

Teaching About Laquan McDonald: A Toolkit for Teachers

Note: This lesson is designed to help guide a difficult conversation, if you choose to discuss the case in class. CPS is not requiring a lesson on this topic, but wants to ensure teachers feel comfortable and prepared. The lesson plan is designed to be an educational tool and by no means an endorsement of any opinions.

Introduction to the Case

On October 20, 2014 Laquan McDonald, a 17 year old African American man, was shot and killed by a white Chicago Police Department officer. The incident was captured via the dash cams of a squad car on the scene. Immediately after the incident, the City's Independent Police Review Authority, the civilian independent agency charged with investigating officer-involved shootings, initiated an investigation, collecting evidence and interviewing witnesses at the scene. Several days later, IPRA sent the evidence in this case, including the video, to prosecutors who started a criminal investigation into the officer's conduct. In addition, the officer was immediately stripped of his police powers and assigned to desk duty. While the City can strip the officer of his police powers, under the City's contract with the police union, the City cannot take further action regarding the officer's employment until the investigation is complete. On November 24, 2015, the Cook County States Attorney charged the officer involved in this incident with first degree murder.

Earlier this year the family reached a settlement with the City for \$5 million dollars. The City chose not to release the dash cam footage so as not to interfere with an active criminal investigation. For example, releasing a video during a pending investigation has the potential to compromise eyewitness testimony because witnesses may adjust their testimony to fit what they or others perceive in the video. Not releasing evidence during an ongoing criminal investigation is consistent with the longstanding practice of federal, state and local law enforcement authorities. However, a judge ordered the footage to be released by November 25, 2015 and the City will comply with that order.

Note: The content of the webcam footage will soon flood the internet and no doubt many of your students have seen or will see the footage. **The video should not be shown in school** as its contents are reported to be graphic. **Please read "where to begin" before introducing this topic to your class.**

News stories on the killing of Laquan McDonald:

- *Release of video of police shooting will cast spotlight on Chicago*
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-chicago-cop-shooting-video-laquan-mcdonald-met-1122-20151120-story.html>
- *Chicago set to release dash cam video of Laquan McDonald's fatal shooting*
<http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/20/us/laquan-mcdonald-chicago-dashcam-video/index.html>
- *Video: City will not fight release of Laquan McDonald police shooting video*
<http://abc7chicago.com/news/laquan-mcdonald-police-shooting-video-ordered-to-be-released/1091677/>

Opinion pieces:

- *More Than Bullets Killed Laquan McDonald* by Mary Mitchell

<http://chicago.suntimes.com/news/7/71/1119435/more-than-bullets-killed-laquan-mcdonald-teenage-chicago-police-shooting-victim>

- *Plenty of Blame to Go Around* by Neil Steinberg
<http://chicago.suntimes.com/news/7/71/1114938/plenty-blame-go-around>
- *Chicago Will Soon See How Laquan McDonald Died. Be Passionate. Be Peaceful* by Chicago Tribune Editorial Board
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/editorials/ct-laquan-mcdonald-police-video-edit-1122-20151120-story.html>

Where to Begin?

Dealing with sensitive issues takes careful planning and consideration. We cannot over emphasize the emotional impact that this topic and discussion might have on your students, thus requiring very intentional and thoughtful planning. It is important to consider your students, their potential personal and community connections to this case or similar cases, and the complexities involved in the relationship between community members and law enforcement both in Chicago and around our country. Before you begin planning how you will engage with students on this topic, we suggest checking out the following resources:

- “Teaching About Controversial or Difficult Issues” from Teachable Moments
<http://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/teaching-about-controversial-or-difficult-issues>.
- “Talking to Students About Ferguson” from Facing History and Ourselves
<http://facingtoday.facinghistory.org/talking-to-students-about-ferguson>.
- YouthRadio.org shares DIY Toolkit: How Teens Want You to Teach #Blacklivesmatter
<https://youthradio.org/news/article/diy-toolkit-how-teens-want-you-to-teach-blacklivesmatter/>

Teach this sensitive lesson with the following classroom goals:

1. *Give students a safe outlet for expressing their thoughts without arguing about the incident.*
2. *Have students imagine the best possible outcome.*
3. *Avoid further perpetuation of the fear and hatred of law enforcement that these incidents encourage.*
4. *Help students to consider the tools for civil protest that are in the tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and in the spirit of brotherhood.*
5. *Help students to examine the role that race, class, privilege, and stereotyping plays not just in this incident, but in our society.*
6. *Bring historical context to the conversation.*

Guidelines From Facing History and Ourselves
<http://facingtoday.facinghistory.org/talking-to-students-about-ferguson>

A 1-Day Lesson to Start the Conversation

The lesson suggested below assumes that you have already established classroom norms, agreements and routines for discussion. Remind students that those norms are never more important than when addressing difficult and often sensitive topics. If necessary, review your classroom norms and agreements before you begin discussion.

1. Warm Up - Silent Write

Write the following prompt on the board and ask students to write silently in their journals for 5 minutes. If they run out of things to write ask them to remain silent until the timer goes off in order to provide everyone the opportunity to jot down their thoughts or responses to this statement.

“On October 20, 2014, Laquan McDonald, a 17 year old African-American male was shot 16 times and killed by Chicago Police Officer Jason Van Dyke. The video of this incident has been/will be released to the public.”

After writing ask students to circle any words, phrases or questions that they would be willing to share with their classmates. Ask students to jot those words/phrases/questions down on stickie notes and pass up to the front. Read the stickie notes aloud and ask students to note any common words/phrases or trends.

2. Learn More - *Save the Last Word* discussion protocol

After completing the warm up, ask students what they already know about the case. Record all information that they share on the board. You might ask them how they heard or learned about the information they are sharing. Place a question mark next to information that may be unconfirmed or outside of what has been shared publicly through the media. For example, “my uncle said he saw the video and...” Choose one of the articles shared above and ask students to either read silently or as a class. As students read they are asked to highlight 2-3 important sentences or phrases. In the margin next to what has been highlighted ask them to jot down a few points about why they highlighted that particular sentence or phrase. You can also ask them to record any questions they have as they read. (This will be used for the next activity).

Assign students to groups of 4; each student should be assigned a number 1 through 4. Student number 1 will choose one of the sentences or phrases he or she highlighted to share with the group. Each group member will take turns discussing the selected excerpt, noting why it might be important and their own thoughts or connections. After group members 2-4 have had a chance to comment on the highlighted sentence, group member number 1 will then share the reason they chose the sentence and what it means to them. They now have had **the last word**. Repeat the process so that the remaining group members each have an opportunity to identify their important words or phrases. You may choose to have groups or individual students share out general impressions based on what they heard from their classmates.

3. Pulling Out Questions

After the students have completed the “Save the Last Word” protocol, ask them to record on chart paper any questions that came up either in their discussion or as they were reading silently. If time permits, asking students to do a second close reading in their small group, this time to identify questions that stand out to them. You may choose to do a more extensive question generating protocol (try the Question Formulation Technique from the Right Question Institute <http://rightquestion.org/downloads/Question-Formulation-Technique-Outline1.pdf>).

Once students have generated a list of questions, have students identify which questions are fact-based questions, such as *What happened to Officer Van Dyke after the shooting?* or *Where was Laquan killed?* and which are questions up for debate or interpretation, such as *Should Officer Van Dyke be charged with a crime?* or *Should the judge have made the city release the video?* Have student prioritize what they think are the 3 most important questions to be addressed (tell them they have to have at least one of each kind). Help the class narrow down their top two choices for interpretive or debatable question. Then ask them what factual questions they might need to answer to ensure that they are able to engage in the discussion. By sharing their questions, you will be able to see what particularly interests students about the case and help you in designing what activities you do to follow up on this introductory discussion. You could also ask students to do independent research based on their questioning. **See below for ideas on how to continue engaging students in this topic and building off of the questions they’ve generated.**

4. Wrapping up and Reflecting on Difficult Conversations

As you wrap up class, ask students to complete an exit ticket in which they answer 1-3 reflective questions. These questions could include:

- What did you learn about Laquan McDonald today?
- If you were going to go home and teach someone in your family about the case, what would be the most important aspects of the case you would want to share?
- What more would you like to learn about the case?
- How did you feel participating in the save the last word activity and the question generating activity?
- Is there anything that you want to be sure your class discusses or does as it relates to this case?

5. Taking it Home

Ask students to interview a parent or family member about the killing of Laquan McDonald. You can use the questions generated in class or provide students with questions such as:

- What do you know about the killing of Laquan McDonald?
- What should happen to Office Van Dyke?
- What would justice look like for Laquan McDonald and his family?
- How do you think events like this can be prevented in the future?

Digging into the Complexities

4 Ways to Deepen and Extend

The Laquan McDonald case may tap into an area of real concern for many students. An introductory discussion of the issue will likely generate energy from students to continue to discuss and explore both the case itself and its connection to their lives and communities. If you choose to continue study of this issue with your students, below are resources that will help you to frame and explore some of the complex and challenging issues that the killing of Laquan McDonald raises.

1.) Should the video of Laquan McDonald's murder be released?

Laquan McDonald's mother has stated she does not want the video footage of her son to be released. The attorneys for the Chicago Police Department have argued that the footage should remain sealed until the investigation of the officer is complete. On the other hand, several journalists and community members have argued that the people have a right to view the dash cam footage. Explore different viewpoints using the links below. Then engage the students in discussion.

- McDonald family attorney and journalist who sued city to release video discuss their reactions to the judge's ruling <http://chicagotonight.wttw.com/2015/11/19/mcdonald-family-attorney-journalist-react-judges-ruling-controversial-police-video>
- Two community members discuss the impact of releasing the video and the larger issues related to the case of Laquan McDonald <http://chicagotonight.wttw.com/2015/11/19/laquan-mcdonald-police-video-release-stirs-mixed-reactions>
- Laquan McDonald's family does not want police shooting video released <http://wgntv.com/2015/11/20/laquan-mcdonalds-family-does-not-want-police-shooting-video-released/>

2.) How should Chicago respond to the killing of Laquan McDonald?

There are many who are speculating on how the release of the webcam footage will impact Chicagoans and particularly young people of color who already are distrustful of law enforcement. The following stories offer perspectives on both what it will mean for Chicago and the potential for large scale demonstrations. Have students review some of those viewpoints here.

- ***Community Leaders Calling for Calm Ahead of Laquan McDonald Video Release***
<http://abc7chicago.com/news/community-leaders-calling-for-calm-ahead-of-laquan-mcdonald-video-release/1094449/>
- ***Chicago Will Soon See How Laquan McDonald Died. Be Passionate. Be Peaceful.*** By Chicago Tribune Editorial Board
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/editorials/ct-laquan-mcdonald-police-video-edit-1122-20151120-story.html>
- ***Laquan McDonald Video Release Has Police Preparing, Activists Urging Peace***
<https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20151120/archer-heights/laquan-mcdonald-video-decision-come-over-next-72-hours-from-city>

- **Video: City will not fight release of Laquan McDonald police shooting video**
<http://abc7chicago.com/news/laquan-mcdonald-police-shooting-video-ordered-to-be-released/1091677/>

Option 1 - Discuss the question, “How should Chicago respond to the killing of Laquan McDonald?” Students can utilize text from the sources above. Try a Fishbowl, Socratic Seminar or the Civil Discussion method (<http://www.lawanddemocracy.org/discussioncivil.html>).

Option 2 - Deliberating in Democracy case study on Tunisian anti-government protests

One option to engage students in a world studies course would be to address the question “Should our democracy have the power to prohibit unauthorized public demonstrations?” using a case study outside of the United States. Because the response of the Tunisian government is not one we would expect to see this can also provide an opportunity to draw out contrasts in addition to points of connection.

http://www.dda.deliberating.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=84%3Apublic-demonstrations&catid=40%3Apublic-demonstrations&Itemid=37&lang=en.

3.) Where do we go from here? Addressing the Problem.

Option 1 - Unearthing Root Causes

In order for students to make better informed decisions about the kinds of policies they might want to advocate for, we suggesting engaging in an analysis of the root causes of the police involved killings of young people of color. See Mikva Challenge’s lesson on root causes in their Issues to Action curriculum (page 119). <http://www.mikvachallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/DigitalIssuesAction.pdf>

Option 2 - Examining Public Policy on Body Cameras for Police

One important policy issue being debated in Illinois today is the mandated use of police body cameras. This lesson, from the Constitutional Rights Foundation - Chicago, asks students to consider “Body Cameras and Law Enforcement - Problem or Solution?” <http://www.crfc.org/teaching-materials/body-cameras-and-law-enforcement-problem-or-solution>

4.) Explore the Connection to Race and Racism in America

Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center has compiled a series of resources titled “Teaching Ferguson: Race and Racism in America”. This package of resources includes blog posts, articles and lesson ideas to use with students. <http://www.tolerance.org/teaching-about-ferguson>

Still Looking for Inspiration?

Check out this piece in the Atlantic entitled, How to Teach Kids About What’s Happening in Ferguson. It is a collection of crowd-sourced curriculum resources (articles, poetry, film, etc) that people have used to explore the topic with their students.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/how-to-teach-kids-about-whats-happening-in-ferguson/379049/>