows continue to explore contradictions, asking provocative questions such as "Is the NAACP still needed?", and "should the American public care if our schools are racially and socioeconomically segregated?"

A few themes unite the units:

- The most common topic concerns educational opportunity and race. This is unsurprising given that many of the Supreme Court's most important race cases have concerned schools; moreover, as teachers themselves, Fellows were naturally drawn to education-related questions.
- Many of the units strive to escape the black-white paradigm that dominates much of the Supreme Court's writing on race; Fellows were especially eager to explore issues affecting Latinos, Asians and other racial minorities.
- Many of the units seek to study not only oppression and discrimination, but resistance and struggle. A particular area of focus for many of the units is the role of young people in the fight for equality.
- Fellows drawn to a seminar such as this tend to have an orientation towards social justice, fairness, and equality. At the same time, classroom teachers should not be dogmatic, but instead should allow students to develop their own opinions, supported by their own research. Fellows wrestled with this tension throughout the seminar. Most ended up agreeing with Will Wagoner-Morales, who writes in his unit, "It is very important that students be allowed to form their own opinions of the issues at stake. As a teacher I at once wish to be very upfront with my personal views and ideology, while allowing students to come to their own conclusions." I couldn't have said it any better myself.

James Forman, Jr.

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